



URBAN VIOLENCE IN ZARQA, JORDAN



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INTRODUCTION

With 90.3% of the population living in urban areas, Jordan is among the 50 most urbanized countries in the world. The urbanization rate increased with 100% between 2000 and 2024^[1] The growth is driven by poor city planning, better job opportunities in big cities and a large refugee influx due to multiple wars in the region. ^[2]

Urban violence is a complex phenomenon influenced by economic, social and political structures. Studies show that, unemployment and resource inequality can lead to youth gangs engaging in violence and crime.^[3] In Jordan, the unemployment rate was 22% in 2023, and 40.5% in the age group 20-24. Furthermore, 84.9% of women remain outside the labor force. ^[4]

In Jordan, many people live with the threat of violence. The 2017-2018 Jordan Population and Health Survey (JPHS) found that 64.2% of children between 1-14 years in Zarqa had experienced physical punishment by their parents. The same survey showed that 26% of ever married women in Jordan between 15-49 years had experienced violence from their husband (21% emotional, 18% physical and 5% sexual). In Zarqa, this number was 36%.^[5]



Figure 1: picture of Zarqa

The prevalence of violence poses a challenge to Zarqa's future development, hindering investments and sustainable progress while harming individuals.^[6] Victims often face depression and anxiety, and exposure to violence increases the likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator, perpetuating a cycle of violence. ^[7] Communities are also affected, as stress-related issues, such as drug abuse, can lead to aggressive behavior.^[8] Social and cultural norms in Jordan create significant barriers to report violence. People fear that they will be blamed for the violence, not taken seriously, or face social stigma. ^[9] This study investigates the root causes of violence from a theoretical perspective using the *ecological framework for understanding violence*, which states that no single factor can

explain why some people or groups are at higher risk of facing interpersonal violence. Contrarywise, interpersonal violence is the result of interactions among a range of factors across four levels: individual, relationship, community, and societal. [10]

The objectives of the study and future perspectives for planning

The study aims to inform effective violence prevention programs tailored to Zarqa’s unique challenges, through an examination of violence trends, risk factors, and root causes of violence. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a safer and more resilient environment for the residents, providing local authorities and organizations with the insights and recommendations needed for designing and implementing targeted interventions.

Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods approach combining literature, quantitative and qualitative data. The triangulation aimed at enhancing the study’s rigor and depth.

The quantitative component of the study was divided into the following eight sections.

Section 1	Demographic composition
Section 2	Perceptions of security in the community
Section 3	Perceptions of violence
Section 4	Risks and preventive factors
Section 5	Experience of violence and violence dynamics
Section 6	Violence prevention and community trust
Section 7	Perpetrators and victims
Section 8	Reporting patterns

Table 1: questionnaire content

Data collection process

The study sample of 526 respondents included residents from Zarqa, aged 18 and above. A simple random sampling technique with face-to-face interviews was used. The number of residential blocks selected in each of Zarqa's three districts was based on the population, to ensure an equal representation. The random sample selection followed a four-step process: 1) Random cluster selection, 2) Random selection of residential buildings, 3) Random selection of the apartment, and 4) Random selection of the respondent.

Focus groups and Key Informant Interviews

In total, six focus group discussions (FGD) and five key informant interviews (KII) were conducted in June and July 2024, following a semi-structured interview guide provided by DIGNITY. FGD's included three female and three male groups with youth respondents aged 18-35 from Zarqa. Key informants from various sectors were selected to provide relevant and diverse perspectives on the study's objectives.

Data analysis

Quantitative data analysis was performed using Excel, STATA and SPSS. Acknowledging the gender-specificity of the topic, all survey questions were disaggregated on gender. Qualitative data collected was analyzed using MaxQDA and inductive thematic coding to identify and interpret patterns and themes within the data. Relevant quotations were highlighted to exemplify the quantitative findings.

Validation workshop

Following a participatory approach, Dignity and NAYA organized a validation workshop on the 28th of September 2024 with 25 stakeholders from the Zarqa governorate to discuss the study's preliminary findings. The main goal was to jointly review and validate the findings of the study.

