“What Works” in Reducing Community Violence: A Meta-Review and Field Study

Thomas Abt | Senior Fellow | Harvard Kennedy & Law Schools | April 11, 2018
Violence typology and continuum

Bullying
- Rarely lethal
- Occurs in private
- Involves few
- Spontaneous
- Expressive
- Common

Family/Intimate Partner
- Common

Community

Gang
- Frequently lethal
- Occurs in public
- Involves many
- Planned
- Instrumental
- Uncommon

Organized

State
To date, no meta-reviews have included the full range of programs that are intended to prevent youth violence; additionally, no meta-reviews have used both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Matjasko et al., 2012
Meta-review methodology

- Searched leading databases, journals, grey literature in Americas, Caribbean and Europe
- Focused on community violence and rigorous evidence
- Identified 43 eligible reviews aggregating 1,435 individual studies
- All reviews and most studies generated in high-income countries
Violence is “sticky”

Violence is highly concentrated among small number of places, people, and behaviors

• In Boston, 1% of youth aged 15-24 responsible for over 50% of city-wide shootings; 5% of city responsible for 70% of total shootings (Braga & Winship, 2015)

• In Minneapolis, 50% of 323,000 calls for police service from 3% of addresses (Sherman, Gartin & Buerger, 1989)

• In most cities, 0.5% of the population responsible for 75% of homicides (Muggah, 2015)
“Sticky” strategies work best

• In criminal justice, interventions focusing on highest risk places and people, and behaviors generate strongest effects
  – Policing (Braga, 2015)
  – Gang reduction (Gravel et al., 2012; Petrosino et al., 2015)
  – Recidivism reduction (Hollin, 1999; Lipsey & Cullen, 2007)

• In public health, targeted interventions outperform universal ones
  – Of 15 RCTs of anti-violence interventions – 2 of 2 (100%) tertiary, 3 of 7 (43%) secondary, 2 of 6 (33%) primary interventions reduced violent behavior (Limbos et al., 2007)

• If violence moves around corner, sticky strategies fail, but “over 30 years of research evidence... suggests that crime relocates in only a minority of instances” (Johnson et al., 2014)
  – That said, a new evaluation of hot spots policing in Bogota raises questions
Meta-review highlights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place-based strategies</th>
<th>People-based strategies</th>
<th>Behavior-based strategies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Hot spots, problem-oriented, and broken windows policing all moderately effective</td>
<td>• Focused deterrence, cognitive behavioral therapy most effective</td>
<td>• Firearms enforcement moderately effective, guns buybacks not effective</td>
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<tr>
<td>• CPTED, urban renewal strategies only modestly effective</td>
<td>• Family-based strategies moderately effective</td>
<td>• Drug treatment effective, drug enforcement not effective</td>
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<td>• Community policing not effective</td>
<td>• Standalone education, employment strategies mixed, weak effectiveness</td>
<td>• Targeted gang enforcement effective, gang prevention not effective</td>
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<td>• RNR rehabilitation effective</td>
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<td>• “Control” strategies for juveniles not effective</td>
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Field study methodology

• In the U.S., met with leadership, management, and staff from leading anti-violence interventions
• In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, met with broad range of stakeholders
• 51 semi-structured interviews and 22 individual site visits in total
U.S. highlights

“Go where the violence is”
“Meet them where they’re at”
No “business as usual”
“Stay true to the model”
“Use the data”
“You win with people”
Elements of effectiveness

#1 Specificity
Elements of effectiveness

#2 Proactivity
Elements of effectiveness

#3 Legitimacy
Elements of effectiveness

#4 Capacity
Elements of effectiveness

#5 Theory
Elements of effectiveness

#6 Partnership
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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Northern Triangle field highlights

Tremendous commitment and passion, but a clear lack of capacity in three areas:

- Reliable statistics and data
- Pervasive fear, mistrust
- Traditional criminal justice responsibilities
Concentration Principle

• It makes sense to concentrate resources because:
  – Most strategies have modest or moderate impacts, so effects should be accumulated over multiple interventions
  – Interventions focusing on highest risk places, people, and behaviors generate strongest effects
  – Community violence displacement is generally minimal, so impact to surrounding areas more likely to be positive than negative

• Coordination corollary: concentrated effects must be aligned and coordinated with one another
  – The “comprehensive” conundrum
Implementation Imperative

• Sound implementation essential to intervention effectiveness
• Determining appropriate program dosage or intensity is critical
• In the Northern Triangle, adaptation of interventions developed in high-income, high capacity settings is critical
Evaluation Imperative

- 7% of security-related programs in LACs feature strong evaluation; 57% no evaluation whatsoever (Alvarado et al., 2015)
- Absolutely essential to improve both quantity and quality of evidence and data
- Cumulative knowledge-building is critical
- Improving local capacity is crucial
Recommendations for funders

Rec 1
• Recognize centrality of violence reduction to further development to the region and plan accordingly.

Rec 2
• Transition to evidence-informed approaches incrementally but purposefully.

Rec 3
• Build internal and external capacity for evidence-informed violence reduction.

Rec 4
• Invest in evidence and data, emphasizing cumulative knowledge development.

Thomas Abt, 2018
Towards a framework for preventing community violence among youth

Thomas Abt, 2018
Community violence is a pervasive, persistent, and complex social phenomenon.

Understanding it requires a multi-disciplinary approach, addressing it demands a multi-sector response.

In order to properly organize any collective response, frameworks are necessary to coordinate activities so components help rather than hinder each other.
Anti-violence framework

• A good framework:
  – Is theoretically sound, empirically grounded, and easily implemented.
  – Clearly articulates a reasonably accurate, complete, and useful description of both the problem and its solution.

• While many fields contributed to study and practice of violence prevention, public safety and public health outpace all others by significant margin.
### Anti-violence framework – all strategies

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Interventions with modest, mixed, null, or negative effects on community violence are indicated in *italics*.  

**Thomas Abt, 2018**
## Anti-violence framework – best strategies

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Interventions that, if revised, could have significantly improved effects are indicated in (parentheses).
J-PAL, JPV, USAID project

• Joint effort to inform violence reduction policy in Mexico
• Updates and expands previous meta-reviews on crime and violence (Abt and Winship, 2016; Weisburd et. al, 2016)
• Contextualizes evidence specifically for Mexico
• 300 individual papers analyzed + 70 semi-structured interviews conducted in Mexico with local stakeholders
### J-PAL, JPV, USAID project

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For more info:


- Psychology, Health, & Medicine “frameworks” article: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13548506.2016.1257815

Thank you!