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The Costs of Political Violence in the United States

The Benefits of Investing in Communities

by Andrew Blum, PhD



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COVER IMAGE: Charlottesville, VA - August 2017: Memorial flowers and notes are left at the spot where Heather Heyer was killed and others were injured when a car plowed into a crowd of protesters during a white supremacist rally. Credit: Kim Kelley-Wagner / Shutterstock.com.

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Note on the Events of January 6th, 2021

The insurrection at the United States Capitol occurred while this report was being prepared for publication. As more details emerge, it will be some time before the lead-up to the violent insurrection, the insurrection itself, and its aftermath can be fully analyzed. However, this event certainly illustrates many of the types of costs of political violence that this paper details. There are the immediate economic costs of shutting down the Capitol complex and repairing the damage that incurred. There are costs in increased security; 25,000 National Guard troops were brought into Washington, D.C. for the presidential inauguration, up to 7,000 of which will remain in place for a longer time period. Future analysis will also need to delve into the affective costs: for example, how can we measure the cost of the trauma to members and staffers of color working in the Capitol during and after the insurrection?

These and many more unnamed costs merit deeper exploration over the coming year. We must not forget that we are likely to see more violence if we do not take proactive steps to address the drivers of violence and polarization. This report provides a framework for thinking through this work and provides an analysis of holistic strategies that can be used to prevent similar attacks in the future.





Washington, DC - January 6, 2021:
Pro-Trump supporters riot and breach the
U.S. Capitol Building. Credit: lev radin /
Shutterstock.com.

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ANTIDOTE.”¹**

— MICHAEL SIGNER, FORMER MAYOR OF CHARLOTTESVILLE

Introduction

The core goal of this report is to explore how “democracy can provide the antidote” to political violence within the United States. In the last several years, we have seen extremist attacks, a surge in hate crimes, protests by heavily armed militias, and vicious acts of brutality by law enforcement. Violence and the threat of violence are harming communities throughout the U.S. and undermining our democracy.

At the same time, hard-won experience from communities within the United States and around the world has revealed concrete strategies that can be used to prevent, respond to, and recover from political violence. Political violence imposes real costs, but it also drives communities to create real solutions.

Many of those solutions were on display during the 2020 election, which contributed to creating a largely peaceful election. The polarization and violent rhetoric on display during the election, however, also makes clear that we have work to do moving forward. Now is time to start that work. Now more than ever people understand the risk of political violence and the urgent need to invest in efforts to prevent it. Our goal must be to leverage that awareness and that energy into creating longer-term, sustainable, democracy-strengthening solutions to prevent political violence in the United States.

This paper thus focuses on two basic questions:

- *Why should we care about political violence?* What are the human and economic impacts of political violence? After the headlines cease and attention fades, what are the real costs of political violence to communities?
- *What can communities do about political violence?* What are the community-centered strategies that address political violence? What does the evidence say about which strategies are most effective? How do we build communities that are resilient to various forms of political violence?

We pose these questions primarily to funders. Democracy Fund has commissioned this research to inform the community of funders to which it belongs — funders committed to strengthening democracy within the United States. They have done

so because, for the health of our democracy, we must address the threat of political violence. And to do this, there must be support for communities working to create real solutions to this fundamental challenge.

Political Violence — A Working Definition

Like the related concepts of terrorism, extremism, hate crimes, and police brutality, the concept of political violence is a complex and contested one. Nonetheless, there is some consensus on at least a high-level definition. The Alliance for Peacebuilding defines political violence as “force/violence used with a political motivation, to achieve a political goal, to assert political power over another group, or to disseminate a political message to an outside audience.”² Applied to the U.S. context, this definition suggests that political violence is

Because political violence is about power, it is important that its **definition includes the threat of violence, not just actual acts of violence.**

fundamentally about who has power within the political system — who has power to determine access, who has power to confer benefits or impose costs, who has power to set the rules of the game. Because political violence is about power, it is important that its definition includes the threat of violence, not just actual acts of violence. To threaten violence is itself an assertion of power.

The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) pilot study on political violence in the United States notes that even under a common definition, political violence will look different in different contexts.³ Below is a prospective list of the most relevant forms of political violence in the United States:

- Politically motivated attacks on civilians or government institutions, including mass shootings, bombings, and other forms of attack.
- Violence by extremist groups and militias, including individual incidents but also longer-term campaigns of violence, such as lynching.
- Hate crimes, including those against LGBTQIA+ individuals.
- Violent demonstrations/ protests/riots/mobs.
- Excessive use of force by police and other state actors, including state-sponsored violence.

This list, which should be seen as a working list to be interrogated and debated, is not the final word. The aforementioned working definition of political violence and this list will be used as the starting point for the analysis that follows.

Finally, in regard to definitions, it is important to note that the question of political violence by state actors is conceptually more difficult than other forms of violence. Uniquely, state actors can use violence legitimately and do so as part of their normal functions. ACLED, for instance, addressed this issue in their pilot study by excluding incidents where “law enforcement agencies appear to have used violence within the bounds of the legal constraints on their activity.”⁴

This is a start, but the nature of these “legal constraints,” and, even more fundamentally, what is or is not a legitimate use of violence by the state, is exactly what is being contested in the United States right now. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to resolve that dispute. For our purposes, it is enough to say that violence by the state can be legitimate; at some point, however, it does cross over to being violence that contravenes laws and norms and is used, not to enforce the law equally, but to target particular groups. Once it does, this violence is illegitimate and falls within our definition.

Illegitimate violence is of particular importance for our arguments if it is designed to exclude, to silence, and to suppress political participation and political voice. Such violence has been used by police against protestors in city after city, by federal agents in Portland, Oregon, and by security forces in front of the White House itself.

Democratic Goals

Above, we laid out a working definition of political violence. As this report is primarily targeted at funders, we begin with the democracy-promotion goals articulated by these funders. These goals can be divided into three major categories:

1. **Meaningful participation and inclusion:** The Ford Foundation notes: “Around the world billions of people are excluded from full participation in the political, economic, and cultural systems that shape their lives. When so many lack access to and engagement with their government, policies fail to address their needs . . .”⁵
2. **Supporting an open, deliberative democracy:** The Hewlett Foundation seeks to “[u]phold key values of US democracy including pluralism, political tolerance, negotiation and compromise, and the central role of Congress in our democracy.”⁶ Many funders also focus on making political discourse and deliberations informed and civil — for example, creating programs that focus on fighting disinformation and strengthening media.⁷

3. **Effective, legitimate, and accountable democratic institutions:** Democracy Fund notes that “American democracy depends on a government that represents the interests of the people in all of our diversity—one that is prepared to act on our behalf and that is held accountable when it does not.”⁸

Of course, these goals are interrelated. When all groups can meaningfully participate, and in a way that is open, civil, and deliberative, citizens can hold government accountable. This accountability leads to a government that can solve problems more effectively and strengthen the legitimacy of its institutions.

Political Violence and Democratic Goals

What is the interplay between these democratic goals and political violence? As we look at the United States and other countries that have democratic or quasi-democratic political systems, we can see that this interplay creates two dynamics—either a vicious cycle or a virtuous circle.