Ethical considerations

The study was granted ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of Princess Sumaiya University of Technology and from the Ministry of Interior. To ensure respondents' and interviewers' safety and well-being, the following ethical guidelines were applied: respondents were informed about the purpose and thematic content of the study, confidentiality, anonymity, use of data and the right to withdraw. Written informed consent was given by all respondents.

Key findings

Demographic distribution of respondents

The studied population consisted of 526 respondents. The majority has Jordanian nationality (91.3%) and almost half (47,9%) are in the age group from 35-59 years. The majority (66.2%) is married and most have finished either secondary school (24.3%) or high school (38.8%). Only 18.3% reported having paid work, and 42.8% reported being housekeepers. There is a gender imbalance in work status, with a large majority of women being housekeepers.

		Zarqa (N = 526)	%	
Gender	Female	267	50.8%	
	Male	259	49.2%	
Age	18-34	176	33.5%	
	35-59	252	47.9%	
	60-87	98	18.6%	
Nationality	Jordanian	480	91.3%	
	Syrian	28	5.3%	
	Palestinian	8	1.5%	
	Egyptian	3	0.6%	
	Saudi-Arabian	1	0.2%	
	Pakistani	1	0.2%	
Marriage status	Married	348	66.2%	
	Single	115	21.9%	
	Widowed	45	8.6%	
	Divorced	14	2.7%	
	Separated	4	0.8%	
Years of education	Elementary school (0-6 years of education)	67	12,7%	
	Secondary school (7-10 years of education)	128	24,3%	
	High school (11-12 years of education)	204	38,8%	
	Bachelor degree (13-17 years of education)	117	22,2%	
	Master degree (18-20 years of education)	8	1,5%	
	Doctorate (20-23 years of education)	2	0,4%	
	Work status	Non-paid work	2	0.4%
		Unemployed	67	12.7%
Self-employed		39	7.4%	
Student		42	8%	
Retired		55	10.5%	
Paid work		96	18.3%	
Keeping house		225	42.8%	

Table 2. Demographic distribution of respondents

Experience of violence

In the quantitative data, 10% (N=27) of men and 6% (N=17) of women reported having personally experienced some form of violence in the last six months. The top three types of violence experienced were threats, intimidation and harassment (45,5%, N=20), psychological violence (29,5%, N=13) or verbal violence (18,2%, N=8). A small number of respondents (6,8%, N=36) reported having been a perpetrator of violence in the past six months.

Respondents in the household survey were also asked about indirect experiences of violence. Some respondents (5,3%, N= 28) reported that a member of their household had suffered violence in the last six months, with the main type of violence being threats, intimidation and harassment (39,3%, N=11), psychological violence (42,9%, N=12) or beating/fighting (28,6%, N=8). More than a third of respondents (35,9%, N=189) reported having witnessed violence in the community during the last six months.

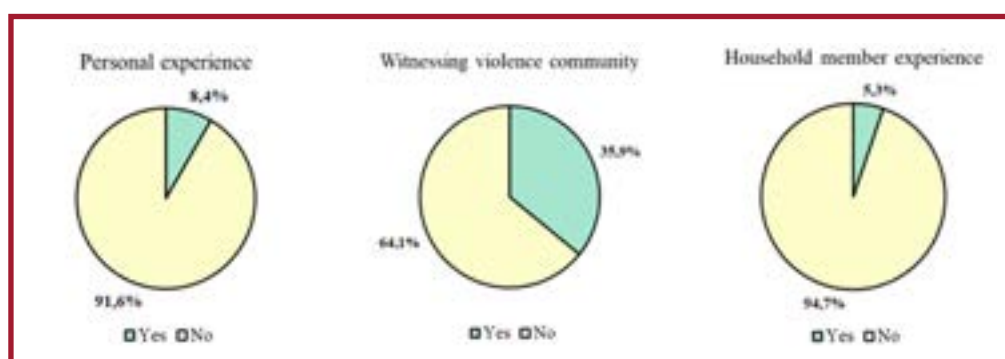


Figure 2: respondents' direct and indirect experiences with violence

Types of violence

Youth violence (64%) was perceived as the most common type of violence in the community, followed by resource-based violence (17%) and gang-related violence (12%) while physical violence (54,2%) was perceived as the most common type of violence in the household, followed by verbal violence (23%) and child abuse (11,2%). Qualitative findings show that physical violence is prevalent, often worsened by men's stress and economic hardship, leading them to take out frustrations on family members. Sexual violence was seen in both the community as harassment and in the families, although hidden due to societal and religious taboos. The interviews showed that drug abuse was a key concern for the community, as well as violence between children, both bullying and fighting.



