

Interventions to Reduce Violence against Children in Low- and Middle-income Countries Evidence and Gap Map Pillar 1: Laws, crime and justice

This research brief was prepared by Ashrita Saraniⁱ, Ramya Subrahmanianⁱⁱ, and Howard Whiteⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Director, Campbell South Asia

ⁱⁱ Chief, Research on Child Rights and Protection, UNICEF Innocenti

ⁱⁱⁱ Chief Executive Officer, Campbell Collaboration

ABOUT THE EVIDENCE AND GAP MAP

An Evidence and Gap Map (EGM) is a presentation of the available and relevant evidence on a topic. EGMs visualise what we know (and do not know) via a graphical display of areas with strong, weak, or no evidence.

This EGM provides an overview of interventions to reduce violence against children (VAC) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). It represents a first step towards developing an evidence architecture to inform policy, programme, and investment strategies to prevent VAC.

The EGM includes studies on all types of VAC: physical, sexual, and emotional. It includes studies on specific forms of VAC: corporal punishment, peer violence, intimate partner violence. A fourth category of 'unclassified' studies includes research that addressed multiple or unspecified forms of violence.

The intervention-outcome framework of this EGM is based on the INSPIRE framework (WHO, 2016) which outlines seven evidence-based strategies to end VAC:

- implementation and enforcement of laws
- norms and values
- safe environments
- parent and caregiver support
- income and economic strengthening
- response and support services
- education and life skills

Evidence on strategies was further analysed to map the following outcomes:

- direct impact on violence
- norms and values
- economic and social factors
- safety and risk factors for other harms
- health
- education
- availability of information on cost-analysis.

The evidence search included impact evaluations and systematic reviews published between 2000–2019, which assessed the effectiveness of interventions to reduce interpersonal VAC in LMICs ([World Bank, 2018](#)). The search included both academic and grey literature. A critical appraisal of all studies was carried out using standardized tools.

Using established inclusion criteria, a systematic search was conducted of English language publications available in academic and other databases online. One hundred and fifty-two studies were identified, including 55 systematic reviews and 97 impact evaluations.

A second phase is underway to update the evidence base through a review of Arabic, Chinese, French, Portuguese, and Spanish.

1. FOCUS OF THIS BRIEF

This brief is one of eight briefs produced to summarize the findings of the [Evidence and Gap Map](#) on interventions to reduce violence against children in low- and middle-income countries. This brief summarizes the available evidence for Pillar 1 of INSPIRE, ‘Implementation and enforcement of laws’, renamed in the EGM as ‘Laws, crime and justice’.

The category ‘Laws, crime and justice’ is divided into the following two subcategories:

- ‘Laws’, which includes legal actions, such as banning violent discipline, criminalizing or increasing legal consequences for perpetration of sexual abuse and exploitation of children, and limiting youth access to alcohol and firearms.
- ‘Crime and justice systems’, which includes treatment programmes and other safeguards for juvenile offenders in the crime and justice system, police and judicial systems for child protection, access to informal justice, and community-based legal aid and paralegal programmes.

