

I. Background

Organized crime poses a major development and security challenge in Latin America and the Caribbean. Children, adolescents, and young adults may face heightened risks of victimization, early exposure to violent environments, recruitment by criminal organizations, and contact with police and judicial institutions.

Young people's exposure to organized crime may be shaped by structural and contextual factors, including school dropout, unemployment and precarious employment, early exposure to violence, limited access to institutions and services, and recruitment strategies through which criminal organizations may offer income, identity, protection, or coercive incentives.

The relationship between youth and organized crime is multidimensional. Young people may be directly or indirectly victimized through homicide, injury, extortion, forced displacement, recruitment, and other forms of coercion. Their involvement in criminal activities may occur under different conditions and may affect educational, employment, health, and family trajectories. Police, judicial, juvenile justice, and correctional institutions may also shape these outcomes through their prevention, enforcement, detention, and reintegration practices.

The available evidence on which interventions work to prevent youth violence, reduce criminal recruitment, support the rehabilitation of young people in conflict with the law, and build community resilience remains fragmented and, in many cases, poorly adapted to Latin American contexts. This knowledge gap limits the ability of governments and international organizations to design effective public policies.

This call is part of the crime research agenda promoted by CAF's Directorate of Socioeconomic Research within the Knowledge Management Department. It seeks to generate rigorous, original, and policy-relevant evidence on the links between youth and crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, with a view to informing more effective responses to one of the region's most urgent development challenges.

II. Objective

To select up to four proposals for original empirical research papers that generate rigorous evidence on the relationship between youth and organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean. The call prioritizes research on criminal organizations, gangs, and illegal markets, including their effects on youth victimization, recruitment, justice-system contact, prevention, disengagement, and reintegration. Studies of other forms of crime or violence are eligible only when they establish a clear analytical or policy connection to organized crime.

For the purposes of this call, youth refers primarily to individuals aged 15 to 29. Proposals focusing on younger or older age groups may also be considered when the relevance to youth criminal trajectories is clearly justified.

III. Priority Topics

Proposals must align with one or more of the following thematic areas. The examples included under each area are illustrative and do not constitute an exhaustive or mandatory list. The content of each proposal must align with the general theme, while applicants may define the specific approach and aspects to be developed.

Across all thematic areas, proposals should establish a clear analytical or policy connection to organized crime, criminal organizations, gangs, or illegal markets, consistent with the scope of the call.

1. Risk and protective factors in youth trajectories

Understanding the individual, family, community, and institutional factors that may increase or reduce young people's likelihood of involvement in organized criminal activities or victimization linked to criminal organizations, gangs, and illegal markets.

- Roles of family, school, and community environments in building youth resilience, including criminal governance in and around schools, extortion of teachers, the use of schools as recruitment spaces, invisible territorial boundaries, and effects on human capital.
- Impact of school dropout, unemployment, and precarious employment on the risk of criminal involvement.
- Effects of early exposure to domestic or community violence on criminal trajectories.
- Differences by gender, ethnicity, and territorial context (urban/rural) in exposure to risk.
- Transitions between school, work, and unemployment, and their relationship with exposure to violence, criminal involvement, and contact with security or justice institutions.

2. Criminal recruitment, gangs, and youth participation in illegal economies

Analysis of the mechanisms and contexts that may facilitate the recruitment of young people by criminal organizations, gangs, and armed groups, as well as the role of these organizations as employers, including wages, hierarchies, promotion paths, turnover, and comparisons between illegal income and formal or informal labor-market alternatives.

- Organized crime recruitment strategies targeting young people in vulnerable situations, including the use of social media, video games, encrypted messaging, and narcoculture, as well as youth participation in cyberfraud, scams, and financial-mule schemes.
- Territorial dynamics and the role of gangs as alternative structures of socialization.
- Links between illegal economies, including drug trafficking, extortion, illegal mining, human trafficking, smuggling, and other illicit markets, and the economic opportunities, coercion, or incentives faced by young people; effects of shocks in illicit-market prices or supply chains on schooling, local labor demand, and youth recruitment; and the experiences of migrants and

unaccompanied minors on routes controlled by organized crime, including the effects of deportation on human capital.
- Factors that facilitate disengagement from criminal organizations and effective exit policies, including the effects of gang truces or negotiated agreements on exit risks, relocation, and possible retaliation.
- Recruitment strategies targeting young people, including the interaction between in-person and digital mechanisms across different illegal markets, the actors involved, and the economic incentives and forms of coercion operating at different stages of the recruitment process.