Figure 3: line drawing - violence against children

Place based violence

This study shows that most people feel safe in their house, community and the streets. However, when interviewees were asked about places with high rates of violence, certain areas of Zarqa were mentioned repeatedly. These are marked on the map. In some of the areas drug trade and trafficking were considered the main problem. The identification of these areas is based on the personal experience of the respondents, which might not be shared by everyone in Zarqa, possibly due to disparities in vulnerability to violence.

“My daughter is always scared when she leaves the house, or when she leaves school. She is afraid of the young men in the street. Because the young men comment on her clothes, or try to hit on her” - FGD, female

Research has shown that focusing interventions on these specific hotspots, for example through environmental design, can prevent crime and noticeably improve people’s lives. Additionally, crime will not move to a different location, when one hotspot is addressed.^[11]



Figure 4: visualization of violence hotspots Zarqa

Perpetrators

Among the 44 people who experienced violence, women most often experienced violence from their spouse or other family members. For men, common perpetrators were neighbors or strangers. This indicates that for men the danger is generally outside, and for women, the most dangerous place can be their house. Among the 28 people whose household member experienced violence, the most common perpetrators were family members (35,7%, N=10), current spouses (21,4%, N=6), and neighbors (17,9%, N=5), which aligns with the most common perpetrators among those who directly experienced violence. When asked about who they saw as the most common perpetrator of violence, most of the respondents named youth groups/gangs (51%, N= 268). In the qualitative interview, fathers, spouses and men were most often named as common perpetrators.

Victims of violence

Children

In both qualitative and quantitative data, women and children (both boys and girls), were mentioned as the most common victims of violence. Interviewees mentioned that children are vulnerable, and cannot defend themselves, especially considering that their parents are often the perpetrators. The assumption that violence is an acceptable form of discipline leaves children vulnerable to abuse from their parents.

“How is a kid supposed to complain if he is grounded in a room and being hit? How is a girl locked in a room supposed to do that? Her father is standing in front of her door and locking it?” - FGD, male

Bullying in schools was also expressed as a serious problem, both in the interviews and in the validation workshop. The prevalence of violence in schools means that children often face violence in multiple locations. They might be beaten by their parents at home, bullied at school, and face verbal or sexual violence on the street.

“When the parents are not on good terms, and they always fight, the children are psychologically affected. Children are exposed to bad things in school and on the street. Sometimes, the children cannot talk to their parents because the parents are not understanding”.- FGD, female

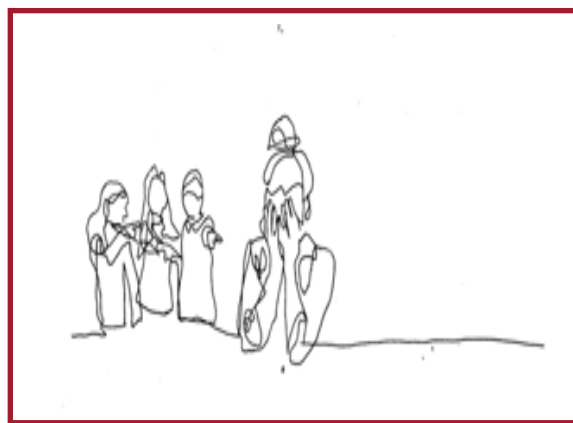


Figure 5: line drawing - bullying

One of the most extreme forms of violence against children is child marriage. In Jordan, in 2017, 13.4% of marriages were child marriages.^[12] Child marriage has a profound negative impact on a child's life, leading to early and frequent pregnancies, limited awareness of rights, disruption of education, and hindrance to normal development into adulthood. Ultimately, these factors increase a girls' vulnerability to spousal violence.

