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LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION:

YOUTH PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN AN ASSESSMENT OF YOUTH VIOLENCE IN COLOMBIA

PREPARED BY THE LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROJECT (TASK ORDER AID-OAA-TO-16-00041), UNDER THE YOUTHPower: EVIDENCE AND EVALUATION IDIQ (AID-OAA-I-15-00007).

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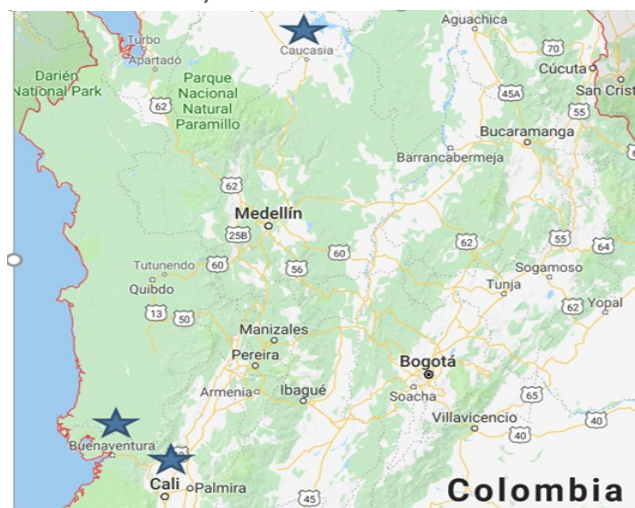
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OVERVIEW

Over the past 52 years, Colombia has experienced persistent levels of community violence due to an internal armed conflict and the proliferation of several criminal organizations. Confrontations between rival criminal groups as well as between former guerrilla organizations and the Colombian armed forces have terrorized communities. Despite strong peace-building and community-building efforts, many young Colombians continue to experience poverty, geo-social isolation, lack of educational and employment opportunities, and violence within their families and communities that continue to put them at risk for mental and behavioral problems (McGill & Kane, 2015). In 2018, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) commissioned the American Institutes for Research (AIR), in partnership with Democracy International (DI), under the Latin America and the Caribbean Youth Violence Prevention Project, to examine the current state of violence affecting the most vulnerable youth in Colombia and current policies, programs, and practices in place to mitigate and prevent violence. The assessment took place over a 12-month period, which started with a desk review and interviews with experts and followed these with two community dialogues in each location to listen to and learn from youth experiences with violence. The research team, together with USAID, identified three locations for the study after reviewing data and examining conditions across the country that met USAID’s criteria for persistent high levels of violence: Cali (large urban), Buenaventura (peri-urban), and Caucasia (rural). (See Exhibit I.)

Exhibit I. Study Locations



COMMUNITY DIALOGUES WITH YOUTH

A total of 55 youth participated in six dialogues including young adults (ages 18–29) and youth (ages 10–17) to share their experiences on violence in their city. In each city (Buenaventura, Caucasia, Cali) two dialogues were held on consecutive days. Their locations were strategically chosen to allow easier transportation for participating youth from different parts of the city (e.g., college, community organization). All six dialogues were audio recorded to assist the facilitators with cleaning up their notes. More details and findings from these dialogues are provided in the main report (Campie, Mizrahi, Romero, Bonilla, & Read, 2020).

These community dialogues provided rich context for how youth are victims and perpetrators of violence and their physical, mental, and developmental well-being are impacted by violence in their communities. We also learned from youth which prevention, youth development, and other resources they have access to in their communities, as well as gaps; this knowledge will help USAID and the Colombia Mission in future decision making.

In each city, we recruited three young adults from the community to work in partnership with the AIR/DI research team as co-researchers (referred to as youth peer researchers in this report, PRs from hereon). The nine PRs led all aspects of these dialogues, including recruitment of participants and logistics (such as identification of the location, room setup, refreshments, and transportation support if needed). They also led group facilitation, notetaking, recording of the session, transcription, and data analysis. Right after each session, the team met for a debriefing session to reflect on the session, what they learned, and data collected. The debriefing at the end of the first session allowed the team to review any data gaps they wanted to address in the second session. The debriefing at the end of the second session allowed them to review their next steps to work on cleaning notes and synthesizing the data collected.

This report focuses on the participatory approach we used to involve these nine young adults in data collection, facilitation, and analysis. In the following pages, we present (1) background on community-based participatory research and engaging youth as peer researchers, (2) the structures and supports we created for youth peer researchers, (3) how the research team and the youth peer researchers benefitted from our participatory research approach, and (4) recommendations for future youth-inclusive work in Colombia and other developing countries on violence prevention and other topics that impact youth. The main findings of our youth violence assessment, which included data from a desk review, interviews with experts, and the community dialogues described above, are reported elsewhere (Campie et al., 2020).