3. Prevention and intervention: what works?

Rigorous evaluation of programs and interventions aimed at preventing youth involvement in or victimization by organized crime, or interrupting criminal trajectories linked to criminal organizations, gangs, or illegal markets.

- Effectiveness of conditional cash transfer programs, youth employment, and job training in reducing violent behavior.
- Effectiveness of combinations and sequencing of educational, family, community-based, digital, psychosocial, and socioeconomic interventions in preventing criminal recruitment and supporting sustainable disengagement from criminal organizations.
- Impact of psychosocial interventions, mentoring, and socioemotional skills development.
- Focused intervention programs (focused deterrence, violence interruption, cognitive behavioral therapy) and their adaptability to Latin American contexts.
- Role of community-based and grassroots organizations in preventing youth violence.
- Evaluation of second-chance education programs and their impact on reducing recidivism.
- School-based programs, strategies to support school retention, and mechanisms to reengage young people who are outside the education system.

4. Contact with the justice system and reintegration of adolescents and young adults

Analysis of adolescents' and young adults' contact with police, judicial, and correctional institutions, including juvenile criminal responsibility systems, ordinary criminal justice, deprivation of liberty, alternatives to institutionalization, and conditions for effective reintegration.

- Effects of deprivation of liberty on life trajectories and recidivism rates among adolescents and young people.
- Alternatives to institutionalization: restorative justice, socioeducational measures, and their comparative effectiveness.
- Detention conditions, governance within juvenile detention institutions, and their implications for rehabilitation and the rights of adolescents deprived of liberty.
- Barriers to the social, educational, and labor-market reintegration of young people leaving the criminal justice system.
- Impact of legislative reforms concerning juvenile criminal responsibility on violence and youth well-being, including potential general-equilibrium responses such as the strategic use of minors by criminal organizations when minors face lower penalties.
- Effects of early contact with police, prosecutors' offices, courts, or correctional systems on educational, employment, criminal, and health trajectories.
- Impact of criminal records, arrests, pretrial detention, or incarceration on the future opportunities of young adults.

- Institutional responses to adolescents and young adults who are simultaneously victims of recruitment or coercion and participants in illicit activities, including identification, protection, diversion, prosecution, and reintegration practices.

5. Young people as victims of crime: impacts and responses

Study of young people as direct and indirect victims of organized crime, gangs, and illegal markets, with an emphasis on measuring the consequences for their life trajectories and designing effective responses.

- Economic, educational, and mental health impacts of victimization on young people and their families.
- Impacts of organized crime and gang violence on young people's educational, employment, and mental health trajectories.
- Extortion, forced displacement, and restrictions on youth mobility as consequences of the territorial presence of crime.
- Forced, coerced, voluntary, and remunerated recruitment: mechanisms, prevalence, transitions between recruitment modalities, and differentiated impacts on the well-being of young people in areas controlled by criminal organizations.
- Effects of fear of crime on young people's social, educational, and economic participation.
- Quality and availability of data on youth criminal victimization in Latin America and the Caribbean: innovative measurement methodologies.

6. Comprehensive public policies and institutional coordination

Analysis of the design, implementation, and effectiveness of public policies that address the intersection of youth and crime through a comprehensive, multisectoral approach.

- Coordination across sectors (education, health, justice, and social protection) to prevent youth violence.
- Citizen security policies and their differentiated impact on young people in vulnerable situations.
- Role of subnational governments and cities in preventing and responding to youth violence.
- Comparative experiences and lessons learned from successful policies within and outside the region.
- Differentiated effects of policing strategies, territorial control policies, mass arrests, states of emergency, targeted patrols, and other security policies on young people, violence, institutional trust, and future trajectories.

IV. Type of Research and Expected Content

This call funds empirical research projects that generate original evidence. Proposals must demonstrate a causal identification strategy or a rigorous research design capable of convincingly answering the proposed research question.