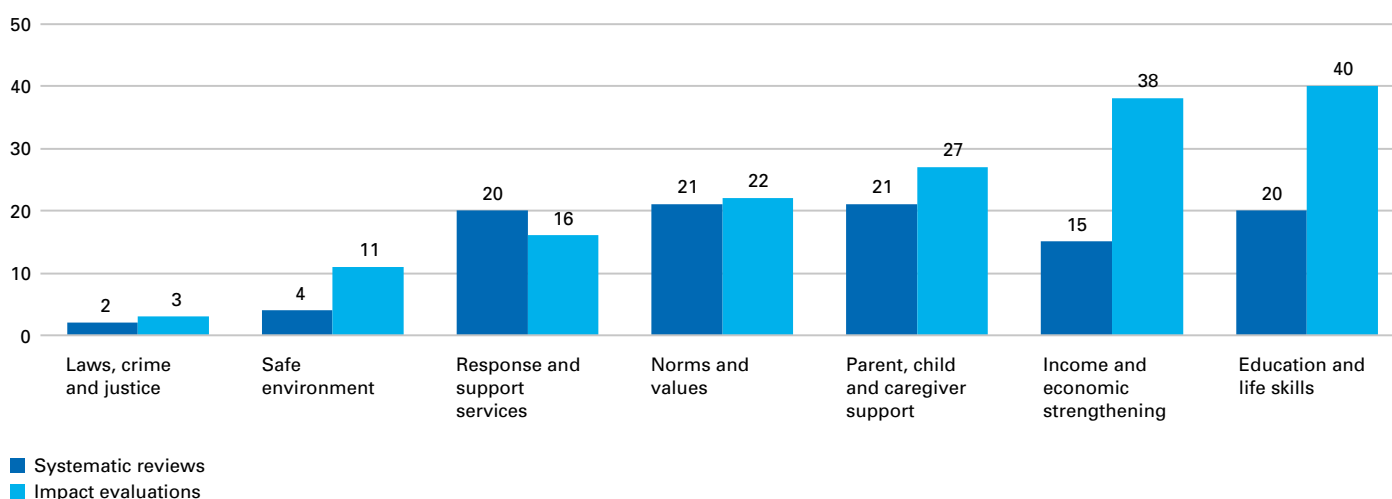
Details can be reviewed in the [main report](#).

2. MAIN FINDINGS

Distribution of studies by INSPIRE category

Studies on education and life skills (60), income and economic strengthening (53) were the most common, followed by parent, child and caregiver support (48), norms and values (43), response and support services (36), safe environment (15), and lastly studies on laws, crime, and justice (5).

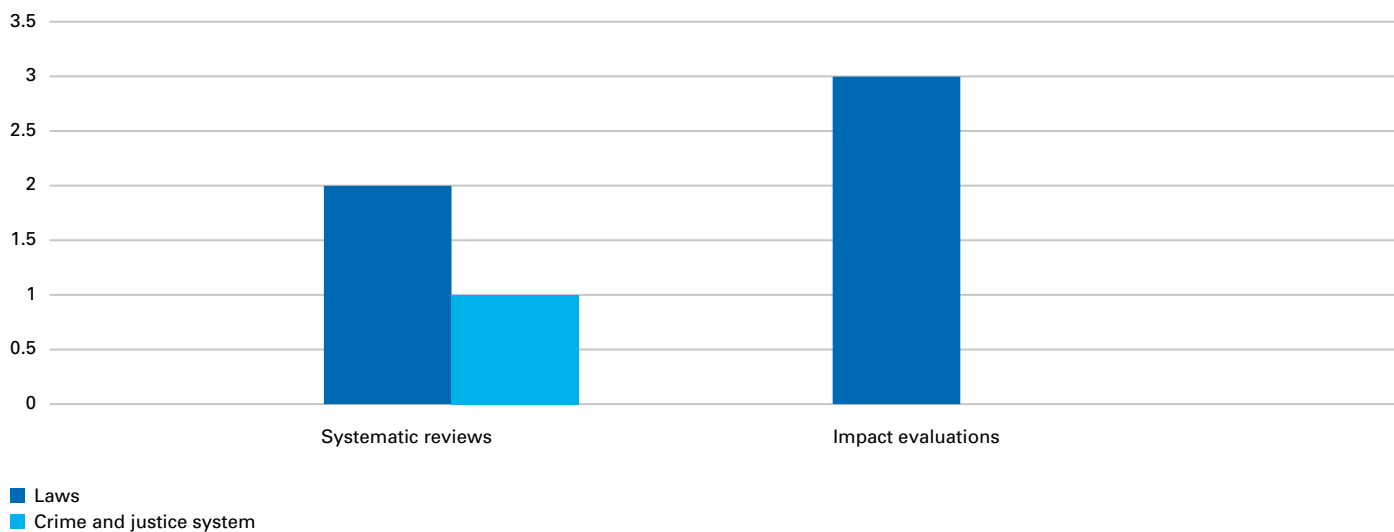
Figure 1: Distribution of studies by INSPIRE category