BACKGROUND

COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Community-based research (CBR) is guided by the core principles of collaboration and partnership to engage key stakeholders in data collection, analyses, and decision making to ultimately effect social change. In this approach, community members and their representatives are engaged in research processes focused on the relevant life experiences they bring to research projects, including perspectives on the issues at hand and insights about solutions. Peer research, where community members are trained and supported to participate as co-researchers, has emerged as a popular form of CBR, with potential benefits to research quality as well as benefits to peer researchers (Damon et al., 2017). The literature identifies a continuum of peer researcher involvement, from working in an advisory capacity, to employment as staff to work on one or more aspects of a research project (e.g., participant recruitment and/or data collection), to instrumental roles as full partners (Roche, Guta, & Flicker, 2010).

Peer researchers improve the research quality because, as key stakeholders from the community, they can elicit more community buy-in for external data collection, develop a better rapport with research participants due to shared life experiences, ask the “right” questions in an interview setting, and facilitate research translation (Damon et al., 2017).

The peer researchers themselves also benefit from participating in the research study. Past studies identified benefits for peer researchers that include increases in empowerment, social capital, and self-confidence (Flores, 2007); and personal advancement, such as job opportunities (Damon et al., 2017). In addition, research processes (e.g., administering surveys, conducting individual interviews, or facilitating focus groups) offer hands-on experience to peer researchers. Detailed training in data collection can alert peer researchers to the potential macro and micro issues that can influence data outcomes, giving them an enhanced understanding of the subject matter.

There are also challenges in involving community stakeholders as researchers. Balancing the competing demands of data collection (e.g., recruiting enough research participants, completing data collection tasks in a timely way, getting data ready for analysis) may compromise meaningful participation of peer researchers, overshadow the needs of community members, and limit the inclusion of their insights and observations in a genuine way, thus making them feel tokenized (Ibáñez-Carrasco, Watson, & Tavares, 2019; Greer et al., 2016; Roche, Guta, & Flicker, 2010).

Lessons learned from past community-based participatory research and engaging with peer researchers include the importance of (1) developing explicit guidelines of the roles, responsibilities, and expectations upfront, (2) setting processes for capacity building (e.g., training, mentoring), (3) providing support mechanisms (e.g., debriefing) to provide emotional and instrumental support, and (4) using reflexive strategies to improve contextual understanding of research findings (Ontario Women's Health Network, 2010).

YOUTH AS PEER RESEARCHERS

Youth-participatory research recognizes young people as assets and empowers them to develop their potential (Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin, Christen, & Powers, 2013; Richards-Schuster & Elliott, 2019). Past studies involving young people in research showed individual benefits (e.g., research and team work skills, gaining employment experience, learning about research and advocacy, belief that they can make a change in their own community, sense of self-efficacy, competence) and benefits for their communities (e.g., increased youth voice in policies and practices, increased perceptions of community efficacy, reduced structural disparities) (Anyon, Bender, Kennedy, & Dechants, 2018; Fernandez, 2002, Ozer & Douglas, 2013; UNICEF, 2017; Zeldin, Bestul, & Powers, 2012; Moore, Benitez, & Sherraden, 2002). Involving young people in research also empowers underrepresented youth and youth in marginalized communities (Pittman et al., 1993). While not directly focusing on youth outcomes through research participation, Watts and his colleagues (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil 1999) emphasized the critical consciousness that youth develop when they learn about social injustices and are involved in civic action, and the importance of this consciousness as a tool in resisting oppression. In Watts et al.'s sociopolitical development model, critical consciousness is the cornerstone for changes in cognitive thinking (e.g., critical reflection and awareness), attitudes (e.g., perceived capacity to affect social and political change), and behaviors (e.g., critical action) (Diemer & Li, 2011; Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011).

On the other hand, structural and societal barriers limit the extent to which young people engage in research as key stakeholders. For example, institutional review boards may question involvement of minors for concerns of safety. In addition, adults' lack of confidence in young people's social and emotional maturity and decision making may influence the extent to which young people are actively engaged in decision making (Flores, 2007). Lessons learned from engaging young people in research focus on providing clear guidelines, support mechanisms, and reflection strategies while also addressing

their developmental and professional needs for adequate training and mentoring (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

Despite the barriers, there is worldwide recognition that it is important to engage young people more actively as key stakeholders and change agents in their communities on matters that directly relate to them. At the international level, the United Nations (United Nations, 2018), the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA, 2013, 2019), and USAID (USAID, 2012) have developed strategies to support efforts to increase youth voice and civic leadership and promote healthy youth development, equity, and empowerment globally. USAID's Youth Power initiative, under which our work in Colombia was made possible, has a learning agenda (Youth Power, 2020) that includes youth engagement as a priority in guiding investments in evidence-building activities and resources.