Selected projects must:

- Formulate a clear research question that is relevant to public policy in the Latin American or Caribbean context.
- Present a robust methodological strategy. Qualitative research must specify its sampling strategy, data-collection protocols, analytical framework, and measures to support credibility and transparency. Measurement studies must define the construct, document validity and reliability procedures, and explain how the proposed measure improves on existing alternatives. All designs will be assessed according to the clarity of the research question,

methodological fit, transparency, feasibility, and potential contribution to knowledge and policy.

- Describe the data to be used, their availability, the status of access, and, where applicable, the strategy for collecting original data. Ex ante designs, including evaluations not yet implemented or projects without a confirmed implementing partner, are eligible if the proposal provides a credible implementation and partnership plan, identifies key risks, and specifies feasible mitigation measures. Data access and partner readiness will be considered as part of the feasibility assessment rather than as automatic eligibility requirements. Describe the ethical safeguards applicable to the research. Studies involving minors, administrative records, personally identifiable or sensitive information, or fieldwork in areas affected by criminal control must include appropriate data-protection, informed-consent or assent, confidentiality, and risk-management measures. Proposals must identify risks to participants and research teams and explain the protocols, institutional approvals, and security measures that will be used to address them.
- Contribute to filling knowledge gaps identified in the existing literature and generate useful inputs for public policy design in the region.

The final deliverables will include a working paper presenting the research results and a blog post summarizing the main findings in an accessible format for decision-makers and the general public. The papers may be published in CAF's Working Paper Series, without prejudice to the authors' right to publish them in academic journals.

V. Funding

Up to four proposals will be selected. Each selected proposal will receive USD 20,000 in funding to conduct the research. The amount will be transferred through a consulting contract entered into with a member of the team or with the institution with which that team member is affiliated. A detailed budget is not required at the application stage, nor will subsequent expense reporting be required. The funds are intended to support research time and costs associated with carrying out the study.

VI. Activities, Deliverables, and Timeline

Selected teams will have up to twelve (12) months to complete their projects. The following tentative timeline is expected:

Month	Milestone	Description
Month 1 | Dec 2026	**Notification and contracting**	Communication of the call results and start of the contracting process. Selected research teams will participate in an online workshop to present their proposals and receive initial feedback.
Month 2 | Jan 2027	**Detailed research proposal**	Submission of a detailed research proposal incorporating the feedback received during the online workshop, including the research question, methodology, empirical strategy, data sources and research timeline.

Month	Milestone	Description
Month 3 | Feb 2027	**Advisor feedback**	Review of the detailed research proposals by the academic advisors and provision of written comments and recommendations to the research teams.
Month 8 | Jul 2027	**Preliminary version and in-person workshop**	Submission of a preliminary version of the working paper and participation in an in-person research workshop organized by CAF. Academic advisors will review the preliminary drafts, provide written comments and participate in the discussion of the research projects during the workshop.
Month 12 | Nov 2027	**Final submission**	Submission of the final version of the working paper, incorporating the feedback received during the research process and workshop.

Deadlines may be adjusted on a case-by-case basis according to project needs, subject to prior consultation with the CAF team.

VII. Scientific and Organizing Committees

Scientific Committee:

- Juan Fernando Vargas (Collegio Carlo Alberto)
- Micaela Sviatschi (Princeton University)
- Daniel Ortega (CAF)
- Verónica Amarante (CAF)
- Pablo Brassiolo (CAF)
- Dolores de la Mata (CAF)
- Tatiana Rosá (CAF)

Organizing Committee:

- Carla Calá (CAF)
- Pablo Brassiolo (CAF)

VIII. How to Apply

Applications must be submitted through the following form before November 23, 2026. The proposal must be submitted in Spanish or English and include the following documents:

1. **Research proposal:** A document of up to 1,500 words presenting the research question, methodology, and data to be used. The word limit includes the title, abstract, main text, footnotes, tables, and figure captions. References and annexes are excluded. Particular attention will be given to the clarity of the question, the suitability of the empirical design, and the feasibility of data access. Proposals exceeding the maximum length will not be evaluated.
2. **Team composition:** A list of team members indicating each person's name, institutional affiliation, and role in the project.
3. **CV of the principal investigator or team:** Up to two CVs, each no longer than two pages.

IX. Frequently Asked Questions and Contact

A frequently asked questions document addressing the most common inquiries about the call is available.

If you have additional questions that are not addressed in that document, please contact us at investigacion@caf.com.