Note: The number of studies shown in each figure refers to the total number of studies falling under each category presented. Individual studies may be classified under multiple categories. For instance, if a study examines the impacts of multiple interventions, that study would add to the count for each intervention studied in that paper. The sum of studies for each figure may therefore be greater or lesser than the number of unique studies associated with that figure.

Studies relating to laws, crime, and justice (5) are the least represented in the EGM. Of the five studies identified in the category ‘Laws, crime and justice,’ two are systematic reviews (SRs) and three are impact evaluations (IEs). The three impact evaluations identified map to the ‘Laws’ subcategory. There were no impact evaluations related to the subcategory of ‘Crime and justice systems’.

Figure 2: Distribution of studies by ‘Laws, crime and justice’ subcategories

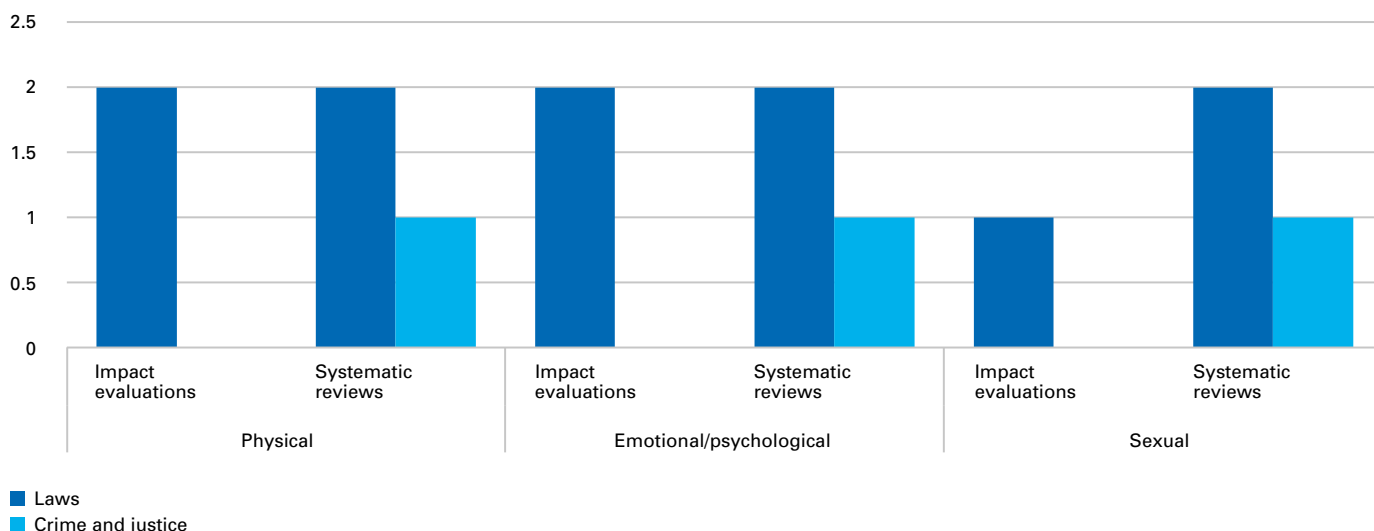


Note: The number of studies shown in each figure refers to the total number of studies falling under each category presented. Individual studies may be classified under multiple categories. For instance, if a study examines the impacts of multiple interventions, that study would add to the count for each intervention studied in that paper. The sum of studies for each figure may therefore be greater or lesser than the number of unique studies associated with that figure.

