



## WHAT WORKS IN REDUCING COMMUNITY VIOLENCE A Meta-Review and Field Study for the Northern Triangle

The countries of Central America's Northern Triangle – El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – are facing a violence epidemic. With an average homicide rate of 63 per 100,000, the region is the most violent in the world.

Despite the overwhelming urgency of the issue, violence remains poorly understood. While prevention and rehabilitation have gained ground in recent years, the main approach to violent crime continues to be heavy-handed suppression, leading to the wrongful arrest of thousands of youth, overwhelmed prisons and justice systems, and empowered gangs.

Policymakers in the region have limited access to existing knowledge, particularly evidence derived from rigorous research and evaluations. Experiences from around the region show that it is possible to reduce violent crime without increasing incarceration.

A new study by researchers at Harvard University thoroughly reviewed existing approaches to reducing violent crime to better understand which strategies and interventions are most effective.

### METHODOLOGY

In support of the U.S. Government's Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) commissioned researchers from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government to perform a systematic meta-review, spanning more than 1,400 studies and 30 crime and violence control strategies, to identify effective strategies to reduce community violence, one of the main contributing factors to the region's rampant insecurity. A companion field study was also performed in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and the United States, resulting in approximately 20 site visits and 50 semi-structured interviews.

### THE FINDINGS

The study finds that, based on a review of the evidence, the most effective community violence reduction efforts include:

- **Place-based interventions** targeting specific micro-locations where such violence disproportionately occurs;
- **People-based interventions** focusing on high-risk individuals and groups that are most likely to perpetrate and become victims of violence; and
- **Behavior-based interventions** concentrating on behaviors closely linked to violence, such as carrying firearms, excessive consumption of alcohol, and belonging to a gang, among others.

While crime and violence can be displaced by successful interventions, evidence demonstrates that for community violence, any such displacement is minimal and the impact to surrounding areas is more likely to be positive than negative.

The study highlighted two strategies as particularly relevant and effective in reducing community violence:

- **Focused Deterrence** responds to gang and gun violence by targeting small groups of offenders, creating collective accountability, conveying a community message against violence, warning of consequences for future offenses, and assisting those offenders willing to change their lives.
- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy** reduces violence by changing the way criminal offenders, including juveniles, think about violence and manage their behavior.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Government policymakers and international donors should take into consideration proven interventions when designing violence reduction efforts. It is important to promote and diffuse scientific data and knowledge, offer training and technical assistance, and promote evidence-informed policy changes. Based on the findings, the study identifies the following priorities:

- Build awareness of and support for effective violence reduction strategies.
- Incorporate violence reduction within broader poverty reduction and development efforts.
- Explore the use of proven violence reduction interventions, such as focused deterrence and cognitive behavioral therapy, in consultation with local stakeholders.
- Support networks and partnerships to develop local capacity for violence reduction, especially with regard to analysis, research, and evaluation.
- Promote consistent standards for program evaluation to expand cumulative knowledge on this topic.