First, imagine a country where violence is increasing, undermining democratic goals like participation, civil deliberation, and legitimate governance. As these goals are undermined, more groups are excluded from meaningful participation, and institutions are unable to resolve disputes in societies peacefully, thereby leading to more violence. *This is the vicious cycle.*

Conversely, imagine a country where democratic institutions are becoming a bit more consolidated. This means that there is more inclusion and more participation and that institutions are getting a little better at solving disputes peacefully. As violence decreases, institutions gain greater legitimacy and strength, leading to a continued reduction in violence. This is the virtuous circle.

As Michael Signer noted, democracy provides the antidote to violence. Advancing democratic goals strengthens a society’s ability to address the challenge of political violence. And addressing the challenge of political violence further strengthens those democratic institutions. Thus, the work of promoting democracy is the work of preventing political violence and vice versa.

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is the work of **preventing political violence**
and vice versa.



LAST YEAR'S SHOOTING AT THE TREE OF LIFE SYNAGOGUE WAS A STONE DROPPING IN WATER, CREATING CONCENTRIC CIRCLES OF GRIEF. AT THE CENTER WERE THE SURVIVORS AND THE FAMILIES OF VICTIMS. THEN CAME THE FIRST RESPONDERS, AND THE LOCAL LEADERS WHO HANDLED THE OVERWHELMING LOGISTICS INVOLVED IN THE AFTERMATH.

ON AND ON: **MEMBERS OF THE PITTSBURGH JEWISH COMMUNITY. PITTSBURGHERS WROTE LARGE. AMERICAN JEWS. AND, FINALLY, THE WHOLE OF THE COUNTRY, WHICH SAW THE ATTACK AS PART OF THE LONG LIST OF MASS SHOOTINGS THAT HAVE ALREADY HAPPENED THIS DECADE."**⁹

— EMMA GREEN

Why Should We Care? The Costs of Political Violence¹⁰

While all violence creates physical harm, what this quotation about the Tree of Life attack illuminates is that political violence, *by design*, expands that harm. Political violence creates harm and imposes costs on society well beyond the violent incident itself. To truly understand political violence, it is crucial to have a better understanding of the scope and scale of those costs.

Toward that end, we will assess three types of costs:

1. **Physical and psychological costs:** How can we understand the extent and type of physical and psychological harm that political violence causes?
2. **Economic costs:** What direct and indirect economic costs result from political violence?
3. **Costs in additional violence:** How does political violence catalyze further violence and create cycles of violence?

To assess these costs, we will synthesize research from a variety of academic fields. Sometimes this research — for instance, data on homicides or mass shootings — is not focused directly on political violence. When applying such

research, we are not making the claim that homicides or mass shootings are political violence, only that the research on these topics informs our assessments of the costs of political violence.

BELOW: Protester holding a sign at a rally against the Muslim Travel Ban in New York City. Credit: vivalapenler / iStockPhoto



The Cost in Physical and Psychological Harm

PHYSICAL HARM

Current Violence

Tragically, for individual events of political violence, it is easy to assess the extent of physical harm — that is, how many are killed and physically injured. We know that at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh eight people were killed. We know that at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston nine people were killed and at the Walmart in El Paso 23 people lost their lives.

It is more difficult to assess aggregate levels of physical harm. Until recently, political violence was not a conceptual category commonly used to inform data collection. As a result, most data-collection efforts have focused either on specific types of political violence or on broader phenomena of which political violence is a part.

For instance, the FBI regularly collects data on hate crimes, and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) collects data on killings by extremists. Recently gathered data include:

- In 2018, the FBI counted 7,120 hate crimes, of which 4,751 targeted persons.¹¹ In 2017, the total was 7,175 and, in 2016, 6,121. It is important to note that while these numbers may be useful for year-on-year comparisons, it is widely acknowledged that the methods used by the FBI result in the significant undercounting of hate crimes.¹²

- The ADL identified 42 individuals in 2019 who were killed by domestic extremists. In 2018, the total was 53; in 2017, it was 41.¹³

These data are illustrative, but because they focus on particular manifestations of political violence they do not tell us much about political violence in the aggregate. There are other forms of data collection — for instance on mass shootings¹⁴ or on police shootings¹⁵ — that include not only incidents that would be categorized as political violence but also others with no political motivation. Again, these sources provide insights into the phenomenon of political violence but don't allow us to assess the aggregate reach or impact of political violence.

Recently, ACLED began gathering data based on a definition that aligns with the one used in this paper. Its pilot effort gathered data from July to September 2019. During this period, ACLED identified roughly 32 incidents of political violence causing 47 fatalities.¹⁶ ACLED has now launched the U.S. Crisis Monitor initiative, which will collect these data on an ongoing basis. It recently released data covering the period May–September 2020¹⁷ that identified 55 events of political violence. These data did not provide information on fatalities.

The ACLED initiative is new to the United States and was launched during an extraordinary time of overlapping crises in the country. At the moment, therefore, it is difficult to extrapolate its findings more

broadly. Going forward, however, the initiative will be the best way to assess the extent of physical harm that political violence is creating within the United States.

The Risk of Escalated Violence

The evidence above documents existing political violence in the United States. But the United States is also at risk of experiencing more serious, escalated forms of political violence. First, there is a risk of intergroup conflict, in particular ethnic/racial riots or massacres.¹⁸ Second, there is also a risk of wide-scale violence by militias and other armed groups. This risk is heightened when these militias could be either tacitly or explicitly endorsed by the federal government. The United States is currently experiencing these types of violence at low levels, and each is currently at risk of escalating.

By looking at the history of the United States, and beyond the United States to other countries, we can see how deadly political violence can become when it does escalate. In the United States, among the most violent periods was the “Red Summer” of 1919. In the span of 10 months, it is estimated that 250 Black Americans were killed in over 25 massacres by white mobs and militias, as well as individual lynchings. Taking a slightly longer view of this violent era, it is estimated that, at a time when the U.S. population was less than a third of what it is today, over 1,100 Black Americans were killed from 1917 to 1923.¹⁹

Beyond the United States, death tolls from similar forms of political

violence — riots/massacres and violent militias — have been even higher. In 2000–2001, a series of riots in Jos and Kaduna, Nigeria, is estimated to have killed between 5,000 and 10,000 people. The 2002 riots in Gujarat, India, are estimated to have killed over 2,000 people.

These examples remind us to look not just at what is but at what might be. Given the trends of the past few years, the risk of escalated, more widespread violence within the United States is real. And we know both from U.S. history and from other countries' experiences how deadly such violence can become. Importantly, the examples from abroad and from our own history show that there can be sustained periods of escalated violence even when the country is not in a civil war.

PSYCHOLOGICAL HARM AND TRAUMA

Violence is traumatic. To understand the cost of political violence, therefore, we must also look at the psychological harm it creates in those directly and indirectly impacted.