Types of violence addressed in the studies

Figure 3 below illustrates the distribution of studies assessing the effectiveness of ‘Laws, crime and justice’ interventions in reducing physical, emotional/psychological, and sexual violence. Impact on physical violence was reported by five studies (2 IEs, 3 SRs). Similarly impact on emotional/psychological violence was also reported by five studies (2 IEs, 3 SRs). The impact on sexual violence was reported by four studies (1 IE, 3 SRs).

Figure 3: Distribution of studies by types of violence addressed

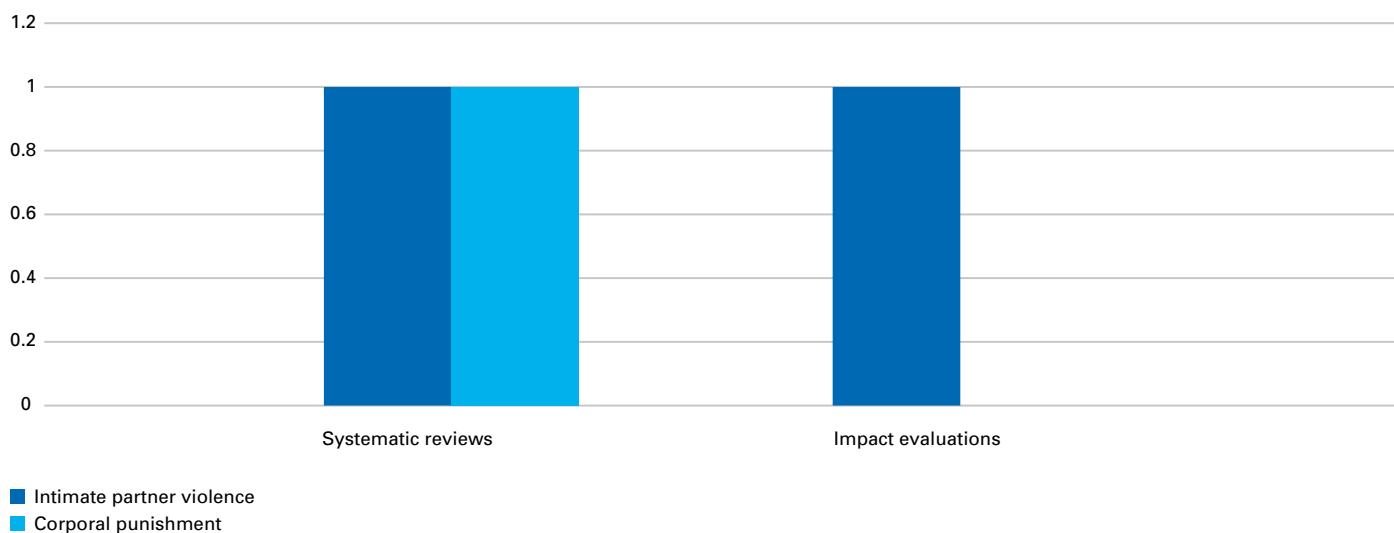


Note: The number of studies shown in each figure refers to the total number of studies falling under each category presented. Individual studies may be classified under multiple categories. For instance, if a study examines the impacts of multiple interventions, that study would add to the count for each intervention studied in that paper. The sum of studies for each figure may therefore be greater or lesser than the number of unique studies associated with that figure.

Forms of violence addressed in the studies

Of the five studies identified, one systematic review and one impact evaluation focus on intimate partner violence. One impact evaluation addressed corporal punishment.

Figure 4: Distribution of studies by forms of violence addressed



Note: The number of studies shown in each figure refers to the total number of studies falling under each category presented. Individual studies may be classified under multiple categories. For instance, if a study examines the impacts of multiple interventions, that study would add to the count for each intervention studied in that paper. The sum of studies for each figure may therefore be greater or lesser than the number of unique studies associated with that figure.