“I got married at the age of 13 my parents married me off. I was literally a child when I got married. They fixed my hair and dressed me and I wasn't aware that this was a wedding... He was more than 20 years older than me. After our first night, I was hospitalized and they gave me lots of blood. Everyone at the hospital was asking about the girl who married at young age. I will never forgive my parents for that because they knew what it meant. When I gave birth to my child, the doctor said that my pelvis was not ready for giving birth”. FGD, Female

Finally, economic exploitation through child labor occurred from this study, underlining the vulnerability of children. There are many ways in which children face violence in Zarqa. What they have in common is the negative impact of the development of the child, which consequently has a negative impact on Zarqa's future.

Women

Women's vulnerability relates to the inequalities between men and women in society. It was mentioned in seven of the interviews that women do not have the same rights as men. This inequality prohibits their independence and prevents them from defending themselves against violence. The lack of gender inequality is both embedded in the law, and in social and cultural norms dictating what is appropriate behavior for a woman. For instance, the norm of men being the breadwinner and women taking care of the kids, are enforced and upheld by both women and men. Despite the consequences being more severe for women, both men and women face negative pressure from this system.

A concrete example is that while many women do get an education, they do not become financially independent, since a woman will often not do paid work outside of the house after she gets married.

"Even if you (a girl) study, you won't achieve anything, because in the end, you are going to get married" - FGD, Female

In the household survey, 83,9% (N=224) of women reported that they were keeping house, compared to 0,4% (N=1) of men. In contrast, 33,2% (N=86) of men reported having paid work, compared to 3,7% (N=10) of women. Consequently, many women do not have the financial resources to take control over their lives and are dependent on their husband. This is especially concerning given the fact that spousal violence is common in Zarqa.

Additionally, multiple interviewees highlighted that women are often blamed for violence that happens to them, and that they are punished harder if they deviate from social norms.

"We are in a male-dominated world, and we only see women's mistakes" – KII, Female.

The expectations placed on women, in upholding the family's honor, are high. In rare occasions, this leads to honor killings or suicide. The perceived importance of upholding honor means that many women, both when growing up and in their marriage, are controlled by men, and do not have full decision-making power over their own lives.



Figure 6: cartoon drawing - sexual harassment^[13]

Root causes of violence

The study aimed at identifying the root causes of violence in Zarqa. The graph below illustrates the most frequent root causes of violence at the community level and within the family. Poverty, unemployment, cultural and social norms, and problems within the close family were prevalent root causes, while tribes appeared in the interviews as both a root cause leading to violence and as a mechanism for resolving disputes. Additionally, two root causes highlighted from the interviews are the influence of a negative environment where *violence causes violence* and inadequate infrastructure, such as lack of green spaces, lack of safe environments, and overcrowding.

