Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy

POLICY BRIEF 44

MAKING CITIES SAFER AND MORE DEMOCRATIC THROUGH YOUTH-CENTRED KNOWLEDGE



Executive summary

Young people in cities affected by violence are rarely asked what security means to them. This policy brief draws on participatory research conducted with 545 young people aged 16 to 29 in Comuna 1 (Popular) and 2 (Santa Cruz) in Medellín, Colombia, and Mitchells Plain in Cape Town, South Africa, engaging them not as a population at risk, but as experts on their own realities. Through workshops, interviews, a youth-led survey, and creative communication initiatives, the research identified the compounding forces driving young people's vulnerability to violence and criminal groups: economic precarity, mental health harms, invalidation, and institutional distrust, and how young people would make their communities safer. It presents recommendations for local governments and civil society on how to reduce violence and strengthen security by addressing its drivers, moving beyond punitive control or one-off interventions in young people's lives, and toward creating the conditions that reduce their vulnerability in the first place: dignity, opportunity, and a credible future. Recommendations include expanding economic pathways, prioritising youth mental health, strengthening youth participation, extending protection to families and communities, and rebuilding trust between young people and institutions.

Acknowledgments

We thank, above all, the young people of Medellín and Cape Town, especially the Colectivo PatiAmarilla and Voices of the Plain, whose experiences, critical reflection, and proposals are at the heart of this brief.

Cover photo: Young participants discussing findings at a stakeholder workshop in Cape Town, South Africa. Photo: Alexandra Abello Colak

Authors:

UK

Alexandra Abello Colak

Gareth A. Jones

COLOMBIA

Julián Muñoz

Natalia Maya

Julián Zapata

SOUTH AFRICA

Ashton Botha

Rivonne Valentine

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Introduction

Young people in historically underserved communities are disproportionately exposed to violence, both as those most at risk of harm and as those most often blamed for causing it. Despite sitting at the centre of the problem of violence, and being the main targets of the punitive or preventive programmes, young people consistently lack the space and opportunity to participate in how local governments design and govern their policy response.

Our research set out to bring young people's voice, knowledge, and experience to the centre of the conversation on how to address insecurity. Drawing on participatory research conducted with young people from Comunas 1 and 2 in Medellín, Colombia, and Mitchells Plain in Cape Town, South Africa, communities historically affected by chronic violence, deep structural inequality, and the daily presence of gangs and criminal organisations, the research generated findings co-produced directly with young people.

By engaging young people not as a population at risk, but as experts on their own realities, the research set out to better understand young people's security needs and how they become vulnerable to violence and to exploitative actors. The research points to three findings for policy and practice. First, young people's vulnerability to violence and criminal groups is driven by compounding systems, not by single risks that can be addressed in isolation; within these systems, economic insecurity, unmet mental health needs, and a deeper, existential insecurity about their future and agency emerge as key drivers of vulnerability. Second, official security priorities in both cities consistently diverge from what young people identify as most urgent, a gap that weakens the effectiveness and legitimacy of current responses. Third, young people, given genuine opportunity and space, engage seriously and constructively with the question of their security, offering ideas and proposals that are specific, actionable, and well suited to their communities.



Participants during a youth workshop in Medellín, Colombia. Photo: Gareth Jones

The Study in a Nutshell

What we set out to understand

The research was designed to answer four questions: How do young people experience violence and insecurity in their daily lives? What makes them vulnerable to violence and to the influence of gangs and criminal groups? What can reduce that vulnerability and make their communities safer, while also protecting people's rights? And how do we know whether security policies are working, from a young person's perspective?

Who we worked with

Our research team included university researchers from Colombia, South Africa and the United Kingdom and young community researchers from Medellín and Cape Town. We worked collaboratively with consolidated groups of young people; in Medellín with Colectivo PatiAmarilla and the Laboratorio Juvenil, and in Cape Town with Voices of the Plain. The youth collectives were active partners, not only as participants but as co-researchers. Together, we co-designed a survey, analysed the data alongside insights from participatory youth workshops, and worked jointly to communicate the findings back to each community.

We also collaborated with civil society organisations. Corporación Con-Vivamos in Medellín and YMCA Cape Flats in Cape Town provided spaces for and facilitated activities with young people in their communities, and Security4Peace's human-centred security approach guided the analysis of insecurity with young people.

In total, 545 young people aged 16 to 29, living in Comunas 1 (Popular) and 2 (Santa Cruz) and Mitchells Plain, took part in the research across both cities (280 in Medellín and 265 in Cape Town).

