

Preventing violence: a commitment by the Organization

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It is with great satisfaction that we provide researchers and specialists on the subject of violence with the results of a study that represented an extraordinary experience of exchange and shared effort. The study and its results not only contribute to understanding a very complex problem but also show what we can do together in facing problems that cross borders and are common to the Region of the Americas as a whole.

More than 10 years ago the available data began give us warning signs that deaths and injuries intentionally inflicted by others were increasing in several countries of the Region. Mortality from these causes contributes more and more to total mortality and to potential years of life lost. These acts of violence have pushed up demand for emergency health services, physical rehabilitation, psychological care, and other public assistance. At the beginning of the 1990s, the problem changed from one of just certain cities and countries and became regionwide. The information available to guide prevention and care has been fragmented and incomplete, with significant underreporting and a lack of agreement among the different reporting sources. Data registering the impact of violence on the health of survivors are limited and unreliable. Even harder to find has been information on the factors and causes associated with violence in its various forms.

The Member States of the Pan American Health Organization have recognized that violence between persons in the family, community, and social sphere is a regional public health issue. In 1993 the Directing Council of the Organization, at its XXXVII Meeting, issued Resolution XIX and asked the Pan American Sanitary Bureau to work with others in preparing and carrying out a Regional Plan of Action on Violence and Health. This step presented us with the enormous challenge of addressing a highly complex problem. The conceptualization, measurement, and analysis of violent behaviors in different contexts, as well as the comprehension of those behaviors' causes and related factors from a demographic point of view, were set as urgent tasks designed to guide public health actions in preventing violence and treating victims and aggressors. Fostering and carrying out research and improving information and registration systems took a key position in the international cooperation programs. The study that is published in this special issue represents one of the concrete responses to the joint undertaking mandated by the Member States of the Organization.

The initiatives and the efforts made by the national and local governments have been many, as also have been those of various organizations in civil society. Today, in the twilight of the 1990s, we can see that we better understand the problem of violence and that we have more and better information to guide actions. However, at the beginning of the new millennium, we will have to make use of that improved information and understanding to find effective and efficient ways to prevent interpersonal violence in its various forms. Therefore, our next task must be to commit ourselves to using the results of this research and other recent studies on violence as a guide for the design of public policies on violence prevention.

Many questions remain unanswered and should be examined through research. Nevertheless, it is essential to call for action, working from the base of the accumulated observations, in order to reach a more in-depth understanding of the problem and its determining factors. Building communication links and facilitating dialogue and exchange among researchers and those who make or influence decisions will be the next challenge in the area of international cooperation on violence prevention in the Region of the Americas.