Outcomes addressed in studies

‘Impacts on violence’ (5) was the most reported outcome for interventions on laws, followed by outcomes related to norms and values (4), safety and risk factors (2), and health (2). Studies typically reported on more than one outcome. Only one study reported on economic and social outcomes such as social inclusion, gender equity, social discrimination and poverty, and no studies reported on cost-analysis or education. For interventions related to the crime and justice system, one study reported violence outcomes and one study reported economic and social outcomes.

Figure 5: Number of studies by ‘Laws, crime and justice’ intervention subcategories and outcome categories*

Subcategory \ Outcome	Violence	Norms and values	Health	Safety and risk factors for harms	Economic and social	Cost analysis	Education
Laws	5	4	2	2	1	0	0
Crime and Justice system	1	0	0	0	1	0	0

*Colour saturation denotes evidence concentration in that cell.

Intervention target group

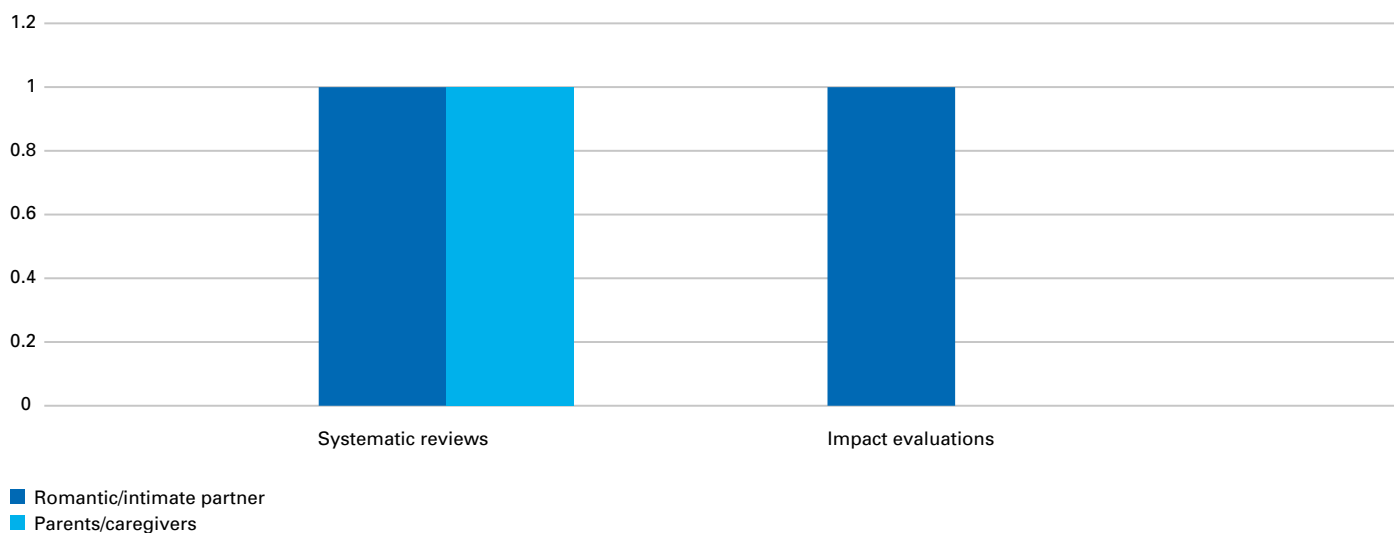
Impact evaluations and systematic reviews under this pillar address interventions for adolescents (2), girls/female child (2), boys/male child (1) and parents/caregivers (1).

There are gaps in evidence with respect to key vulnerable populations. Studies targeting subgroups of children who may be at increased risk of VAC were not identified, including children with disabilities and those who belong to minority groups.

Perpetration of violence

Three studies reported on interventions for perpetrators of violence. One impact evaluation and one systematic review related to ‘Laws, crime and justice’ interventions focused on perpetration of violence by romantic/intimate partners. One systematic review focused on perpetration of violence by parents/caregivers.