How we explored the research questions

The research began with participatory workshops and systemic mapping exercises, in which young people identified and connected the factors driving insecurity in their own words, alongside semi-structured interviews with young people, civil society actors, and local officials. Members of the youth collectives then worked with the research team to analyse these qualitative insights and use them to design and test a survey instrument built specifically to capture what mattered most from a youth perspective. That survey was completed by 244 young people in Medellín and 143 in Mitchells Plain, with young people themselves leading its application in their communities. In a final stage, the team worked with young collaborators to analyse the resulting data and to develop initiatives to reflect on what they meant, including stakeholder engagement events and community dialogues in each city, a social media campaign, a podcast, a poster campaign, and a community mural, to raise awareness of the findings and identify concrete proposals for improving security responses.

Figure 1 summarises the four phases of this process, from understanding young people's experiences through to co-producing recommendations and disseminating findings **with them**.

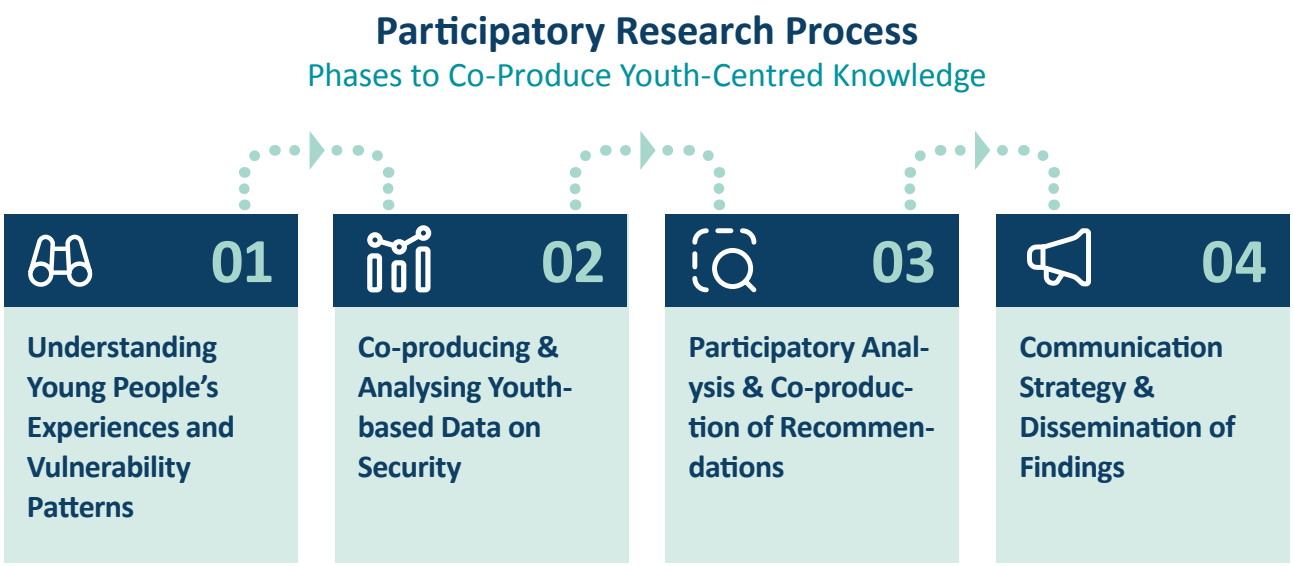


Figure 1. Phases of the Participatory Research Process

Summary of Activities

- Participatory workshops with young people: 14 workshops, 36 participants, in Medellín; 8 workshops, 120 participants, in Cape Town
- Semi-structured interviews with young people and key stakeholders (local officials and civil society representatives): 13 in Medellín, 39 in Cape Town
- Youth-led survey: 244 respondents in Medellín; 143 respondents in Cape Town
- Creative, youth-led community engagement: an Instagram Live and a poster campaign in Medellín; a three-episode podcast series, a webinar, and a community mural in Cape Town
- Communication materials co-produced with young people: one YouTube video, two Instagram carousels, four reels (in English and Spanish), and two newspaper articles

Key Findings

Security and violence-prevention policies have historically treated young people as passive targets of intervention, rather than as citizens whose rights must be protected and whose knowledge and perspectives can improve responses to urban insecurity. Our research shows that, given genuine opportunity, space, and respect, young people engage with the question of security in their communities with nuance and critical insight that help enrich public debate and existing policy frameworks. Treating them solely as targets of intervention, rather than as key partners in shaping practice, is one of the structural weaknesses this research identified in both cities. The four findings set out below draw on knowledge coproduced with young people:

1. Falling homicide rates does not mean young people are safe

Young people's exposure to non-lethal forms of violence and exploitation, and their own sense of what threatens their security, do not track the intensity of armed violence around them, or the indicators local governments use to measure their success. In Medellín, where sustained reductions in homicide have brought lethal violence to its lowest level in 50 years, young people still report experiencing multiple, simultaneous forms of harm, including sexual harassment, street attacks, and extortion. They also remain exposed to exploitation: one in four young people surveyed, 24%, reported having recently received offers to take part in risky activities linked to illegal economies or sexual exploitation, nearly one in five surveyed (20%) specifically for sexual exploitation or nightlife-economy work, most commonly webcam work (18%), sex work (7%), and sexting (5%). This exposure is sharply gendered: 29% of young women reported receiving such offers, against 18% of young men, a gap that widens further for sexual exploitation specifically, while young men were more likely to be approached for roles directly tied to the criminal economy, running errands, selling drugs, acting as lookouts, or transport weapons (10% versus 4%).

Similarly, in Mitchells Plain, 55 percent of the 128 young people surveyed reported experiencing at least one form of violence over the past year, and among them, 29 percent reported experiencing two or more different forms at the same time including threats, violence at home, street attacks, sexual violence, violence at school and cyberbullying. Despite the harms caused by this simultaneous exposure to multiple forms of violence, the most pressing worries for young people in both cities centre around unemployment, opportunity, and mental health. More strikingly, in Mitchells Plain, a community currently affected by gang violence, unemployment still outranks gang presence, drugs, and corruption as young people's top threat to their quality of life. Even where armed violence is severe and immediate, young people do not experience it as their defining insecurity, but as one layer within a wider structural condition that official indicators largely fail to see. Young people do not simply ask to be rescued from gangs and criminal groups; they ask for the structural conditions that make gang life and offers by criminal groups viable alternatives to be addressed directly.

2. Youth vulnerability is driven by a compounding system of insecurity with four leverage points.

What pulls young people toward criminal actors and violence is not a set of discrete risks such as unemployment, drug use, school dropout, gang presence, but the combination of multiple, mutually reinforcing problems that interact as a system, generating constant worry and anxiety. Across both cities, this system has four distinct leverage points:

- **Economic precarity:** unemployment, informal and precarious work, and constant financial pressure on the household
- **Mental health harms:** chronic anxiety, frustration, and difficulty processing emotions and social expectations
- **Invalidation and social disregard:** young people's identities, struggles, and daily realities dismissed or unseen by adults, institutions, and their communities
- **Declining trust in institutions:** especially police, but extending to the state more broadly

Economic precarity sits at the centre of this system, driving vulnerability by deepening the other three. Financial hardship strains families, which in turn deepens mental health pressures and reinforces young people's sense that their struggles go unseen and unsupported. When the state offers no credible alternatives, the recognition, income and belonging criminal groups promise become comparatively more attractive, not because young people are unaware of the dangers, but because the state's and community's alternatives feel weaker in practical terms. This has a direct bearing on how young people evaluate the offers they receive from criminal groups: it is not a moral failing or a lack of awareness, but a response to their search for agency in a context where they feel under strain and in survival mode.

Asked what worried them most, young people in both cities named unemployment and lack of opportunity ahead of gangs, drugs, or organised crime. The sense of being forced to live in survival mode, enduring deep uncertainty about the future in a context of felt abandonment and lack of support, is a key driver of young people's vulnerability.

Fifty-three percent of the 143 young people surveyed in Mitchells Plain said they were struggling with their mental health, with anxiety, frustration, and sadness the most reported emotions. In Medellín, over one-half of the 216 young people who answered this question also said they had difficulty processing their emotions.

3. Stability, recognition, belonging and the freedom to be young are unaddressed dimensions of security

Connected to economic uncertainties and mental health pressures sits a mostly unrecognised form of insecurity, absent from policy frameworks: young people in both cities felt unable to shape their future, to have their struggles taken seriously, and to be who they are without being seen as a threat.

Young people described feeling watched, by police, by gangs, and by their communities, but not protected, a condition that makes it dangerous simply to be young. When they voice their struggles and concerns, these are too often dismissed by adults and communities as incomparable to the "real" hardship of previous generations, under apartheid in South Africa and during the 1990s in Medellín, leaving young people's needs and pain invisible. And simply being themselves, expressing who they are, carries social risk: young people described being seen as dangerous because of their age and identity, a judgement that constrains how freely they can move about and claim their communities.

This matters for policy, because it is directly implicated in why young people become vulnerable to recruitment by gangs and criminal organizations: young people in both cities described criminal groups as offering more genuine recognition, purpose, and belonging than the state, their schools, and members of their communities currently provide. Preventive strategies that address material need alone - jobs, services, infrastructure - without also addressing recognition, dignity, and belonging, will keep losing ground to actors who understand this dynamic and act on it deliberately.

