



## In Search of Common Ground

### *Applying Shared Lessons from Countering Violent Extremism and Preventing Gang Violence*

**BY ENRIQUE BETANCOURT & TODD DIAMOND**

Note: This chapter originally appeared in *Sharpening Our Efforts: The Role of International Development in Countering Violent Extremism*, an anthology published by the Center for Strategic & International Studies.

Violence, in all its forms, remains a top international concern despite well-documented decreasing levels of homicide and conflict-related deaths worldwide.<sup>67</sup> Behind this concern lies the fact that violence disproportionately affects developing regions around the globe. For example, although only having 8 percent of the world's population, the Latin America and Caribbean region accounts for 30 percent of global homicides. In the same vein, only four countries—Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico, and Colombia—account for nearly half of the homicides that take place every year in the world.<sup>68</sup> Extremist violence and radicalization have spread from the Middle East to threaten the stability of parts of the Sahel, East Africa, and Asia. Likewise, victimization disproportionately affects underserved and disenfranchised demographic groups, particularly young men, women, and children. In these contexts, extreme levels of violence perpetuate and expand the inequality gap, weaken the adherence to the rule of law and the progress of democracy while also hindering other related development efforts such as poverty alleviation and access to health and education.

Countering violent extremism (CVE) and gang violence prevention (GVP) increasingly are becoming priorities for government agencies and donors in the development sector looking at both issues through a national security lens. For the most part, geographic and geopolitical differences have limited the interaction of practitioners working to address these issues, but experience shows us there are enough similarities in causality, entry points, and potential mitigation measures that examining both for lessons and recommendations is worthwhile.

---

67. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (New York: Viking, 2011).

68. Ignacio Cano and Emiliano Rojido, *Mapeo de Programas de Prevención de Homicidios en América Latina y el Caribe* (Laboratório de Análise da Violência, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, 2016), <https://www.oas.org/ext/es/seguridad/red-prevencion-crimen/Recursos/Biblioteca-Digital/mapeo-de-programas-de-prevencion-de-homicidios-en-america-latina-y-el-caribe>.

Whether violent extremism in the Middle East or gang violence in Central America, weak institutions and a lack of state legitimacy creates a power vacuum that is often filled by non-state actors. These can be extremist groups or gangs that are likely to exploit and weaponize citizen grievances for their own benefit. Similarly, underserved neighborhoods—where schools, social networks, and families already have some level of affinity or affiliation to these groups—typically have been hotbeds for recruitment. Children who have experienced the type of armed conflict prevalent in Syria for the past six years, for example, face multiple risks and vulnerability that make them more susceptible to extremist teachings. Activities aimed at reducing violence and bolstering state legitimacy are crucial to achieving long-term stability and development impact.

For many years the international community has approached this crisis from a variety of perspectives. In tackling the problem from a law enforcement perspective, police (and in some cases, armed forces) have focused their efforts on incapacitating gangs or extremist groups' criminal networks by "taking out" targeted individuals and their associates. Efforts to address the problem through a preventive lens have entailed the provision of social services to underserved communities to address the root causes of gang or extremist violence and the mechanisms they use to recruit group members. Lastly, counterinsurgency stabilization approaches and crime control operations like "weed and seed" have implemented a sequence of the former two approaches under the assumption that target communities need to be cleared from criminal elements first and subsequently targeted with social services.

Our experience operating programs to address extremist and gang violence in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, as well as in Mexico and Central America, suggest that these approaches typically fall short of achieving sustained violence reduction because prevention and stabilization activities often are not coupled with efforts to achieve longer-term capacity-building objectives to strengthen the legitimacy of the state.

Prevention efforts tend to prioritize service delivery to the general population and to focus on addressing the root causes of violence. Such efforts often lack the capacity to direct relevant and evidence-informed programming to the smallest portion of people who cause the largest portion of violence. This approach also overlooks the fact that the motivation for the implementation of "prevention" activities in the first place is the existence of already overwhelming levels of gang or extremist violence and that these groups often capitalize for themselves the benefits of state and international efforts and resources. In parts of Syria, the Islamic State and other extremist groups controlled the education sector, closing or exploiting schools to promote its extremist ideology. Similar methods can be observed with groups like MS-13, which exerts full control of community life in large swaths of the most important urban centers in Central America.