Survivors, Family Members, Witnesses

Research on survivors of mass-shooting incidents has found that a significant number experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A major literature review conducted in 2017 identified 36 separate studies reporting PTSD in survivors of mass shootings. The prevalence of PTSD varies in these studies, as there were many different populations studied and different means for assessing

PTSD. A study of survivors of a mass shooting at a Texas cafeteria found 28 percent of survivors suffered from PTSD within two months of the incident.²⁰ Less than 10 percent of the sample were injured in the shooting. This tracks with a general estimate from the National Center on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that, overall, 28 percent of those witnessing a mass shooting suffer from PTSD.²¹

Most of the research on the impact of violence on family members comes from criminology researchers, who often refer to family members of homicide victims as co-victims. Different research studies have found PTSD prevalence rates among co-victims of 39 percent (at six months), 34 percent (at two years), and 23 percent (any time after the homicide).²² Additionally, one study found 49 percent of co-victims suffering from symptoms of major depressive disorder two years after the homicide.²³

It seems likely that family members of victims killed in incidents of political violence experience these psychological harms at least as frequently as those killed in criminal homicides. No research we could find, however, looks at this question directly. This is an important topic for future research.

Survivors and family members of victims are those most severely impacted by political violence. But the scale of direct impact goes well beyond these groups. One study, for instance, surveyed over 4,000 Virginia Tech students after the mass shootings on campus in 2007. The study found 15.4 percent had PTSD after three to four months.²⁴ While some of these students were involved directly in the shooting, most were simply on campus.

"This is the incredible thing — we were singled out. And it's a particularly desolating feeling. But then what goes beyond that? Yes, we're feeling horrible right now, as we should, and we're grieving and we're feeling afraid. This will not be the end of it because we really can't control how white America is going to react."

— OSCAR VILLALON, A RESIDENT OF SAN FRANCISCO, RESPONDING TO THE EL PASO SHOOTING.²⁵

After the politically motivated mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, 446 individuals applied for support from the victim's fund. Those eligible included families of victims killed, individuals who were hospitalized for injuries for one or more nights, people who received same-day medical care following the attack, and anyone who was at the Walmart, at the neighboring Sam's Club, or in the parking lot at the time of the attack who received mental health treatment.

Hate crimes also led to high levels of anger and anxiety.²⁹

These examples give a sense of the scale of psychological harm created by incidents of political violence. The Virginia Tech attack created roughly 600 cases of PTSD. The attack in El Paso resulted in almost 500 individuals negatively impacted enough to apply for support. And we know from the other research on victims that much of this harm will last for years.

Groups Targeted by the Violence

Barbara Perry and Shahid Alvi, two leading researchers of hate crimes, describe hate crimes as “‘message crimes’ that emit a distinct warning to all members of the victim’s community: step out of line, cross invisible boundaries, and you too could be lying on the ground, beaten and bloodied.”²⁶

The most comprehensive research on how political violence, in this case hate crimes, impacts the targeted group was conducted by

the Sussex Hate Crime Project. Over five years, the project conducted numerous studies in Great Britain with over 1,000 members of the Muslim community and over 2,000 members of the LGBT community.²⁷ In its 2018 final report, the project concluded that simply being aware of the victimization of fellow group members led to increased feelings of vulnerability and perceptions of being under attack. The impacts were significantly higher than for random acts of violence that were not hate-related.²⁸

Given these findings, it is not surprising that in a survey of 1,300 American Jews in October 2019, a little over one year after the Tree of Life Synagogue attack in Pittsburgh, 42 percent said that American Jews had become less secure in the previous year, as opposed to 2 percent who said that American Jews were safer.³⁰

This body of research provides a clear picture of how political violence creates trauma among the targeted group. In addition, it powerfully clarifies the political nature of such violence. In the words of hate crime researcher Barbara Johnson:

[A hate crime] involves acts of violence and intimidation, usually directed toward already stigmatized and marginalized groups. As such, it is a mechanism of power, intended to reaffirm the precarious hierarchies that

characterize a given social order. It attempts to recreate simultaneously the threatened (real or imagined) hegemony of the perpetrator’s group and the “appropriate” subordinate identity of the victim’s group.³¹

As noted above, political violence is ultimately about who has power over whom — power to exclude, power to silence, power to suppress.

The Community Where the Violence Took Place

Although it becomes more difficult to assess harm as we move outward from individuals or groups directly impacted, there are researchers who have sought to assess the impact of political violence on whole communities. In Charlottesville, for instance, research found a statistically significant increase in emergency room visits for acute anxiety in the weeks after the Unite the Right rally.³² This increase was even more significant among Black people.

Beyond acute mental health problems, the community’s well-being as a whole is negatively impacted by political violence.³³ Researchers in Boston took advantage of the fact that a large research project on well-being was being conducted at the time of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. Participants in the research were self-reporting on various aspects of their well-being on a daily basis. The study found a significant drop in well-being in the days and weeks after the bombing. Strikingly, the overall average decrease in well-being was larger than the decrease in individual well-being caused by unemployment.

CASE STUDIES:

- “Thousands of others . . . had a hard time escaping their trauma. In Charlottesville, months after the events of 8/12, practicing local therapists continued to see patients for free . . .”
— Michael Signer, former mayor of Charlottesville in his book *Cry Havoc*³⁴
- “I wish we could have the bandwidth and the resources to really make sure that we are reaching out to every individual and saying, ‘What do you need?’ . . . We want to help you get what you need because healing is not a one-size-fits-all.”
— Deb Zuloaga, President of United Way, El Paso
- “I had fooled myself into believing I was better able to handle that trauma.” — Joe Moody, Texas State Representative from El Paso
- “Because there’s no comparison to the knowledge that someone is willing to kill you because you just are different. I feel like I don’t have a choice but to have to be on my toes and alert. And it’s exhausting.” — Diego Torres, reacting to the El Paso shooting³⁵
- A witness of the Portland MAX train stabbing told a journalist a year later that every time he gets on the MAX he can still smell blood, “like cold metal.”³⁶

CONCLUSION

Along with Emma Green’s quotation above, more than one of our case study interviewees used³⁷ the metaphor of a rock in a pond when describing how harm, grief, and trauma ripple out from incidents of political violence. As the review above has shown, in regard to the inner circles, there is solid research that demonstrates the physical harm and psychological trauma incidents of political violence create for those involved, those targeted, and communities where these events take place. As the circles get bigger, expanding out to the whole country, the harm becomes diffuse and harder to measure, but it is still there. And that harm could grow hundreds of times worse if the United States falls prey to more serious, widespread violence.

The Economic Cost

When political violence happens, it is right and proper that we first focus on the human cost. In the aftermath of these incidents, however, communities must also wrestle with the significant economic costs that political violence creates.

There is no single, agreed-upon method to assess the economic cost of violence, whether political violence or homicide. However, to begin to understand the scope of the economic cost, we can look at three categories: 1) economic costs resulting from harm to individuals; 2) costs of property damage; and 3) the disruption of economic activity.³⁸

ECONOMIC COST OF HARM TO INDIVIDUALS

Various research efforts have sought to assess the economic costs of individual acts of violence. For instance, research has been conducted on the cost to treat gunshot victims.³⁹ A 2017 study found that gunshot victims who were treated and discharged had medical costs averaging \$5,200. Those who were admitted to the hospital had medical costs averaging \$96,000. The same study estimated that the cost to each victim in economic loss (i.e., lost wages) was roughly 15 times the medical cost.