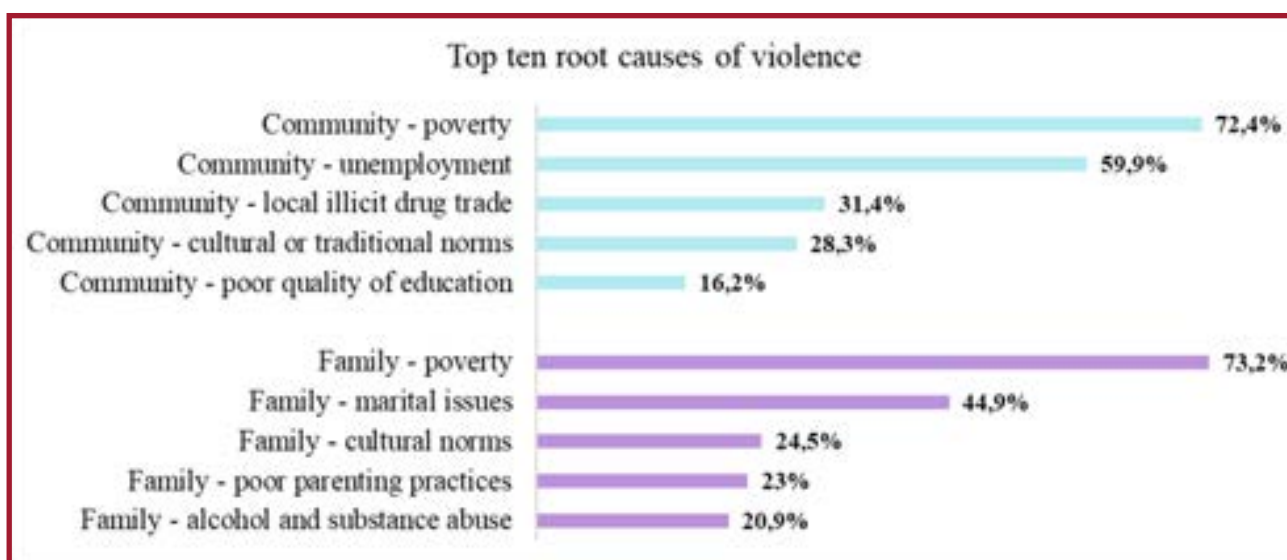


Figure 7: graph root causes violence

Based on violence studies worldwide, the ecological framework below shows the most common risk factors of becoming a victim or a perpetrator of violence. In this study, the risk factors highlighted in purple were identified through both qualitative and quantitative data. ^[14]

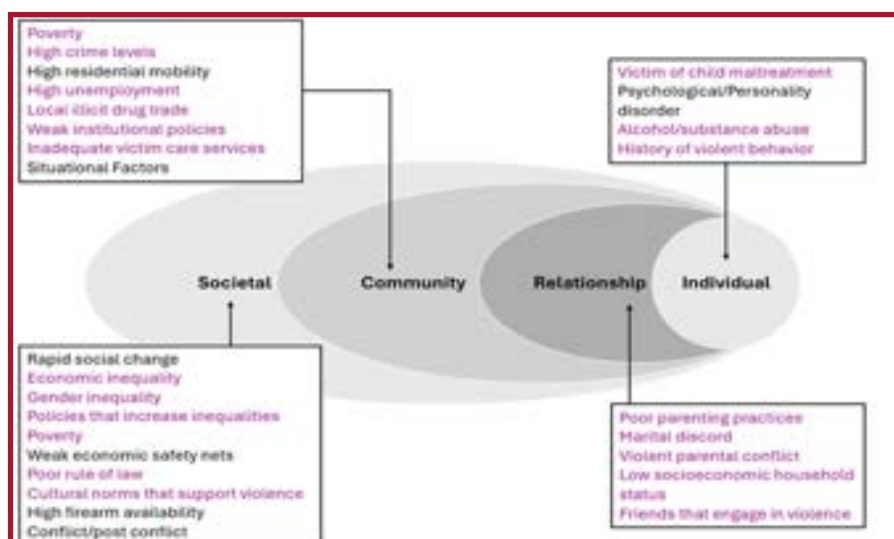


Figure 8: ecological framework for root causes of violence

Cultural and social norms that support violence

The ecological framework above showed the various levels at which different causes of violence originate. Results from the interviews and the household survey showed that causes for violence go deeper than simply individual struggles, bad friends, or pressures from facing unemployment and poverty. Rather, they point towards a culture that allows and normalizes violence, often based on traditional values on how men, women and children should behave, and on how conflict should be solved.

“At home, anything such as honor killings, sexual violence and violence against the gender can be present because of an unmodern mindset that is holding tight to a gap that should have been covered a long time ago concerning the woman’s rights or the man’s rights”. - Female, FGD

These norms and values also serve as a form of social control, to ensure that social cohesion is maintained. In service of this social cohesion, incidents of violence, if they are reported, are often resolved through informal contacts or within the tribes, which undermine the legal system.

“The tribe would go and drink coffee with the other family, then the girl would lose her right. (...). Isn’t this injustice? When there is a rape, the case ends with a cup of coffee?” - KII, Female

Consequences of violence

Of those who reported personal experience of violence in the household survey, 84.1% experienced mental consequences, like nightmares or anxiety. Few people experienced physical consequences, like injuries, which corresponds to the finding that most people experienced verbal or psychological violence. In the interviews, mental consequences were also mentioned most often. Interviewees discussed negative feelings, suicide and drug use as consequences for survivors of violence. These consequences do not just negatively affect the individual but are felt by the entire community. For example, feeling unsafe and fearful due to the threat of violence from people under the influence of drugs affects the freedom of movement of people in the community and reduces social engagement.