In the same vein, pure crime control efforts tend to be too punitive in nature and to perpetuate the cycles of violence, the stigmatization of whole communities, and the lack of trust in state institutions. "Taking people off the streets" leaves a great deal of collateral damage in the form of fragmented families, disinvestment, and a sense of unfairness by overlooking the trauma and victimization experienced in these communities.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps

---

69. Katy Reckdahl, "Mass Incarceration's Collateral Damage: The Children Left Behind," *Nation*, December 16,

the one aspect that most hinders the effectiveness of this approach is its tendency to challenge group identity and affiliation, which, paradoxically, likely will strengthen the group's cohesion. Efforts targeted against MS-13 in Central America, and even the adverse impact of increased incarceration in underserved communities in the United States, confirm the unintended consequences of this approach.

Furthermore, stabilization approaches typically fail for two main reasons. They result in unintended but real ancillary harm because of their reliance on military or crime control methods across a given community. There also is an inherent difficulty in seamlessly connecting strong-arm approaches and the delivery of social services because those responsible for implementing each of these strategies operate with competing institutional agendas that define success in divergent ways.

A growing body of evidence, as well as developing communities of practice that have implemented concrete successful efforts in places as diverse as Oakland, Ciudad Juarez, and Raqqa, suggest that there are ways to mitigate the drivers of group violence. In each of these circumstances, a main ingredient has been the alignment of diverse actors—such as locally elected officials, clergy, tribal leaders, and educators—around efforts to incorporate specific development objectives within the context of changing group behavior. By nurturing change agents such as mayors, teachers, and community police officers, interventions can enable them to implement ongoing interventions while capturing and empowering political will.

More than four years of U.S. government-funded support to the Syrian education sector has demonstrated that targeted interventions can provide badly needed learning opportunities for students and a level of political legitimacy for, in this case the moderate opposition-controlled Ministry of Education, even when challenged by an extremist non-state shadow “ministry.” However, in many of these areas, the influence of armed and terrorist groups on education still poses a challenge to stability, social cohesion, and legitimate economic opportunities. With a student population of about 1.3 million, education systems in opposition-held areas of Syria have struggled to make up for six years of severely limited literacy, numeracy, and other basic learning, leaving children and youth susceptible to violent extremism.<sup>70</sup> Our response has been a series of programs that address this deficit through a systemic approach to remedial learning and practical skills building that enlists key change agents to lead these efforts.

In both opposition-held northwest Syria and post-Islamic State Raqqa, the alternatives to extremist groups have included the promotion of space for moderate dialogue and support for structured activities that enable youth to engage with their communities. Moderate governance actors who have led this effort have been free education directorates, local councils, and the Syrian Civil Defense, among others. CVE programs were designed to use psychosocial support and education as complementary means to reduce the influence and interference of armed actors. Funding was directed where there was local political will or

---

2014, <https://www.thenation.com/article/mass-incarcerations-collateral-damage-children-left-behind/>.

70. “Status of Early Primary Education in Syria: Early Grade Reading and Early Grade Mathematics Assessments, War Stressor Survey, and School Effectiveness Survey Results Report,” Prepared for the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID)/Syria, Prepared by Dr. Brenda Sinclair and Dr. Michel Rousseau, Chemonics International Inc. Consultants, September 2017.

where it could be cultivated among governance and civil society actors, with activities that were key to combatting the factors that attract young people to violent extremist groups.

In the city of Morelia, Mexico, efforts dubbed Civic Justice driven by local authorities with the support of international donors have successfully implemented a collective impact effort to reduce violence and bolster trust between community actors and their government.<sup>71</sup> A key realization of local authorities was that close to 70 percent of homicide victims had previous arrest records due to administrative offenses and misdemeanors at the municipal level. The civic justice model partners municipal police, municipal courts, and the delivery of key social services, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and conflict mediation, focusing on the early manifestation of social disorder and providing assistance to victims of violence.