4. Institutional distrust, especially of police, undermines every other response.

Weak state legitimacy, not crime rates alone, is the deeper institutional problem this research identified: how police treat young people, and the absence of accessible services, do more to shape young people's sense of insecurity than statistics capture. In Medellín, 90% of 244 young people surveyed reported little or no trust in state institutions, including police, army, and municipal government. In Cape Town, police were named as the institution young people had the most daily contact with, and simultaneously the one they trusted least: just 6% of the 143 young people surveyed reported a high level of trust.

This is not simple disengagement: when young people see the state as unable to protect them, or as a source of harm itself, this legitimises criminal organisations as a more reliable source of order. Tellingly, young people in both cities said they find real support not in formal institutions or services, but in music, friends, and their informal networks. No security strategy can succeed while this trust deficit goes unaddressed.

In Medellín, 90% of 244 young people surveyed reported low or no trust in state institutions. In Cape Town, only 6% of 143 young people reported a high level of trust in the police, the institution they have the most daily contact with.

Policy Recommendations

Towards strategies that see young people as agents of change, that listen to their experiences, and that respond to the multidimensional reality they are living.

The research showed that security responses for young people living in the most affected communities of Medellín and Cape Town should mean care and protection, not surveillance and control, guaranteeing young people the right to live without fear and to pursue meaningful lives.

Security, in this sense, should not be centred on controlling or intervening in young people's lives, but on creating the conditions that let them live with dignity, imagine a future, and become who they want to be. The common thread running through proposals in both cities was that young people are asking for opportunity and accompaniment, not assistance, and for holistic, relationship-based responses that integrate economic, social, emotional, and institutional support, rather than addressing each in isolation.

Drawing from the research findings and on direct proposals from young people discussed with local stakeholders, six strategic areas for action emerged. These are not city-specific priorities, but transversal areas that cut across every effective response to youth insecurity:

1. **Enable credible youth economic pathways.** Employment dominates young people's concerns, but their request goes well beyond having a job to survive. Expand free, accessible training and skills development aligned with young people's interests, not only with what adults or the market currently demand, including economic pathways built around vocational training, microgrants, and structured routes into work. Connect this training to practical access: real vacancy listings, work experience, professional networks, career guidance, internships, mentorship, and job placement, since, as one young person put it: "the challenge isn't always education, it's what happens after."

2. **Prioritise youth mental health and wellbeing.** Normalise access to emotional support and break the stigma around mental health, for young people and their families alike. Community-based, youth-friendly, trauma-informed services, delivered where young people already are, in schools, youth clubs, and community spaces, are more effective than centralised or clinical-only models.

3. **Strengthen youth agency, belonging, and participation.** Recognise and strengthen the youth-led initiatives that already exist, music, art, sport, and

communication collectives, rather than prioritising the creation of new top-down programmes. Invest in young people's own leadership, communication, and civic participation skills, so they can lead and sustain these spaces. Support youth-led peer networks built for conversation, listening, and collective reflection, where young people can make sense of their own realities. Create and formally institutionalise spaces for young people in community and civic decision-making, with real institutional weight and follow-through, not simply consultation.

4. **Support young people by supporting their families, schools, and neighbourhoods, not only the individuals identified as "at risk".** Build lasting youth support systems within communities, strengthening community-based organisations with a sustained, trusted local presence, and formally integrate them as implementing partners in government-led youth programmes, to guarantee continuity beyond a single administration or funding cycle.

5. **Rebuild trust between young people and institutions.** Rebuild the relationship between young people and the police specifically, through structured, respectful dialogue and an ethics of care in policing, alongside broader efforts to make government services more timely, responsive, and tailored to young people's expressed needs. Approaches must be gender-responsive and explicitly inclusive of LGBTQ+ young people throughout.

6. **Involve young people in generating the evidence used to design and monitor security and prevention policies.** This research showed the value of engaging critically with young people about the gaps in what governments currently know about insecurity in their own communities, gaps that official data and conventional indicators miss consistently. Local governments, civil society and academia should support young people's involvement in producing evidence, not only as survey respondents, but as co-designers of the questions, the indicators tracked, and the interpretation of what the data means, strengthening both the quality of the evidence and its legitimacy in the eyes of the communities it is meant to serve.

For Further Information on this research see:
https://www.lse.ac.uk/geography-and-environment/research/addressing-urban-violence-through-participatory-research-with-youth-in-colombia-and-south-africa

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