Colombia's 2005 National Youth Policy, the country's Youth Citizenship Act of 2013, and its Law 1885, approved in 2018, are reforms for youth voice, civic participation, and governance to improve equity and diversity in the social, economic, cultural, and democratic life of the country (Romero Rodriguez et al., 2015; Leiva, 2018). In particular, Law 1885 empowers youth to have a representative voice in governance through Youth Councils that are implemented at all levels of government.

Recent initiatives in Colombia have primarily focused on engaging young people in peacebuilding activities. For example, the Program Alliance for Reconciliation, led by ACDI/VOCA, engaged young people as researchers to implement a youth mapping methodology in 21 municipalities (Ochoa, 2018). Young researchers collected and synthesized data on how young leaders engaged in building peace in their communities based on their own interests and experiences. Most recently, youth-led participatory action research, conducted by United Network of Young Peacekeepers (UNOY), documented and examined young people's roles in peacebuilding and studied the factors that enable or constrain these roles in Colombia, Libya, and Sierra Leone (UNOY, 2019).

The Colombia Youth Violence Assessment aligns with global and national policies on youth engagement and enhances our knowledge of youth-led research that has been implemented in Colombia thus far in peacekeeping efforts and expands it to examine youth experiences with violence. Our examination of youth participation in research and the potential benefits presented in this report provides a unique opportunity for us to share lessons learned and recommendations for future work with young people.

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES

In the following pages, we describe the structure and processes used to identify, train, and support our PRs in our assessment of youth violence in Colombia.

PEER RESEARCHER RECRUITMENT

We involved nine PRs, three from each city, Buenaventura, Cali, and Caucasia, to lead the coordination, facilitation, and synthesis of the two community dialogues in each community (for a total of six in three cities). The PR were charged with (1) recruiting participants for the dialogues, (2) coordinating the logistics for each dialogue (invitations, space, refreshments, room preparation for data collection), (3) improving and finalizing the list of questions for the dialogues developed by the research team, (4) facilitating each youth dialogue using the predetermined list of questions, taking notes during each dialogue, and monitoring time, and (5) summarizing each dialogue and aggregating findings from the two dialogues conducted in their city.

Our field work lead (referred to as FL from hereon), whose role is discussed below, recruited the PRs through local community organizations or municipal governments that served youth organizations, as well as through word of mouth. We aimed to recruit PRs within each targeted community who had some level of experience with public speaking and coordination of events. We also aimed to achieve diversity in age and gender. Our pool of nine PRs had the following characteristics:

- Between 19 and 29 years of age (average age was 25)
- Five women and four men
- Two with a college degree, and three currently attending college
- Two employed as Cure Violence interrupters¹ in their communities in Cali

STRUCTURES AND SUPPORTS TO ENGAGE YOUTH

To effectively engage the PRs in our data collection and analyses, it was important that we prepare them adequately to carry out the research tasks and create processes that would make them feel valued and supported. In the following pages, we describe our process, which included (1) organizational structures to engage young people and (2) the training and coaching to support them.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

Assigning a local coach/fieldwork lead to work directly with the PRs. Since most of the research team was based in the U.S., it was essential that youth had access to a local research team member. Therefore, we partnered with a consultant living in Bogotá who served as the fieldwork lead and as the liaison between the research team and the PRs in each city.

The fieldwork lead supported the development of peer researcher training materials, communication tools, and data collection and analyses templates we used to engage the PR. The U.S.-based research team members convened a 2-day in-person meeting in Washington, D.C., with the FL to plan the PR approach and to solicit feedback from the FL on the training and support materials to be used with the PRs. Following this meeting, the research team finalized the PR training and support materials and the FL began working directly with the PRs (described in more detail below) to train them, monitor their progress, provide coaching and other supports, and identify solutions to challenges that arose.

Setting expectations and structures for a professional work environment. It was important that the PRs be treated as professional partners. Each youth signed an agreement form that described the scope and sequence of the work, timelines, and expectations for their participation and deliverables expected of them, as well as the compensation they would receive. The PRs attended a 2-day group training in Cali (see below) to introduce them to study goals, background information on youth violence in Colombia, data collection and analysis plans, and their roles and responsibilities in the study. At the end of the training, the FL provided the PRs with a certificate of training completion to document their experience for future use.

Prioritizing the safety of the PRs and the community dialogue participants. AIR's Institutional Review Board approved research design and data collection tools in accordance with human subject

¹ <https://alvaralice.org/en/noticias/cali-first-city-in-colombia-to-implement-the-cure-violence-model/#:~:text=Through%20the%20Cure%20Violence%20model,viole%20as%20an%20infectious%20disease.>

protections guidelines. All PR activities were held in locations that PRs and the FL considered to be safe. For example, youth dialogues in each community took place at various locations such as in a library, university, or a community organization. We also emphasized building relationships with the PRs as a group so they would feel comfortable sharing their challenges and look for resolutions during the study. The 2-day PR training provided a great opportunity to build a relationship with the FL and bond as a group with the PR. The debriefing sessions the PRs held as a research team right after each community dialogue and their contact with the FL allowed other opportunities for them to feel emotionally safe and supported.