Efforts in Morelia included the development of measures to collect granular data at the neighborhood level, an enterprise only local authorities can enable and sustain; a dynamic deployment of law enforcement and victim assistance services to places of concentrated violence; and an increased focus on problem-oriented policing and strengthening collaboration between municipal police and state-level justice actors. These efforts were coupled with a swift and certain sanctions approach in municipal courts requiring mandatory community service for all minor offenses instead of jail time or economic sanctions. The Civic Justice approach in Morelia, now being replicated in other cities in Mexico, reduced homicides by 20 percent while strengthening the trust between the state and Morelia's most vulnerable communities.

With this in mind, we put forth five principles to design and implement programs aimed at countering and preventing violent extremism and enabling stable environments for improved development:

#### **ADAPT TO THE UNSTABLE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

A project's ability to assist local governments in responding quickly and appropriately to community needs is paramount to establishing credibility and trust between the project and its counterparts. Similarly, projects in fragile contexts need ongoing analysis based on shifting opportunities and constraints to stay relevant and responsive to changing power dynamics throughout implementation. Programs in fragile contexts often proceed without linear progression; the best programs utilize feedback loops and iterative design to help achieve their goals.

#### **TARGET GROUP BEHAVIOR RATHER THAN IDENTITY**

Programmatic approaches informed by focused deterrence principles establish a coalition of law enforcement, clergy, social workers and tribal and other community leaders to reduce gang participation and violence. This holistic approach has systematically proven effective in affecting group behavior.<sup>72</sup>

---

71. Paulina Villegas, "As Violence Soared in Mexico, This Town Bucked the Trend," *New York Times*, September 1, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/01/world/americas/mexico-violence-police.html>.

72. Anthony A. Braga and David L. Weisburd, "The effects of 'pulling levers' focused deterrence strategies on crime," *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, March 4, 2012, <https://campbellcollaboration.org/library/pulling-levers-focused-deterrence-strategies-effects-on-crime.html>.

### **PROVIDE PROBLEM-SOLVING AND CITIZEN-CENTERED JUSTICE SOLUTIONS**

Programs to strengthen the rule of law should complement long-term institutional reform efforts with context-specific justice measures focusing on the most immediate needs of citizens. Procedural justice<sup>73</sup> approaches can have a positive effect on the experience of citizens with the justice system and strengthen their adherence to the rule of law.

### **PRIORITIZE INCLUSIVE AND PSYCHOSOCIAL INTERVENTIONS**

Programmatic activities must address youth and civic engagement, treating high-risk individuals with psychosocial methods, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and engaging populations that have been marginalized or excluded from their communities. Taking an inclusive approach reinforces individual empowerment and helps establish or rebuild trust in the governance structure. This engagement should happen as a precursor or concurrently with more traditional state- or donor-sponsored reintegration, education, and community outreach activities.

### **ENABLE COLLECTIVE IMPACT**

Collaboration and coordination cannot be mandated by government decree nor by an international donor. Research shows that successful efforts to address a complex problem such as group violence requires multi-agency efforts coordinated by a dedicated team accountable for facilitating collaborative efforts.<sup>74</sup> When spearheaded by local ownership of the problem, such teams are capable of monitoring and solving problems related to the implementation of a common agenda with clear and shared goals while managing communication among key internal and external actors.

While we continue to search for commonalities among CVE and GVP implementation in identifying and tackling the root causes of violent behavior, we should focus on empirically-informed solutions from each of the two sectors, adapted to their contextual conditions, to collectively respond to the similarities that affect both of these critical development and national security challenges.

---

73. Lorraine Mazerolle et al., "Procedural justice and police legitimacy: a systematic review of the research evidence," *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 9, no. 3 (September 2013): 245.

74. J. Kania and M. Kramer, "Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2011, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact).