

Cash, Food, and Vouchers Reduce Intimate Partner Violence in Urban Areas in Ecuador

Cash Transfer and Intimate Partner Violence
Research Collaborative



Estimates indicate that one in three ever-partnered women aged 15 years and older has experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence (IPV) in her lifetime, with regional rates ranging from 16.3 percent in East Asia to 65.6 percent in Central Africa.¹ Significant resources have been invested in understanding what works to prevent IPV, with relatively little evidence of successful interventions that are also cost-effective and scalable. A growing evidence base demonstrates that cash transfer programs, primarily meant to address poverty and vulnerability, are promising interventions to reduce IPV. However, knowledge gaps remain on whether findings generalize across regions and program designs, as well as what mechanisms underlie impacts. In this series of briefs, case studies highlight the potential of cash transfers to affect IPV in diverse contexts.

What does the global evidence say?

*In a mixed-methods review of rigorous studies from low- and middle-income countries, 11 of 14 quantitative studies (79 percent) and 5 of 8 qualitative studies (63 percent) showed that cash transfers decrease IPV.² In explaining these impacts, studies generally hypothesized three pathways through which cash could affect IPV: 1) increases in **economic security and emotional wellbeing**; 2) changes in **intrahousehold conflict**; and 3) increases in **women's empowerment**.*

The Ecuador study draws on a mixed-methods evaluation of the World Food Programme's Food, Cash and Voucher program that includes a cluster-randomized controlled trial (cRCT) and a qualitative study. The cRCT took place from March to October 2011; the qualitative study took place in 2013. The cRCT collected data on IPV before and after the program on a sample of 1,226 women in domestic partnerships, while the qualitative study was based on in-depth interviews with women as well as focus group discussions with women and men. At baseline, 16 percent of women reported experiencing physical or sexual IPV, 26 percent reported experiencing emotional IPV, and 17 percent reported experiencing controlling behaviors in the 6 months preceding the study.

This case study summarizes the impact of a short-term food, cash, and voucher program targeted to the urban poor in Northern Ecuador. The program led to a 30 percent reduction in physical and sexual IPV as well as a 19 percent reduction in controlling behaviors via decreases in marital conflict, increased family well-being, and women's empowerment.

The Cash Transfer and Intimate Partner Violence Research Collaborative

Collaborative brings together an interdisciplinary group of researchers from IFPRI (the host institution), the University of North Carolina, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, and the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. The Collaborative has dual goals of expanding the evidence base around the impacts of cash transfers on intimate partner violence and disseminating research to global stakeholders.

The Food, Cash and Voucher Program

The World Food Programme's Food, Cash and Voucher Program aimed to increase the dietary diversity, food consumption, and nutrition of poor Ecuadorians and Colombian refugees in northern Ecuador. Total monthly transfers equaled US\$40 (roughly 11 percent of a household's pre-program monthly consumption), given primarily to women in six monthly installments. Food transfers consisted of rice, lentils, vegetable oil, and canned sardines. Cash was distributed via preprogrammed ATM cards, and food vouchers were redeemable at local supermarkets for pre-approved nutritious foods. To maintain eligibility for transfers, recipients had to attend monthly nutrition training sessions.

Results showed that, during the six-month program, transfers reduced physical and sexual IPV by 30 percent and reduced controlling behaviors by 19 percent. Furthermore, cash, food, and vouchers all resulted in decreases in IPV, with no significant differences among them.

What were the main mechanisms through which transfers led to reductions in IPV? Analysis suggests three complementary pathways: 1) decreased **marital conflict stemming from negotiating for money** to meet the family's daily needs, 2) an increased **sense of family well-being and happiness**, and 3) expanded **self-confidence, decision-making, and freedom of movement** among women. Although the study was not able to test the contribution of different program components directly, the nutrition trainings likely accounted for some of this impact—particularly for the third pathway.

This study adds to our understanding of linkages between cash transfers and IPV in several ways. First, it shows that economic transfers—even in the short term—can reduce IPV substantially. Further, while some have speculated that cash may lead to greater intrahousehold conflict, this study finds that all types of transfers decrease IPV equally. Finally, the results point to mechanisms through which social protection may viably affect IPV at the household, couple, and woman level.

From a policy perspective, cash transfers and other social safety nets are attractive instruments for addressing violence, as they are rapidly expanding in resource-poor settings (social safety nets reach approximately 1.9 billion people in 136 low- and middle-income countries³) and often reach women and the most vulnerable segments of society directly. However, policymakers focused on social protection often do not have IPV on their agendas, nor are they necessarily aware of the growing evidence linking cash transfers to IPV. Building linkages among these stakeholders and expanding the evidence base around what works, where, and for whom will help in designing more gender-transformative programs—including those that, even if aimed at other objectives, can reduce the risk of violence against women sustainably and at scale.

Financial strain as a trigger of IPV

"Sometimes problems arise because I am in need [of money] for one or the other thing and there is no money, and that is when problems start, the fights . . . and it [transfers] helped us a lot, he [her partner] had money to buy other things for the house or pay debts."

~ Female beneficiary

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¹K.M. Devries et al., 2013, "The Global Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women," *Science* 340, no. 28 (2013): 1527-1528.

²A.M. Buller et al., "Intimate Partner Violence and Cash Transfers in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Mixed-Method Review," *World Bank Research Observer* 33, no. 2 (2018): 218-258.

³M. Honorati, U. Gentilini, and R.G. Yemtsov, *The State of Social Safety Nets 2015* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2015).

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