Documenting processes and gathering feedback to inform improvements. We used a number of methods to collect information on the PR process that included FL notes, a baseline questionnaire on PR skills and interests (n=8),² post-training questionnaires on PR satisfaction with the experience (n=9), follow-up surveys with PRs at the end of the study (n=8),³ and a semi-structured interview with the FL. We used PR feedback and survey results to tailor our training templates and data collection guides so PR could work individually and in groups to synthesize the information collected from the community dialogues.

TRAINING AND COACHING FOR SKILL BUILDING

Initial training to build capacity and teamwork. Prior to the youth dialogues, the FL conducted a 2-day in-person training in Cali with all nine PR. The training was key in helping the PRs understand the research goals, tasks and timelines, supports in place to help them, and their role as researchers in the study. In addition, the training was the only time all youth researchers from the three communities were physically together. Some of them knew each other in advance of the training, either from the college they currently attended or the neighborhood they lived in. Therefore, a second goal for the training was to build relationships among the PR and between the PR and FL, and to create a safe and supportive work environment. A dinner the night before the training and a celebratory lunch at the end of the training allowed additional mingling time for the group members to get to know each other.

The US-based research team developed the PR training slides, materials, and templates in English and the FL translated and adapted the materials in Spanish to ensure contextual and cultural fit. For example, the FL identified icebreaking activities and hands-on activities to build rapport between the peer researchers and the FL, such as the LEGO SERIOUS PLAY® Methodology,⁴ which allowed the participants to share life stories and current experiences. This icebreaker created an open and trusting atmosphere and camaraderie that was noted by the participants as one of the most valuable experiences of the training. In the post-training survey, the peer researchers said the activity allowed them “get out of their comfort zones” and “reflect our reality or history by getting things out that hurt us.”

Day 1 of the training introduced them to the study goals and their role in the study. Part of the training on day 1 also focused on learning about violence using data from each community and reflecting on their own experience with violence and safety in their city. For example, the three PRs from each city worked as a team on a mapping exercise to identify safe and unsafe spaces in their communities, noting the different and interrelated levels of violence in these places, identifying risk factors (individual, family, peer, neighborhood, society), and then sharing their results with the entire PR group.

² One person's responses were not received due to internet connection problems.

³ We did not receive feedback from one person.

⁴ <https://www.strategicplay.com/article/what-is-lego%C2%AE-serious-play%C2%AE-methodology-145.asp>

Day 2 of the training focused on building data collection and analysis skills. Participants completed hands-on activities to learn about and practice skills that were important in the study, including group facilitation and notetaking. They learned how to code qualitative data and synthesize information using the templates and worksheets we shared with the PRs to assist with their analytic work. Each city-based PR team decided how they wanted to work together to manage the community dialogue process. For example, each group identified a leader within their team and the specific roles each member would take on in coordinating and facilitating the youth dialogues. One of the participants worked at an NGO, which has a studio for launching communication campaigns. Per her suggestion, the team ended day 2 with creating a video where each PR talked about violence in their communities and the study. The FL noted that the video⁵ production turned out to be “a good exercise of connection between all the participants and of ownership of the process.” (Exhibit 2 portrays the PR, FL, and one of our research team members).

Exhibit 2. PR, FL, and a Research Team Member



Over the 2 days of the training, PRs had opportunities to increase their knowledge and practice skills that were important for the success of the study, including community awareness and critical thinking on causes and correlates of violence. Discussions and hands-on exercises exposed them to educational skills such as facilitating the community dialogues in each community (e.g., how to ask questions and probe for details, how to avoid interjecting their own perceptions, and how to

demonstrate effective speaking), data synthesis (e.g., coding), and writing a summary. They also discussed leadership and teamwork. PR feedback (n=8) after the training showed all were satisfied with their overall experiences, training content and materials, and the preparedness of the facilitator. Open-ended comments suggested that the PRs appreciated the community-based approach aligned with “the thoughts, tastes, and needs of the young people of the territory,” and found the knowledge they gained useful, as the comment below shows:

“The experience of the training was fruitful and enriching. It was an experience that allowed me to meet other people and learn from their perspectives about violence in their cities.”

Ongoing communication with FL. After the PR training, the FL continued to communicate remotely with each team and provide individual and collective support as needed, while the PR led the data collection and analyses. The FL described her role in this process as a coach; she trusted the lived experience each PR brought to this community-based work:

My role was guidance. I was humble in telling them that I knew a lot but did not know their realities, and that I would learn from them. I was a teacher, but we were learning together.

⁵ Placeholder for link

Regular and ongoing communication between the PRs and FL was important for supporting the team as well as documenting implementation for lessons learned. For example, the FL coached the youth researchers on facilitating the community dialogues in each community. The FL also supported each team as they worked on synthesizing the findings. This was done by reviewing the analysis templates the research team created for synthesizing the findings. The FL also supported team members when PRs had challenges working together.