Figure 6: Distribution of studies by perpetrator of violence

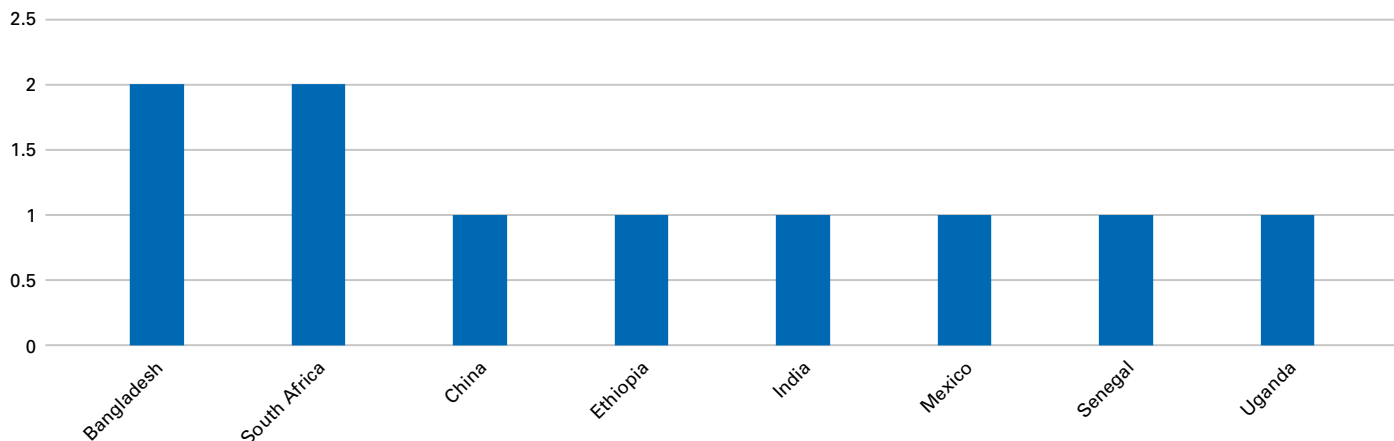


Note: The number of studies shown in each figure refers to the total number of studies falling under each category presented. Individual studies may be classified under multiple categories. For instance, if a study examines the impacts of multiple interventions, that study would add to the count for each intervention studied in that paper. The sum of studies for each figure may therefore be greater or lesser than the number of unique studies associated with that figure.

Geographic distribution of evidence

There are clear regional gaps in the evidence base. Two studies were identified from South Africa, two from Bangladesh and one each from China, Ethiopia, India, Mexico, Senegal, and Uganda.