In regard to homicide, a recent analysis assessed the cost of a single murder in a number of American cities: \$2.5 million in Stockton, California; \$2.3 million in San Bernardino, California; \$1.6 million in Detroit, Michigan; \$1.2 million in Indianapolis, Indiana; \$1.1 million in Dallas, Texas; and \$765,000 in Mobile, Alabama.⁴⁰

The estimate includes costs like medical expenses, police response and investigation, and incarceration, but it does not account for future economic loss caused by the death of the victim, such as lost lifetime wages and tax revenue. These are estimated to be an additional \$1 million to \$2 million if the victim was working at the time of the homicide. Other efforts using comparable methodologies have arrived at roughly similar estimates, ranging from \$3 million to \$5.1 million per homicide victim.⁴¹ Although these research efforts do not focus on political violence directly, there is no reason to believe the costs for a violent death caused by political violence would not be roughly similar. These numbers can thus be seen as a baseline. At a minimum, the injuries and deaths caused by political violence cost this much.

For victims of violence who do not lose their lives, there are the costs of psychological treatment. Several research studies have estimated the annual cost of treatment for PTSD at roughly \$6,000 to \$8,000 per person.⁴² It is often not possible to know how many individuals seek treatment after an incident of political violence, but using the Virginia Tech shooting as an example, a treatment cost of \$6,000 to \$8,000 per person would mean over \$4 million in total potential costs for PTSD treatment of those affected for one year.⁴³ To the costs of treating PTSD, we could add the costs of emergency room visits,⁴⁴ substance

abuse,⁴⁵ and other counseling and psychological services. It would be difficult to compile all of these additional costs, but they are real, nonetheless.

PROPERTY DAMAGE

Much of the data on the property-damage costs of political violence comes from research on terrorism. The narrowest way to assess the cost of a terrorist incident is to calculate insured property damage. Insured property loss varies so dramatically, however, that general lessons cannot be drawn. The 9/11 attacks, the most expensive in history by insured property loss, cost \$27 billion, but costs fall all the way to \$55 million for the 20th most expensive attack.⁴⁶

Riots and other forms of political protest create more property damage. Again, each incident is unique, and total damage varies widely. A single-day riot in Portland in November 2016, for instance, is estimated to have caused \$1 million in property damage.⁴⁷ The 1992 Los Angeles riots are estimated to have caused \$775 million in property damage over six days.⁴⁸ In Chile, one month of protests and riots caused an estimated \$4.6 billion in infrastructure damage.⁴⁹ While these numbers are significant, they can also be put in perspective by comparing them to natural disasters. Both Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Harvey, for instance, caused over \$100 billion in damages.⁵⁰

In economic terms, a bigger concern than property damage is the **capacity of political violence to disrupt economic activity.**

DISRUPTION OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

In economic terms, a bigger concern than property damage is the capacity of political violence to disrupt economic activity. According to an analysis conducted by Pool Re, a terrorism re-insurance firm, insured property loss is normally 0.25 percent, or one-four-hundredth, of the overall economic cost of a terrorist attack.⁵¹ The Boston Marathon bombing provides an illustrative example. It was estimated that shutting Boston down for one day because of the manhunt for the bombers cost \$250 million to \$330 million.⁵²

Finally, escalated conflict and disorder can impact economies on a macro scale. A 2008 World Bank study, for instance, found that riots, which they define as short-duration, intense outbursts of violence, reduced GDP, on average, by 0.36 percent.⁵³ Specific examples of this type of broader impact include:

- A 2015 attack that killed 39 tourists in Tunisia caused a 40 percent reduction in tourism spending by British tourists.⁵⁴
- 2007 post-election violence in Kenya, which killed an estimated 1,200 people and displaced over 300,000, is estimated to have cost the Kenyan economy £145 million or 1 percent of the country's GDP.⁵⁵
- 2019–2020 anti-government protests in Chile caused \$3 billion in lost economic activity (1.1 percent of GDP).⁵⁶

These numbers can seem abstract, but a 40 percent reduction in tourism spending, for instance, means livelihoods lost, lives disrupted, and families who cannot send their children to school. That kind of blow is devastating to communities.

CASE STUDIES:

- One Fund El Paso, the victim's relief fund, began allocating more than \$11.5 million to victims in the four months after the shooting.⁵⁷
- The El Paso economy basically shut down the day of the shooting. The daily GDP of El Paso is roughly \$80 million.⁵⁸
- In Portland, one 2019 riot cost downtown businesses over \$3 million in lost revenue.⁵⁹
- In the months following the Unite the Right rally, hotel occupancy in Charlottesville fell 5 percent and restaurant tax revenue fell 3 percent.⁵⁹
- Governor Northam of Virginia authorized \$2 million in funding for law enforcement and other agencies to prepare for the one-year anniversary of the Unite the Right rally.

CONCLUSION

The various economic costs compiled here should be seen as illustrative rather than as some form of comprehensive accounting. The complex ways in which economic costs radiate out from incidents of political violence make any such comprehensive accounting impossible. From the research, however, we can see that even single incidents of political violence cost societies millions of dollars and in more extreme cases hundreds of millions of dollars or more. Moreover, these costs can last years into the future, whether because of the ongoing trauma and injury individuals endure, from which it can take years to recover, or because of the negative impact on community businesses and the local economy.

The Cost in Additional Violence

It is a cliché that violence begets violence. This cliché, however, is now backed by a number of research findings across multiple fields. According to violence researcher L. Rowell Huesmann, “One of the best-established findings in the psychological literature on aggressive and violent behavior is that violence begets violence . . . Introducing violence into a community increases the risk of greater violence throughout the community.”⁶⁰

In Israel-Palestine, for instance, researchers found that homicide rates increased 28 percent from 2000 to 2001, spanning before and after the

desire to kill Jewish Americans and a 200 percent increase in those related to killing ethnic minorities.

- An 800 percent increase in searches on how to join the Ku Klux Klan.
- A 22,000 percent increase in people wanting to donate to the Ku Klux Klan.⁶⁴

This online behavior does translate into off-line actions.⁶⁵ In the two years after the Unite the Right rally, at least six attendees were convicted of hate-related crimes, including terrorism and attempted murder.⁶⁶ In the two weeks after the El Paso

episodes during this time period.⁶⁷ This means that over a period of eight years, the majority of gun violence in Chicago was “begotten” by earlier violence.

This research was conducted on a specific form of violence in a specific context, crime in Chicago. But one of the dynamics at play, tit-for-tat violence, can be seen in any number of contexts that have a clear conflict divide between different groups — from civil war in the Central African Republic⁶⁸ to gangs in Central America⁶⁹ to pastoralists and nomadic herders in Mali.⁷⁰ Political violence, with its focus on identity, belonging, and defining in-groups and out-groups, is particularly susceptible to tit-for-tat cycles of violence.