Debriefing sessions after each youth dialogue facilitated quality and reflective learning. The FL attended each youth dialogue as a non-participating observer and then met with the PRs right after each youth dialogue to discuss what they had learned, what worked well, and what to do next (Exhibit 3 shows PRs facilitating the community dialogues).

Exhibit 3. PR Facilitating the Community Dialogue



The debriefing was a mechanism used for emotional support for the PRs, as an opportunity for coaching on group facilitation skills, and a discussion of data gaps. Observations of how the debriefings supported the PR and ultimately helped improve the quality of research include the following:

- The debriefings allowed the FL to acknowledge the strengths (e.g., group facilitation, leadership) and improvements she observed, and helped the PR build their confidence.
- The community dialogues revealed traumatic experiences of violence that participants shared from their communities. The debriefing sessions provided a reflective dialogue for PRs to process these difficult emotions and identify ways to objectively present the information they gathered in these community dialogues without interjecting their own experiences.
- The dialogues in each community were scheduled over 2 consecutive days; therefore, the debriefing after the dialogue helped the PRs prepare for the second session and identify how they wanted to probe for more information. For example, the PRs identified a need to probe for recommendations on reducing violence and differentiating between violence in different parts of each city.

- The FL observed that it was difficult for those participating in the community dialogues to think about innovative solutions to the problems of violence. She encouraged the PRs to guide the group conversation in ways that would help the participants articulate solutions.

YOUTH PEER RESEARCHER OUTCOMES

Feedback from the PRs and FL suggested that PRs had positive experiences, and perceived personal and professional benefits from participating in the study.

Overall experiences with the study. After the study ended, all PRs indicated that they (1) were able to work on tasks that interested them, (2) had clear responsibilities, (3) took a leadership role, and (4) developed new skills that they will be able to use elsewhere. The FL also reported a positive experience working with the PR:

“It is important to see that while many people think young people are irresponsible, you find that they are very responsible when they commit to something, how professional and responsible they can be. The process was very satisfying.”

Increased knowledge of youth violence. As the quotes below demonstrate, the PRs reported that they gained a deeper understanding of violence through the community dialogues they facilitated and the training they received as part of the study. Some PRs were not aware of the extent of crime and violence in certain neighborhoods in their city. Even though they all were exposed to violence in their communities to varying extents, the study provided them a better understanding of the traumatic impact violence had on young people in their city. They also had the opportunity to think about the multiple factors that influence violence at the societal, community, family, and individual level as they analyzed the community dialogue data for the study. In addition, the reflective dialogues provided an opportunity for both the participants and the PRs as facilitators to think about how they could advocate for change in their communities to reduce the impact of violence. For example, in a discussion on resources and gaps for youth in their communities, many participating youth realized that their own skills (e.g., teaching dance to young children) and strengths (e.g., mentoring others) could be put to use in helping others. The PRs were asked about the most valuable aspects of their work on the study:

“The most valuable experience was first to get to know the other researchers and how violence has hit the population. It was also very enriching to hear from the voice of some citizens [about] their experiences [with violence] in our city.”

“To have to find out that my city has young people who experience direct violence.”

“To be able to know more about the context of violence in my city that I didn't know, and to create social connection with all the young people who participated in the dialogues whose lives and...families were impacted.”

“Listening to them made us see the reality of other places close up and value what we had in our territory.”

Community and civic awareness and critical thinking. PRs shared that their active work to recruit participants for the community dialogues and facilitating the process helped them think differently about the problem of violence and learn about “people from different neighborhoods of the city” and “different programs that work on behalf of children, adolescents, and young people.” One PR shared that it was a valuable experience to know that “the participants in youth dialogues liked to participate in the dialogue; they felt listened to and they would like to continue participating in these spaces.” In addition, the FL said, “The community dialogues proved to be very powerful in sharing stories, giving the youth a voice to be heard, and created opportunities for collective thinking of solutions to reduce community violence.” The PRs agreed that they “would like to continue working on violence prevention in the community.” The PRs desire to continue civic engagement was also reflected in their recommendations for further work:

“The continuity of the process. Once the research stage is over, what proposals, plans, or projects will be developed for the benefit of young people in the territory?”

“We should all [meet together] in order to share and express more about youth violence in Colombia, get more confidence, be able to continue talking with these people.”

“It would be very valuable to do these dialogues in different spaces of the city. We would like to continue to address the issue of youth violence, to strengthen prevention initiatives, and share the information and reflections that come out of the dialogues.”

Educational and professional experiences. The FL noted that PRs saw their engagement with this study and the work they did as educational. Meaningful involvement in the research process was the basis for the positive outcomes our PRs reported, leading to a sense of social responsibility and a skill set that might lead to job opportunities in their communities and other forms of professional development. Three of the PRs are sociology majors in college and said they will use the PR experience to build on their educational experience. One person who is not able to pursue higher education due to financial reasons reported that her experience as a PR made her want to apply for a related certificate to continue community-based work.