“It’s the most dangerous issue because people who are under the influence of drugs could kill someone or commit another crime” - FGD, Male

Help seeking and reporting

Family seems to play an important role in people’s lives, with the majority of respondents (57,2%, N=277) having received help from their family with various problems and tasks. Outside of the family, the local mosque/church is seen as trustworthy by most respondents (91,3%, N= 480). Yet, this trust does not seem to translate into formal membership of a religious group. These results also show that respondents’ relationships and social networks are mainly centered around informal groups like the family, rather than a formal group such as a sports group. While it might seem likely that survivors of violence will then seek help from their family, the data showed high barriers for speaking out about experiences of violence to others, rooted in feelings of shame and internalized guilt and a fear of facing negative consequences like social stigma from family and community. When discussing this culture of shame and the fear victims feel about damaging their reputation that prohibits them from reporting, a male interviewee commented:

“They cannot do anything, and don’t want to complain because they will be dragged into courtrooms, and it will be scandalous. Do you see where our problems lie?” - KII, Male

Reporting rates are relatively low, with 14,7% (N= 38) of men and 7,5% of women (N= 20) reporting the violent incidents they witnessed. The interviews show a pattern of mistrust in authorities to deal with cases efficiently. Despite this, the majority of those who reported (79,3%, N= 46), reported to the police.

Reflections on the results

When reflecting on the above-described study results, the challenge in obtaining accurate data on experiences and prevalence of violence needs to be considered. For this study, despite efforts from enumerators, the presence of family members during interviews could not be avoided. This might have prevented interviewees from honestly discussing their experiences. In general, the normalization of violence can cause respondents to not classify events as violence, leading these events to go unreported.

As with any research into social phenomena, the qualitative and quantitative data primarily reflect perceptions of violence, among others’ respondents’ personal experience, experiences of their network, and media exposure. While not everyone in Zarqa shares these perceptions, they still offer valuable insights into community dynamics, including reduced social engagement or heightened fear.

Conclusion and perspectives for the future

This study discussed the different violent trends in Zarqa, the root causes and the most common risk factors, based on qualitative and quantitative results. Results showed many different types of violence, with the most prevalent types being youth violence in the community and physical violence in the household. Women and children are the most common victims, and men are the most common perpetrators.

The study used the ecological framework to show that violence originates from many layers in society. Results especially highlighted the impact of unequal gender norms, social norms and cultural norms that permit and/or normalize violence or frame it as an acceptable solution to conflict. High social control means that anyone that transgresses these norms can be punished. Especially women are the victim of this. Social control also leads to violence not being reported, out of shame and fear of negative consequences. The prevalence of violence has negative consequences for the individual, like mental health problems. It also affects the community, for example through an increase in drug use.

Deeply rooted social processes lead to a cycle of violence in Zarqa, showing an urgent need for targeted interventions to support survivors of violence and implement preventive measures to combat violence in Zarqa.

Recommendations

As can be seen in the below graph, respondents in the household survey focused on legal measures, supportive measures for the family, awareness, and job creation. The qualitative respondents also highlighted the importance of awareness, the rule of law and of safe spaces for youth and women. The validation workshop highlighted the need for reduction of violence in schools and the prevention of drug use. Reducing violence is a group effort that requires the inclusion of the entire community, including women, youth, elderly and those with disabilities. Any intervention must involve the community, to ensure an improved quality of life for those living and working in Zarqa.