Gun sales are a final way in which violence propagates itself, particularly in the United States. One researcher found that in the weeks after a terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California, killed 14 people, 25,766 guns were acquired in California, 13,950 by first-time acquirers.⁷¹ More anecdotal evidence shows a spike in gun purchases and enrollment in gun safety classes after the El Paso shooting, particularly by Mexican Americans.⁷²

Having a gun in the house increases the risk of suicide,⁷³ the risk of death by gun accident,⁷⁴ and the lethality of domestic violence.⁷⁵ Abusers are five times more likely to kill their female victim if they have access to a gun.⁷⁶ After a single incident of political violence in San Bernardino, guns, and these increased risks, were introduced into almost 14,000 homes.⁷⁷

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second Intifada began.⁶¹ Similarly, studies of Israeli-Jewish and Israeli-Arab children found those who had witnessed the most violence were significantly more likely to punch or beat a peer.⁶² This last finding is important because it shows that it is not necessary to be a direct victim of violence for the dynamic of violence propagation to take hold. Simply being exposed to violence is enough.⁶³

Moonshot CVE, in research conducted after the Unite the Right events in Charlottesville, found similar dynamics online:

- An 1,800 percent increase in internet searches indicating a

mass shooting, police foiled seven mass shooting plots, from Florida to Ohio to California. In the year after the Pittsburgh attack, 12 white supremacists were arrested for planning attacks on U.S. Jewish communities.

Research on gun violence provides additional evidence on how violence propagates. A recent study on gun violence in Chicago from 2006 to 2014 identified 4,107 separate cascades of violence. The average cascade size was 2.7 victims, but the largest was 469 victims. These patterns of violence transmission accounted for 63.1 percent of the gunshot-violence

CASE STUDIES:

- The Unite the Right events brought attendees from at least 39 states and 50 white supremacist groups. In the two years after the events, at least six attendees were convicted of hate-related crimes, including terrorism and attempted murder.⁷⁸
- After the Unite the Right events, internet searches indicating a desire to kill Jews increased 1,800 percent.⁷⁹
- In regard to Portland, the ADL notes, “violence could attract additional, more hardcore extremists . . . Any bloodshed may be used as promotional fodder for the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer who are in constant recruitment mode.”⁸⁰
- A gun safety instructor in El Paso increased the size of his class for new license-to-carry applicants from 50 to 200 in the wake of the El Paso shooting.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

In addition to harm, trauma, and economic damage, acts of political violence create a radiating circle of risk. Each act of violence creates a risk of a copycat crime, of radicalizing someone else, of a traumatized individual turning to violence at home or in the community, or of a family member committing suicide with a newly acquired gun. The mathematics of risk is ruthless, dictating that follow-on violence will not take place in many cases but will, inevitably, in some cases.

POLITICAL
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INSTEAD, **POLITICAL
VIOLENCE IS
A WHOLE-OF-
SOCIETY PROBLEM.**

What Can We Do About It? Resilience-Based Strategies to Prevent Political Violence

In the paper “Building U.S. Resilience to Political Violence,” the authors:

... propose resilience as a frame for violence prevention in the contemporary United States because it builds on existing strengths of our society while identifying and addressing challenges that less comprehensive approaches miss. . . . [P]olitical violence is not the result of a few bad actors and can seldom be managed by narrowly targeted law enforcement measures alone. Instead, political violence is a whole-of-society problem.⁸²

An inclusive, whole-of-society approach aligns well with the core goal of this paper — to identify strategies to address political violence in ways that strengthen democracy in the United States. One community-resilience assessment tool, for instance, identifies six interrelated factors that can be used to estimate the level of resilience in a community: leadership, collective efficacy, preparedness, place attachment, social trust, and social relationships.⁸³ When community members care about their community (place attachment), when they have broad social networks with trusting relationships (social trust), when they are organized and prepared,

when they have strong, engaged leadership, when they believe they can change their community for the better (collective efficacy), they can respond effectively to complex challenges facing their community, including the threat of political violence. It is easy to see from this list how achieving democratic goals, such as meaningful inclusion or legitimate leadership, would foster resilience, and vice versa.

Achieving democratic goals, such as meaningful inclusion or legitimate leadership, would foster resilience, and vice versa.

This resilience frame informs what is included in this section’s lists of strategies to prevent political violence and what is left out. The evidence table below focuses on strategies that are centered in communities, that rely on community involvement, and that are part of an inclusive, balanced approach to preventing political violence.⁸⁴

The Evidence Table

Each entry in the table provides a description of the strategy, examples of initiatives using the strategy, and a summary of evidence on the effectiveness of the strategy. The strategies are divided into three categories, according to their initial focus: individual, group, or civil society. Most strategies, regardless of their initial focus, eventually engage with all three levels.

The table identifies when there is a dearth of evidence about a given strategy. This should not be seen as evidence against the effectiveness of a strategy. Some strategies can be highly effective but are more difficult to assess rigorously or emerge from fields without a strong culture of rigorous assessment.

Finally, there is always a trade-off when evidence on individual strategies is presented. Doing so makes it easier to assess evidence more rigorously but can also obscure how strategies interact or can be effectively combined into more collaborative approaches. We discuss these more collaborative approaches after the evidence table to follow.

Evidence Table: Strategies to Address Political Violence

INDIVIDUAL-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

1. DERADICALIZATION AND EXIT

Description

These strategies are designed to provide mechanisms for members of violent groups to exit those groups voluntarily. They include various kinds of social support, efforts to reintegrate perpetrators into communities, and efforts designed to help individuals reject their previously held violent ideologies.

The category also includes various non-law enforcement off-ramping or referral strategies that allow friends and family to seek help for an individual whom they think might engage in political violence.

Examples

- EXIT-Germany
- Healthy Identity Program, UK
- Life After Hate, USA
- SMN Radicalisation Helpline, Netherlands
- Moonshot CVE

Evidence Summary

Research has found that it is common for members of violent groups to wish to disengage from those groups.⁸⁵ The research is less clear on how to design deradicalization and exit programs to accelerate the process of disengagement. A recent review of the literature noted straightforwardly, “Do deradicalization programs work? This is unclear.”⁸⁶ It later argued that policymakers in this area are working in a theoretical vacuum.⁸⁷ This creates the need for trial-and-error strategies designed with the local context in mind. Nonetheless, this approach has created some success stories. Saudi Arabia’s deradicalization program, the Sri Lanka Rehabilitation Program, and Denmark’s Aarhus Model are all considered to be relatively successful initiatives.⁸⁸

Relationships, particularly with family and friends, provide one of the most important motivations for disengagement from violent groups.⁸⁹ There is a dearth of evidence, however, documenting the effectiveness of off-ramping and referral processes initiated by family or friends. A recent Rand report notes that several interviewees gave anecdotal evidence for the importance of off-ramping and referral programs but “evaluation literature for this element of terrorism prevention could not be identified.”⁹⁰

Takeaways

- It is common for those within groups who engage, or have the potential to engage, in political violence to wish to leave those groups.
- There are successful examples of deradicalization and exit initiatives, including some off-ramping programs.
- Deradicalization and exit are complex, context-specific initiatives, and the general evidence base for them is relatively thin. This creates the need for a trial-and-error approach when designing and implementing these programs.

2. TARGETED OUTREACH

Description

These strategies are designed to reach high-risk individuals and intervene to prevent them from engaging in violence. They include short-term, “interrupter” strategies and longer-term strategies, such as “focused deterrence,” in which social service agencies and law enforcement collaborate to convince potential perpetrators not to engage in violence.