Improved group facilitation and coordination skills. In the post-study questionnaire, seven⁶ of the nine respondents shared that the study increased their abilities in several areas:

⁶ One person did not respond; another respondent marked all responses as “disagree.”

- Planning a group event step by step
- Activities for coordinating an event successfully
- How to interview a group
- How to analyze information systematically to look for key findings
- Different ways to analyze information collected from others in the community
- Speaking in front of a group of people
- Facilitating a group conversation

In their responses to open-ended questions about the skills they had learned, PR referred to their increased *listening and group facilitation skills*:

“Strengthening the moderation of dialogues.”

“Knowing [how to ask] clear questions without putting my point of view on them.”

“To moderate a conversation between peers and to manage the tension that sometimes arises when talking about topics as complicated as violence.”

“Collect information through reports, taking into account the [opinion] of each person invited during the event. Discuss information with a group of people and thus reach agreements that will improve communication and... obtain the information required in the development of research.”

“Talk to people; lead groups and social events.”

“We tried as a team to be the most cordial and respectful when speaking, trying to make them feel confident and comfortable to express their cases.”

Data synthesis and writing skills were mentioned in open-ended responses as another area they improved through participation in this study. PRs shared that they increased their “ability to synthesize information”. Synthesizing the findings from two community dialogues and writing a summary as a team was not an easy task for the peer researcher groups from each city.

Leadership and team skills. A number of PRs and the FL reported that participating in this study improved their *decision making and leadership skills*, as they all had to consider ways to access their resources and community network to recruit participants, find a location for the dialogues, coordinate refreshments and supplies, and manage their time effectively. Multiple PRs referred to improved collaboration skills as a result of working within a team to accomplish a task (e.g., coordinate and facilitate two community dialogues and synthesize data collected), as in this example: “Most of the time it was difficult to agree on things to do. But in the end, we always came to an agreement.” Two teams in particular were able to collaborate well and coordinate their activities, which supported their writing experiences. They supported each other during the facilitation of the dialogues and analyses and resolved challenges effectively (e.g., finding a time to meet). Although the third team required more coaching and support from the FL to resolve communication challenges among the team members, they were able to synthesize the information from the two community dialogues by the given deadline. In addition, some PRs referred to *empathy* and the emotions they had to deal with after they listened to many stories of violence the youth participants shared in the community dialogues, and even in the Lego activity they participated in during their training when they shared their own stories.

ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES

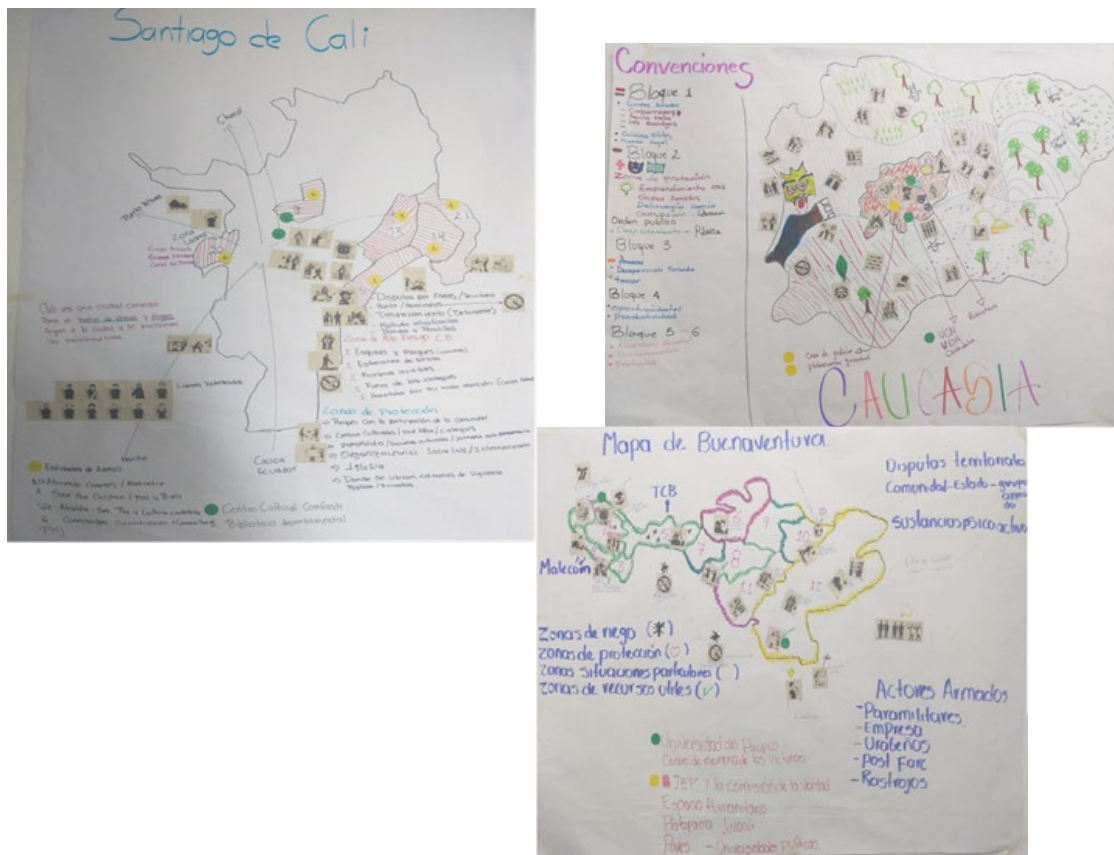
Our main study commissioned by the USAID Colombia Mission—the Colombia Youth Violence Assessment—benefitted in the following unique ways from engaging young people as peer researchers.

