Control

Controlling Violence[1]

It is often thought that control and prevention are quite distinct actions and that consequently, it is simple to categorize actions under one heading or the other. The real world, however, is more gray than black and white:

- Teaching peaceful conflict resolution skills is frequently considered a preventive action par excellence, but is this really the case when the student has already behaved violently?

- Making it more likely for the police to capture perpetrators of violent crime is usually considered a violence control action, but is this really just control when such an action also serves as a deterrent to other potential criminals?

These two examples demonstrate that all actions designed to reduce violence form part of a continuum that ranges from prevention on one end of the scale to control on the other end (see graph 1).

Graph 1.
Continuum of actions ranging from prevention to control

Prevention ← - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - → Control

primary prevention | secondary prevention | tertiary prevention

Primary prevention actions target the population in general in an attempt to avoid aggressive behavior; secondary prevention focuses on high-risk groups, and tertiary prevention, on individuals who have committed violent behavior or have been victims of violence in the past. Control actions, such as making it more likely for violent criminals to be caught or making the sentences of individuals convicted of violent crimes harsher, in principle, also deter violent behavior, although as will be seen later in this note, the deterrent effect is generally quite weak (also see Technical Note 5).

The Most Promising Control and Treatment Options

In this section a few of the most promising violence control and treatment actions are broken down by sector.

Police Action

In reviewing the hundreds of studies on the effectiveness of anti-crime measures taken by police forces in the U.S., Sherman (1999) concluded that some measures *have not had much of an effect* on crime. These measures include:

- ► *More rapid response to telephone calls.* A study showed that, in order to increase the likelihood of

capture, police must arrive in the scene of the crime no longer than three minutes after the criminal act is committed. It has been documented—at least in the U.S.—that victims take an average of a half an hour to report crimes to the authorities. Therefore, speeding police arrival to the scene of a crime by a few minutes will not have much of an impact (Sherman, 1999).

► *Random patrolling.* This measure is implemented in order to give the impression of police "omnipresence." Increasing the number of random police patrols, however, has not shown much of an impact on crime rates. This may be because additional police patrolling goes unnoticed by potential criminals in large cities with low crime density (Felson, 1994).

► *Increasing the number of reactive arrests* (in response to reported or observed crimes, as opposed to concentrating efforts and resources on people who run a high risk of committing crimes or on specific high crime areas, a particular type of offense or a specific time of day when many crimes are committed). Increasing the likelihood of arrest, particularly among juvenile offenders, does not usually reduce the rate of recidivism, but rather increases it. There is mixed evidence for cases of domestic violence with regard to the effectiveness of increasing the number of reactive arrests.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that certain well-defined strategies *have been successful* at reducing violent crime in the United States (Sherman, 1999). These include:

► Increased patrols targeting high density crime areas and at certain times of day or night

► Problem-oriented policing, i.e., a police force that identifies and responds to the root causes of crime

► Community policing

As for Latin America, there is evidence from Costa Rica that implementation of community policing has had a positive impact, especially with regard to perceptions of insecurity and police image. The evidence is less conclusive as to whether community policing has been effective in lowering crime rates (see Table 1). No quantitative studies on the impact of reform in police organizational structure have yet been conducted for Latin American or the Caribbean countries.

Another way of promoting police- community ties is to create neighborhood consultative committees in order to formalize the consultation process of the police with

Table 1.
Impact of Community Policing in Hatillo, Costa Rica

In Hatillo, a survey was conducted of residents before the program was implemented and one year later.