Examples

- Cure Violence, Chicago
- Health Alliance for Violence Intervention
- Ceasefire, Oakland

Evidence Summary

There is significant evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of shorter-term “interrupter” initiatives in reducing criminal and gang violence. Cure Violence frequently implements interrupter-style programs. Several rigorous independent evaluations of its programs in New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Chicago have found that the approach contributed to significant reductions in violence.⁹¹ There is also substantial evidence that longer-term programs, such as focused deterrence programs,⁹² hospital-based violence intervention programs,⁹³ and cognitive behavioral therapy initiatives,⁹⁴ are effective in reducing violence. What these initiatives have in common is a focus on high-risk individuals, on addressing violence and violent behavior directly, and on using a balanced approach that brings law enforcement and social services together.

2. TARGETED OUTREACH (continued)

To date, both interrupter-style and focused-deterrence programs have primarily addressed gang violence. In presenting this evidence, we are not implying that gang violence is political violence but that lessons learned from addressing gang violence are applicable to political violence. Analysis of the similarities between gangs and violent extremist groups indicate that, while targeted outreach models do need to be adapted, these models can be applicable to political violence.⁹⁵ Reasons for this applicability include the following: 1) in both types of groups, a small number of individuals commit the majority of the violence; 2) both types of groups are alienated from authorities, and therefore credible messengers are required to reach potentially violent individuals; and 3) for both types of groups, approaches that have focused on violence directly, but in a balanced way that includes social service providers, community groups, and law enforcement, have proven effective.

Takeaways

- Both interrupter and focused-deterrence programs have strong evidence supporting their effectiveness with gang violence. Research to date has provided some support for the broader applicability of these program models, but more research is needed to provide concrete guidance on how these types of programs can be successfully adapted and deployed to address political violence.
- The largest challenge with these programs is the outreach component. Without a high degree of community trust, it is difficult to successfully engage high-risk individuals, particularly given the troubled history of “targeted enforcement” programs, such as gang-intervention programs.
- The outreach challenge is magnified by the fact that many politically violent groups are identity based. This creates a real danger that “high-risk” individuals will be defined by their racial, ethnic, or religious identity rather than their behavior.

3. CODES OF CONDUCT — POLITICIANS, MEDIA, COMMUNITY LEADERS

Description

These initiatives create voluntary codes of conduct for media, political leaders, and/or community leaders. Those signing agree not to use language or rhetoric that is inflammatory or might incite individuals to violence. The strategy is most often used during political campaigns and elections but can also be used as part of a de-escalation strategy in crisis situations.

Examples

- Media Monitoring Unit, Guyana
- Election Code of Conduct, Macedonia
- Political Parties Code of Conduct, Ghana

Evidence Summary

There is evidence, based on the experience of practitioners, that codes of conduct can be effective in preventing violence around elections. In Bangladesh, election observers concluded that a code of conduct “proved to be highly effective in regulating the conduct of parties and candidates.”⁹⁶ In Guyana, adherence to a media code of conduct was high, contributing to the most peaceful election the country had held in a decade.⁹⁷ In Macedonia, “citizens have seen adherence to codes of conduct improve over eight elections,” thereby improving the overall political environment in regard to elections.⁹⁸ It is difficult to gather more rigorous evidence on these codes, given that where they are least needed may be places where individuals are most likely to sign on. In more polarized and contentious contexts, codes of conduct may not be feasible. Additionally, there are examples where codes of conduct become politicized and escalate tensions, as opposed to reducing them.⁹⁹

Takeaways

- There may be a sweet spot where codes of conduct are most effective, namely, where political tensions have begun to decrease and where trust has begun to improve. Codes can then be used to solidify those gains.
- In highly polarized situations, codes may be just one more politicized issue, thereby increasing tensions.
- These types of codes have not been used frequently in the United States. As a result, their use in the United States would require a socialization process.

(continues)

GROUP-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

1. INTERGROUP ENGAGEMENT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Description

These initiatives include dialogues and other forms of engagement designed to build trust and improve intergroup relations and, when necessary, resolve potentially or actually violent conflicts. The groups involved, often ethnic/racial groups, can be other kinds of identifiable groups that are in some type of conflict with each other.

Examples

- Cincinnati Police-Community Relations Collaborative
- Bridge Alliance
- Erbil Christian-Muslim Football League
- Engaging Communities for Peace, Nigeria

Evidence Summary

Many of these programs are based on “contact theory” — the theory that bringing groups into contact with each other under certain conditions can improve individuals’ perceptions of other groups and improve intergroup relations. A systematic review of high-quality studies conducted in 2019 found that 24 of 27 studies demonstrated the positive effects of such initiatives.¹⁰⁰ Other studies have found that these positive effects can extend or transfer to individuals not directly involved with the intergroup contact.¹⁰¹

When violent conflict has escalated and/or when one group is much more marginalized than the other, it is more difficult for these kinds of engagement programs to work. Many fail, in particular, because other broader and unaddressed social and economic dynamics overwhelm any impact these initiatives might have.¹⁰² There is also the danger in this situation that engagement will make powerful groups feel better about themselves, while not producing tangible gains for the more marginalized groups. Despite these challenges, there are success stories across a wide range of contexts, both within the United States and around the world, where intergroup engagement of various kinds has been used to strengthen relationships and de-escalate conflict.¹⁰³

Takeaways

- There is solid evidence that “contact theory” approaches can improve intergroup relations, although the evidence comes with caveats.¹⁰⁴ One implication of these caveats is that strategies need to pay close attention to the local context and to the participants involved.
- These initiatives should be seen as long-term efforts to weaken the enabling environment for potential perpetrators of political violence. However, improving intergroup relations in general does not necessarily prevent individual acts of violence by extremists.
- After violent conflict has escalated, intergroup conflict resolution is hard and will often fail because of countervailing forces. There are, however, lessons to be drawn from success stories.

2. SHAPING GROUP NORMS

Description

This category of initiatives focuses on shaping norms within a group, particularly strengthening norms against violence. This is done primarily by having members of the group, especially influential members of the group, signal support for the norm in some way. The basic premise is that persuasion from in-group members is more effective at shifting attitudes and behavior than pressure from out-group members.¹⁰⁵

Examples

- Mentors in Violence Prevention
- The Reformation Project
- Inclusionary Leaders Coalition, Bosnia-Herzegovina
- Radio programming in Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria

Evidence Summary

There is significant research across a variety of fields that changing norms or the perception of norms within a group is an effective way of shifting the attitudes and behaviors of the individuals within that group. Significant research has been conducted, for instance, on initiatives designed to impact social norms around drinking on college campuses¹⁰⁶ and violence against women.¹⁰⁷ There is also significant research on initiatives designed to reduce racial prejudice by shifting perceptions of how one’s own group thinks about an out-group. Research has shown that prejudice can be reduced by information indicating low levels of prejudice among others in one’s group or by anti-prejudice messages from other in-group members.¹⁰⁸

The consensus in the field is that the success of initiatives focused on shifting social norms on public health issues, such as drinking, and on issues closely related to political violence, such as racial prejudice and misogyny, means these interventions hold promise for reducing political violence. There is also widespread agreement, however, that more rigorous research is needed on programs that focus on political violence directly. As one author puts it, “[W]hilst existing research offers preliminary hope for the utility of social norms interventions in violence prevention, there remains a need for high-quality evaluations of theoretically-based programmes.”¹⁰⁹

2. SHAPING GROUP NORMS (continued)

Takeaways

- Decisions to engage in violence (or not) are shaped by social norms.¹¹⁰
- Lessons have been learned about how initiatives focused on shaping social norms can influence a wide variety of attitudes and behaviors.
- There is some promising research looking at how lessons from other domains can be applied to programs directly focused on reducing political violence, but more research needs to be done.