Figure 7: Distribution of studies by countries

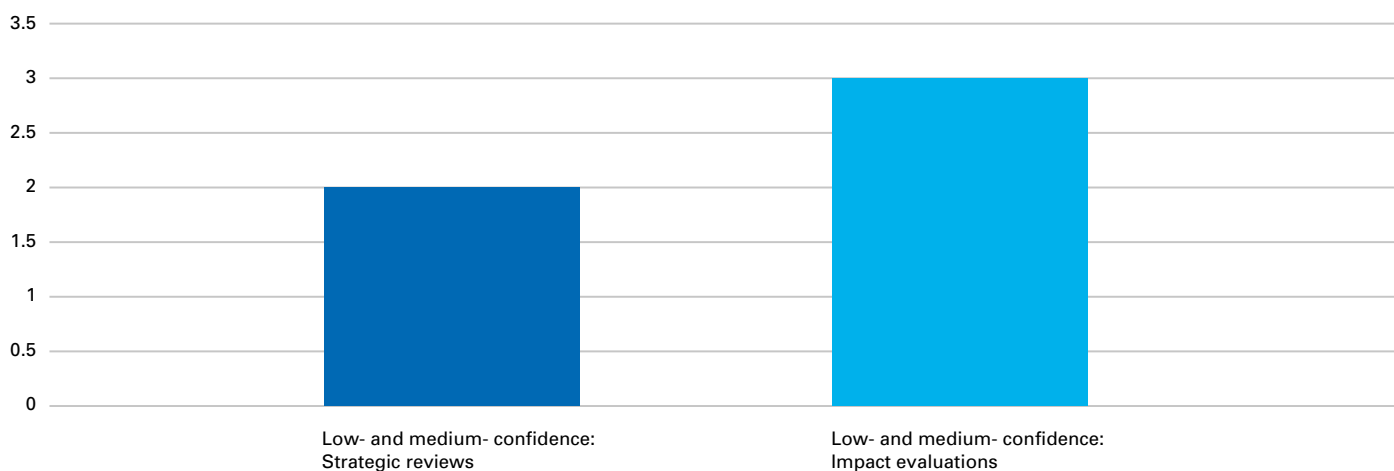


Confidence in study findings

The systematic reviews and impact evaluations were assessed for the level of confidence (low, medium, or high) that could be placed in their findings. The assessment utilized a 16-item checklist for quality appraisal of systematic reviews and a six-criteria checklist for assessment of quantitative impact evaluations. These checklists provide a broad assessment of weaknesses in methodologies used to conduct and report the findings on systematic reviews and impact evaluations.

All the impact evaluations and systematic reviews identified had methodological limitations as per the assessment tools applied and were found to reflect low and medium confidence in study findings.

Figure 8: Distribution of studies by study quality



3. SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE GAPS

- This category has the least concentration of evidence and many knowledge gaps remain.
- There is a lack of ‘high confidence’ systematic reviews and impact evaluations.
- There is a lack of evidence considering vulnerable populations such as children from low-income settings, children with disabilities and marginalised communities.
- Evidence is concentrated to only a few countries and there is a striking gap in evidence from multiple regions.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

‘Laws, crime and justice’ has the least concentration of evidence and notable knowledge gaps remain. A coordinated coalition of funders, researchers and policy-makers can play a lead role in building the evidence architecture around preventing VAC by:

1. Ensuring more high-quality studies are funded and generated on issues ‘Laws, crime and justice’, including primary studies, based on technical guidance on effective research methods for quality evidence generation. High-quality research includes adherence to standardized international checklists for study design, ensuring rigorous ethical protocols, engaging with experienced VAC researchers and building on lessons learned about safety, ethical, and methodological standards.
2. Using the evidence in the map on ‘Laws, crime and justice’ interventions to identify subcategories, geographical areas, and vulnerable groups where greater investment in mixed-method and primary research needs to be made.
3. Strengthening existing databases to support global coordination on available studies addressing the prevention and response to VAC, thereby supporting the use of evidence-informed programmes by governments and development agencies around the world.

How the EGM can be used by stakeholders

- The Map helps funding organizations, international, regional and national government organizations, practitioners and researchers to identify evidence-informed programmes and practices to achieve strategic goals related to the prevention of VAC across sectors.
- Consultation exercises to identify priority evidence needs should be carried out, working with knowledge producers and users to fill those gaps either directly or indirectly.
- Where available evidence is limited or of low quality, researchers should work with other stakeholders to produce a series of impact evaluations and systematic reviews for key interventions in categories and sub-categories of violence prevention approaches. This will help better populate the Map.
- The value of an evidence and gap map is to supplement other forms of primary and secondary research and to regularly take stock of the availability of evidence and research quality and adherence to ethical standards. Funders and research organizations should invest in updating evidence and gap maps to track the production of evidence in specific areas of interest.

About this UNICEF Innocenti research brief

Funding and technical support was provided by UNICEF’s Office of Research-Innocenti. The research was undertaken by Campbell Collaboration. Comments may be sent to: info@campbellcollaboration.org, copying research@unicef.org.

[Explore the EGM](#). Read the [full report](#). Read the [study protocol](#). Access all UNICEF Innocenti [evidence and gap maps and other evidence synthesis products](#).