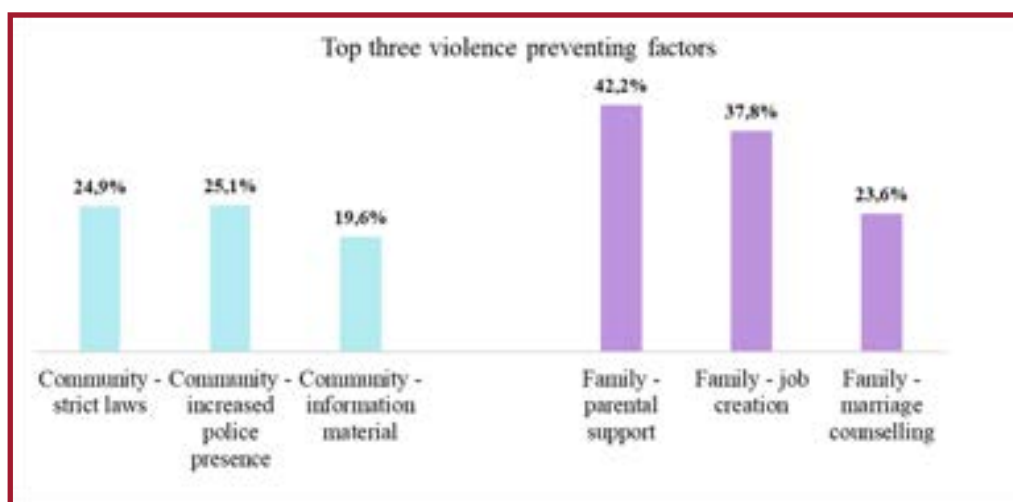


Figure 9: graph violence preventing factors

The below shows eight specific recommendations: ^[15]

1. Creating safe, green spaces

Both men and women in this study emphasized the need for safe green spaces in Zarqa where they could spend leisure time with friends, family, and children. To ensure that parks and green spaces are actually safe, it is important to have proper lighting and surveillance or security guards.

2. Supporting parents in non-violent discipline methods

Establishing parental support groups, potentially together with the family protection unit, to support young parents. Here, they can receive training on positive parenting methods and non-violent discipline methods. Additionally, parents can share experiences among one another, to create a healthy support system.

3. Preventing bullying in schools by empowering students and teachers

Establishing bullying prevention programs to reduce violence in schools. Older students can receive training to serve as confidants for younger students and can help mediate in conflicts or bullying among students.

It is also recommended that school counsellors and teachers are trained to better recognize and address violence and bullying, to work with non-violent communication in the classroom, and to learn skills on how to support the victim.

4. Drug prevention

Increase knowledge on the consequences of drug use among young people and provide support for people who have developed drug addictions. Creating safe spaces for youth can be a strong factor in the prevention of substance abuse.

5. Intersectoral urban violence approach – bringing sectors together

As shown in the ecological framework, violence is caused by many different social structures at different levels. It is vital that sectors are brought together in designing preventative interventions. Dialogue between sectors – police, family protection, school, community leaders, etc. - helps vital knowledge sharing and promotes trust in implementing durable solutions.

6. Promoting non-violent norms and values

Change traditional norms that allow certain forms of violence, like hitting children. This includes broadening the definition of violence, to recognize socially permitted forms of violence as actual damaging violence. It also includes changing social norms that prescribe strict roles for men and women, to prevent unequal power dynamics in relationships.

7. Ensuring a legal system, and law enforcers, that prevents violence

Removing laws that permit violence, or support unequal relationships, like the Personal Status Law No. 15/2019, Art. 61^[16], which stipulates that a woman should have her husband's permission to work. Ensuring equality and non-violence in laws signals a new norm, creates more equal relationships and ensures that perpetrators are brought to account. New laws need to be combined with sensitivity training for law enforcement officers and the family protection unit, to take testimonies in a trauma-sensitive manner, and to create a reporting process that is quick and secure to protect victims from social stigma.

8. Provide mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to victims of violence

Providing MHPSS to victims of violence can help break the cycle of violence and allow them to cope with mental consequences of violence. Consequently, it helps prevent drug abuse and suicide. Support can, for example, take the form of one-on-one therapies or group-based community support services. Given that the most common victims are women and children, it is vital that these services are gender-sensitive and sensitive to different age-group's needs.

For these support services to be effective, it is important that recommendation 6 and 7 are implemented. Victims cannot receive help if there is no space for them to safely talk about their experiences.

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