Youth researchers' input increased the relevance of questions about the drivers of youth violence that were asked in the community dialogues. During the PR training, youth recommended revisions and additions to existing questions to make the questions contextually and culturally more relevant to their communities and to young people in Colombia. For example, the initial set of questions referred to “communities,” but the PRs decided to focus on “neighborhoods” instead. In the case of Cali, the first dialogue focused on the neighborhood, but during the second dialogue, PRs decided to include additional questions to also capture participants' perspectives on the city as a whole.

Youth researchers also shared valuable information on violence and safe spaces in their cities that increased the research team's understanding of the violence prevention context in Cali, Caucasia, and Buenaventura. This information was collected through a community mapping exercise during the PR training; the exercise sparked useful discussions (see Exhibit 4 below). Part of the discussion was whether violence was experienced in specific neighborhoods, and whether participants should therefore be recruited from particular neighborhoods. This discussion was particularly important for the team coming from Cali, a big city with 22 neighborhoods (“Comunas”), and Buenaventura, with 12 neighborhoods.

PRs' connections in their communities were useful in recruiting participants for the community dialogues and coordinating logistics. The PRs were tasked with recruiting participants for the community dialogues with youth, which would have been very difficult without their leadership. Two of the teams decided to also recruit minors (those under age 18) because they felt strongly about the added value minors would bring to the dialogues. The research team needed to take additional steps to engage minors, and the PRs coordinated with the parents to get their consent for the minors to participate in the study. In addition, each PR team used their local connections to identify a space for the two community dialogues in each city.

Exhibit 4. Community Maps of Violence Developed by Each Team



LIMITATIONS

Our process for training and coaching the youth in Colombia as co-researchers with the study team was research based and methodical; however, our approach was not without limitations. Since the research team was not in the same location as the PRs, in-person communication with the research team was limited to the initial training and the community dialogues in each city. In addition, safety concerns due to high levels of violence limited the extent to which the FL was able to travel to meet in person with the PR teams located in Cali, Caucasia, and Buenaventura. To remedy limited face-to-face contact and facilitate ongoing communications, our FL used online group chats (via WhatsApp) and phone calls.

The youth dialogues in Cali, Caucasia, and Buenaventura were designed to be the last phase of our data collection to build on our desktop review and interviews with national experts. Although our study took place over 12 months, the PRs were actively engaged for only 4 months, when they led the community dialogues with other youth in their communities and summarized findings from these dialogues, which were included in our final report. While the short 4-month duration limited the extent to which the study was able to benefit from the PRs and also benefit them, we captured many useful insights and lessons learned to build into future research that includes youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Colombia Youth Violence Assessment sought to understand the current state of violence affecting the most vulnerable youth in Colombia and examine existing resources and gaps in Cali, Cauca, and Buenaventura. Our work to engage young people as research partners is a promising and innovative approach to enhance their civic participation and build their knowledge and experience in matters that relate to youth development. Below we share lessons learned and recommendations for USAID and the Colombia Mission for future research and policymaking.

Engage youth peer researchers early in research design. By design, we engaged the PRs primarily in data collection and synthesis of the community dialogues. Our desktop review and interviews with content experts in Colombia preceded our work with the peer researchers. Future research studies with young people should involve them in multiple phases of data collection to benefit from their experiences and perspectives as well. For example, youth can be trained to participate in desktop reviews to gather and synthesize information on policies, practices, and programs.