CIVIL SOCIETY-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

1. PEACE EDUCATION/PEACE MESSAGING

Description

These are initiatives designed to provide knowledge and teach skills to address conflicts nonviolently and/or shift attitudes away from intolerance, prejudice, bigotry, and other potential drivers of violence. Programs can take place within educational institutions or in other community contexts and often use a mix of instruction and messaging.

Examples

- Public Education Program, United States Institute of Peace (USIP)
- Serve 2 Unite, Oak Creek, Wisconsin
- A World of Difference Institute and No Place for Hate, ADL
- Teaching Tolerance, Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)
- Say Yes to Peace, No to Violence, Liberia

Evidence Summary

Some research from programs in conflict areas around the world shows that peace-education programs can be successful in reducing bias and prejudice, while also increasing individuals' willingness to resolve disputes peacefully.¹¹¹ However, many in the field also argue that peace-education programming has outrun the evidence base, pointing to numerous peace-education programs being implemented around the world that are neither informed by evidence nor rigorously evaluated for impact. Along these lines, we were unable to find research assessing the impact of ADL's school-based programs,¹¹² SPLC's Teaching Tolerance Program,¹¹³ or USIP's Public Education Programs,¹¹⁴ which are some of the best-known programs within the United States.

A specific form of initiative directly relevant to political violence is peace messaging and community education designed to prevent electoral violence. One review of electoral-violence-peace-messaging programs found "no systematic evidence that peace messaging and voter consultation made a difference in the 2017 elections in Kenya or Liberia, noting that peace messaging often struggles to reach the members of society most likely to perpetrate violence."¹¹⁵ However, another research study examining a broader number of elections found that peace messaging could be part of "attitude transforming" strategies for successfully reducing violence by state actors (but not by non-state actors).¹¹⁶

Takeaways

- There is research showing examples of successful peace education, including to prevent electoral violence, but overall the research is both thin and mixed on the effectiveness of these initiatives.
- Election-related peace messaging focused on shifting the behavior of state actors may be effective.
- More generally, peace-education initiatives raise interesting questions regarding the wider enabling environment for political violence. It is likely that such programs cannot prevent all political violence but instead can serve as a dampener that prevents escalation of that violence.

2. DOCUMENTATION AND TRACKING

Description

These are initiatives led by civil society groups designed to document and track various forms of political violence, such as hate crimes, or document the activity of individuals and groups considered to be at risk of engaging in political violence. Tracking efforts include both community-based groups in a particular city and national groups tracking political violence more broadly.

Examples

- Mapping Police Violence Initiative
- Portland United Against Hate
- Hate Groups Map, SPLC
- U.S. Crisis Monitor, ACLED
- ICE and CBP Abuse Tracker, United We Dream

(continues)

CIVIL SOCIETY-FOCUSED STRATEGIES (CONTINUED)

2. DOCUMENTATION AND TRACKING (continued)

Evidence Summary

There is a good deal of research assessing and critiquing existing documentation and tracking efforts,¹¹⁷ as well as research and guidance on how to improve them.¹¹⁸ However, we could find little rigorous research on the impact of documentation and tracking on political violence.

Takeaways

- There are many reasons to engage in documentation and tracking of political violence. For ethical reasons, it is important we bring these incidents to light and acknowledge the harm done to victims. Documentation is also often important for litigation efforts. Policy and practice are often improved when informed by better data and evidence. And it is important to sensitize policymakers and the general public to the scope of political violence, both in particular communities and in the United States as a whole.
- There is currently not a strong evidence base demonstrating the impact of specific documentation and tracking initiatives on political violence.

3. PUBLIC ACTION (PROTESTS, COUNTER-PROTESTS, VIGILS)

Description

This strategy entails public, collective action designed to confront perpetrators of political violence, undermine support for political violence, and/or build broad support for anti-political violence efforts. The category includes actions such as protests, counter-protests, vigils, public art installations, and other forms of nonviolent direct action.

Examples

- Black Lives Matter protests
- Vigils after acts of political violence, such as the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh
- Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace
- Rose Revolution, Georgia

Evidence Summary

There is a broad and complex body of research on public protests and their role in creating social change.¹¹⁹ Within this literature, there is some consensus that nonviolent resistance campaigns — of which mass protests are one highly visible method — can be effective in creating social change.¹²⁰ Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, for instance, argue that if 3.5 percent of the population participates in a protest, they will be successful in achieving their social change goals.¹²¹ Strikingly, the protests after George Floyd was killed, which were largely a massive uprising against a form of political violence, exceeded that threshold.

The research also shows that one of the primary impacts of protests is to create solidarity among those protesting and to activate individuals politically.¹²² These dynamics create downstream impacts, even if the immediate goals of the protestors are not met. The role of protests in shifting attitudes and public opinion is more complicated, as protests can shift attitudes among certain segments of the population, while hardening existing attitudes among others and driving polarization.¹²³ Finally, we know protests and other forms of nonviolent direct action must be integrated into broader social movements that rely on a variety of methods. Protests on their own and divorced from a broader social movement are not as effective.¹²⁴

Much of the research in this field focuses on mass protests. There is less research on more focused, targeted protests, such as the counter-protests in Portland or Charlottesville. There is also not as much research on less confrontational forms of public action such as vigils.

Takeaways

- The interplay between public action, such as protests, and society is very complex. Protests can and do create change, but predicting if and how they will in a particular case is difficult.
- Public action can potentially create counter-productive results, which are also very difficult to predict.
- Protests are high-visibility events, but they are part of broader, longer-term change processes.
- Many times, the purpose of public action should be seen as creating solidarity within a movement, as opposed to creating immediate social or policy change.

4. IMPROVING POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Description

These are efforts to strengthen relationships and build trust between police and community members to create more effective responses to violence of various kinds. Such initiatives include a wide variety of activities, including various kinds of dialogue, police-community engagement events, joint data collection and analysis, and joint efforts to strengthen police-accountability measures.

Examples

- SPARQ, Stanford University
- Building Trust Partnership, San Diego
- MEASURE, Austin
- Community-Police Council, Dayton

4. IMPROVING POLICE-COMMUNITY RELATIONS (continued)

Evidence Summary

There is strong evidence from the criminology field that trust between police and communities leads to a reduction of violence within communities. Researchers have shown that increased levels of trust lead to more effective solving of homicides,¹²⁵ reduced gun ownership,¹²⁶ and increased levels of perceived and actual community safety.¹²⁷ A Department of Justice report on the Chicago Police Department concludes, “trust and effectiveness in combating violent crime are inextricably intertwined.”