Although, the PRs led the community dialogues in each city, the materials and processes were developed and planned by the research team. For example, our research team developed the templates the PRs used for facilitating the community dialogues and synthesizing the information they gathered in these dialogues. At the end of the study, we heard from the PRs that while they learned about youth violence and enhanced their skills through this study, they wanted to have more flexibility in the templates used to collect and synthesize data. Our research team expected the PRs to adhere to the templates we created for them, feeling that these templates would help them write up their summaries and synthesis of data from community dialogues. We learned that involving the youth as we developed the templates and timeframes would ensure a better fit for the cultural, age, and language level of the PRs. For example, the PRs felt it was more important to spend time on debriefing as a group after each community dialogue as a research team and use this concentrated time to talk through the findings and start summarizing the information as a group. They felt this face-to-face conversation right after the community dialogue would be more productive than working on their own to summarize their findings and then working remotely as a group to aggregate findings. Future work supported by USAID and the Colombia Mission should strongly consider engaging youth earlier in the study design so they can bring in a youth perspective as well as cultural and contextual knowledge that would improve the design of the study.

Engage youth peer researchers actively in dissemination and decision making. At the end of the study, the PRs shared that they wanted to be more engaged in the reporting of the findings to USAID and in future decisions on prevention programming in their communities. They found the dialogues with youth in their communities informative and inspiring, and wanted to continue similar types of community-based research. Promoting youth participatory community-based research may be an important step for USAID to promote youth development and leadership in Colombia and other countries around the world. Although Colombia's recent reforms to promote youth civic participation and governance are exciting, many challenges have also been noted in implementing mechanisms for active youth participation and support systems effectively (UNOY, 2019). Training youth as peer researchers may be an effective strategy for examining how youth policies are implemented in Colombia and their outcomes, and for sharing this knowledge with Youth Councils in municipalities for further policymaking. As shared earlier, the PRs created a short video where the PRs took introduced themselves and described the purpose of the study. This video could be used as an example of a product created by youth for youth leadership projects.

Identify youth skills, strengths, and needs prior to the initiative to build adequate supports and processes for youth leadership and engagement. Based on our initial data collection from the PR, we knew that our PR had public speaking and coordination skills but would need support with interviewing and analyzing data collected at the community dialogues. As expected, we benefitted from the participation of the PR, who used their resources, such as community connections, to recruit participants and find a space for the dialogues. On the other hand, the PR needed more instructional support and coaching from the FL in the data analysis phase. When asked about how we could improve our process for future research, the FL recommended that we incorporate more time into the initial training to practice and role play interviewing, coding, and analysis. Based on our experiences from this study, it will be important for future studies involving youth leaders to build in adequate time for training, reflection, and practicing skills. For example, including additional in-person group meetings for talking through data analyses and writing should be a key component of future studies.

Provide equitable opportunities to young people in the most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities who show enthusiasm and commitment but need resources to engage. In the post-conflict era of Colombia and through the recent reforms, youth have been given the leverage to shape the public policy agenda. However, as USAID and the Colombia mission consider involving young people actively in community-based work, it will be important to consider the contextual and structural barriers that youth face and recognizing their needs as key to making progress in youth development.

The monetary compensation we provided to PR for their work and time in this study was an important incentive, as almost all of the PR lived in disadvantaged and high-crime neighborhoods and had little income they made on their own or through their families. Our FL shared a comment one peer researcher made about the compensation: “This is great, this is more than I make making and selling Biche [a local drink] in a year.” Therefore, it will be important for USAID and the Colombia Mission to consider financially compensating young adults in community-based work.

Access to internet and technology posed challenges at times to making progress, although the teams were usually able to figure out alternative ways to stay connected. It will be important to consider the use of technology and addressing any barriers upfront will be an important consideration for future studies.

Physical safety due to community violence limited how frequently teams were able to meet with the FL in person. Physical safety and access to technology will be even more important to consider during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Promote future studies to better understand how young people’s active involvement as researchers on social issues influences their social, political, and economic development in Colombia and other countries. In our study of youth violence in Colombia, our primary goal for engaging youth as researchers as well as key informants in the community dialogues was to enhance the quality of the data we collected. On the other hand, our systematic data collection from the PR and the FL also allowed us to capture our process and the short-term positive outcomes for the PR. We hope future research will promote community-based youth participatory research not as an *innovative, sporadic* approach to understanding social issues in developing countries but as *a requirement*. This approach will support young people’s sociopolitical development and technical skills through training and coaching by expert adults. It will also be important in future studies to continue to learn how young people develop through their research participation. More specifically, development and use of contextually valid and

reliable instruments will be important in assessing youth outcomes through research participation in the Latin America and Caribbean region.

CONCLUSION

There is global consensus among policymakers, community leaders, and researchers that involving youth in addressing issues that affect them has tremendous potential for social change. Particularly in violence-affected Latin America and Caribbean Region contexts, engaging youth as partners in knowledge building and translation has multiple benefits for youth development as well as community change. This report was guided by the USAID Youth Policy (USAID, 2012), and draws on the literature of youth engagement and participatory evaluation with youth and provides implications for future research and policy making involving young people as change agents. We intended to document and share how the organizational structures, training, and coaching for skill building provided to youth benefitted both our research team and the youth peer researchers.

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