There is also evidence from around the world that strengthening police-community relations can create more peaceful communities, even in contexts with higher levels of tension, conflict, and/or violence.¹²⁸ In these contexts, community members and police often have a shared interest in reducing violence and building peace at a local level.¹²⁹

In regard to how to improve police-community relations, there are useful reports documenting lessons learned and providing recommendations for best practices.¹³⁰ There is less research rigorously assessing the most effective strategies to improve police-community relations. One systematic review did find support for police-led, procedural-justice strategies as a means to improving perceptions of police legitimacy.¹³¹ The current evidence base will need to be strengthened and updated to account for the current Black Lives Matter protests, which have shifted views on police and police-community relations.

Takeaways

- Strengthening police-community relations is an effective strategy for violence reduction. There are hard-won lessons from practitioners on how to improve police-community relations, but additional research is needed to draw more general conclusions about the most effective strategies.
- The current Black Lives Matter protests, along with calls to defund or abolish the police, create both opportunities and challenges to fundamentally change the nature of police-community relations in the United States.
- Building trust between police and community members can be an effective strategy, even in contexts with higher levels of conflict and violence.

Moving from Individual Initiatives to Collaborative Approaches

An overarching lesson that emerges from this review is that these initiatives often rely on each other to succeed. Targeted-outreach programs often do not work unless there is a foundation of police-community trust. Intergroup work goes hand-in-hand with efforts to shape norms within groups. Improving police-community relations often relies on protests that hold police and government officials accountable for their commitments. Peace education can shift the enabling environment, but it needs to be combined with targeted outreach strategies to reach individuals most at risk of becoming perpetrators.

In addition, political violence is a complex, multifaceted problem. Communities that set up a single initiative designed to confront one type of violence may find themselves struggling to respond to other kinds of violence not addressed by their effort.

It is thus important to combine individual initiatives into a more comprehensive, collaborative strategy. This is not a novel insight, and, in fact, many communities have created collaborative strategies. Below are four examples:

1. Portland United Against Hate: Portland United Against Hate is a coalition of community-based organizations, neighborhood groups, and municipal entities.¹³² It is independent but receives funding from the City of Portland. Its mission is to “to track, respond to, and prevent acts of hate while providing the support that our communities need.”¹³³

2. Integral Urban Projects, Medellín, Colombia: In the 1990s, Medellín was among the most violent cities in the world. The city launched an initiative based on a concept of social urbanism that promoted social inclusion and citizen empowerment. Core to this strategy were “Integral Urban Projects, a series of individual and tailored neighborhood interventions characterized by multisector participation and a strong information-management system.”¹³⁴ The goal of the projects was to reduce marginalization, as well as opportunities and incentives to participate in crime. The strategy included public, private, and law enforcement actors. The homicide rate in Medellín fell from 400 per 100,000 residents in the 1990s to 27 per 100,000 residents in 2014.¹³⁵

3. Operation Ceasefire, Oakland: Oakland Ceasefire has created a broad-based partnership that includes city government, community members, social service providers, and law enforcement. According to a report on the program:

This group of stakeholders identifies the small number of individuals at highest risk of involvement in serious violence and communicates in person a message that can be summarized as “we care about you and we want to see you alive and free, but we want the shooting to stop.”

Interested participants are then connected with social service providers, while narrowly targeted law enforcement actions are taken against those individuals who continue to engage in violent crime after receiving direct communication.¹³⁶

Oakland Ceasefire is credited with creating a 50 percent drop in homicides in the city.¹³⁷

4. The Aarhus Model: The Aarhus Model is a Danish deradicalization approach named after the city in Denmark where it originated.¹³⁸ The program is a collaboration between social service agencies, the University of Aarhus, government officials, and law enforcement and security service agencies.¹³⁹ The approach has two components. The first is providing a holistic set of social services to individuals referred to the program. This referral can come from any member of the community. Referred individuals can participate in the program or not — it is entirely voluntary. The second component of the program is continuous dialogue with houses of worship — in this instance, mosques — and other key stakeholders in the community to build the foundation of trust on which referrals rely.

These examples are illustrative. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze these efforts in detail, although that should be a task for future research. Here we will just highlight three key takeaways:

1. **When undertaking a collaborative strategy, the evidence on individual initiatives should still be assessed.** Joined-up approaches stand a much better chance creating positive impact, and avoiding harm, if their component parts rest on a strong evidence base. The four initiatives summarized above have a strong commitment to being data driven and using evidence-based approaches.
2. **These strategies rely on investment not only in specific projects but also in the infrastructure of collaboration.** Collaboration takes resources. Without an investment of those resources, collaboration will fail. Specifically, it will fail because of a lack of inclusiveness. Insufficient resources will filter out less privileged participants who don't have access to the resources needed to participate. Thus, an investment in collaboration is both practical and equitable.

The initiatives described here have made a commitment to collaboration. Reverend Dr. George Cummings, co-chair of the Oakland Ceasefire Steering Committee, said, "The single most important thing to the success of the strategy has been the partnership. We've had to fight for it, but the partnership is working. Left alone to OPD [Oakland Police Department], this would never have happened."¹⁴⁰ Similarly, the City of Portland invested in a coalition to fight hate crimes, not a specific organization or a set of specific projects.

3. **Collaborative strategies are, almost by definition, more inclusive.** The examples above involve civil society organizations, houses of worship, universities, and neighborhood groups working alongside law enforcement and government agencies. In Medellín, the strategy created inclusion and participation

down to the neighborhood level, tailoring each intervention to the local context. As discussed above, inclusion plays a crucial role in developing strategies to confront political violence in ways that advance democratic goals. In Aarhus, the city has avoided some of the pitfalls of previous deradicalization programs by focusing intentionally on inclusion and integration into communities, as opposed to an overly securitized, threat-reduction approach.

The last crucial takeaway from these examples is simply that creating smart, inclusive, collaborative strategies to strengthen resilience and address violence, including political violence, is possible. For those seeking to launch new initiatives, or strengthen existing ones, there is much existing inspiration on which to draw.

Inclusion plays a crucial role in developing strategies to confront political violence in ways that advance democratic goals. In Aarhus, the city has avoided some of the pitfalls of previous deradicalization programs by focusing intentionally on **inclusion and integration into communities, as opposed to an overly securitized, threat-reduction approach.**

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NOW. WE CANNOT
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OF VIOLENCE.

**PLEASE
EVERYONE,
STAY SAFE.** ¹⁴¹

— ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ, TWEET, MAY 30.

Conclusion

Representative Ocasio-Cortez is right. The United States cannot descend into the chaos of violence. As this paper has shown, political violence is already creating immense harm, and, if that violence escalates to levels we see in other countries around the world, that harm will grow exponentially. The United States is not immune to this kind of widespread violence. It has occurred regularly in U.S. history.

This paper has also shown that we already have strategies to prevent such violence. Creating and implementing them is difficult, but we have learned a great deal about how to do so. Political violence is a complex problem, and experience has shown there are few shortcuts in confronting it. Experience has also shown, however, that when communities invest and are invested in this work, they are capable of

successfully addressing the threat of political violence and doing so in a way that advances, rather than undermines, core democratic goals. The United States is at a moment that calls for such investment. As we move past the shorter-term risks posed by the 2020 election, we must now invest in building a more inclusive, more democratic, more peaceful society in the longer term.



LEFT: Miami, USA - December 7, 2014: Protesters line the streets calling for justice for Michael Brown and Erica Garner. Credit: Street Muse / iStockPhoto.

Endnotes

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