According to the survey, the *perception of a lack of public safety* dropped significantly:

	Before	After
— The main problem in Hatillo is assaults	45%	44%
— Crime has increased over the past six months	65%	38%
— I feel unsafe, even at home	36%	19%
— I am afraid of being robbed in my own house	54%	22%
— I feel unsafe when I walk through my neighborhood during the day	28%	12%
— I avoid going out at night because I feel unsafe	53%	23%

*Percentage of people surveyed that strongly agreed

Police image improved notably:

	Before	After
— They are efficient	47%	27%
— They are honest	39%	22%
— They are disciplined	42%	18%
— They are well trained	46%	20%
— They inspire confidence	49%	29%
— They treat you well	37%	16%

*Percentage that responded negatively

Nevertheless, the *victimization rates* did not change much:

	Before	After
— Robbery at home	13%	14%
— Armed assault on the street	5%	2%
— Unarmed assault on the street	9%	8%
— Automobile theft or vandalism	4%	5%
— Motorbike or bicycle theft	3%	6%

In short, implementing a community-policing model has had an impact on the perceptions of levels of public safety and on the image of police, but seems to not have had an impact on the likelihood of becoming a victim of crime.

Source: Chinchilla Miranda, 1998

the community. For these committees to produce the desired result—greater confidence of the public in the police and a reduction in crime—the police must be responsive to the crime-fighting priorities recommended by the community.

Any attempt at improving community-police relations must address the high degree of public distrust in the police (see Table 2) and, in order to address this problem, there is a pressing need to train and professionalize police forces and establish or strengthen internal and external monitoring mechanisms of police behavior.

Table 2.
Distrust of Police Forces

A survey conducted in Buenos Aires showed that:

► 19.3% of the population fears the police more than criminals. Among teenagers, this figure was 37%.

► 7% of the general population and 15% of all teenagers who were polled stated that they had been victims of abuse of police authority during the last 12 months.

► 26% of the general population feels that the armed forces, retired police officers and police officers on active duty are some of the most frequent criminal offenders (Smulovitz, 1999).

Results from studies conducted in other countries confirm that there is widespread concern regarding this issue in many other countries of the region:

► In a survey carried out in 1995 in El Salvador, 22% of the respondents stated that the National Civilian Police never respect their rights and 33% feel that the police "sometimes" respect their rights (Stanley, 1996).

► A survey conducted of family members of victims of homicide in Caracas showed that 75% of the respondents were very mistrustful of the police and 44% claimed to have evidence of police involvement in murders (Sanjuán, 1998).

Legislative Actions

There are five main methods for reducing crime rates and the incidence of violence through legislation: increasing the likelihood of landing in jail for committing a crime or making sentences harsher; imposing curfews; restricting the sale of alcohol at certain times and on certain days; making it illegal to carry guns; and making domestic violence a crime.

► **Greater Likelihood of Going to Jail and Serving Longer Prison Terms**

According to the economic model of criminal behavior, a would-be offender calculates the expected benefits and costs of committing a crime before deciding whether he or she will proceed to commit the act. The expected cost is defined as the product of the probability of being caught by the police, the probability of being prosecuted and convicted of the crime, and the monetary and psychological cost of serving a prison sentence. Therefore, according to this model, an increase in the likelihood of being put into jail or receiving a harsher sentence makes the expected costs of committing a crime higher. In addition to these deterrents, criminals also think twice about committing a crime because landing in jail will usually render them inactive: imprisoned convicts, in most cases, cannot continue to commit crimes.

The preceding explanation, of course, operates on a purely theoretical level. In practical terms, the impact of an increase in the likelihood of conviction and of receiving a more severe or longer sentence must be empirically estimated. No such estimates exist for countries of the region, so only data for the United States are reported here:

● An increase in the average length of a jail sentence has been associated with a decrease in robberies. If the entire prison population of the United States were released at one time, robberies would increase by 10 to 30%. Such estimates, however, are not very precise because they are very sensitive to assumptions regarding the number of crimes committed by each individual, the length of a criminal career, and probability of arrest and conviction (Donohue and Siegelman, 1998).

● A 10% increase in the prison population yields a 4% decrease in violent crimes and a 3% decrease in crimes against property (Levitt, 1995).

The interesting question is not whether an increase in the likelihood of conviction or the length of sentence reduces crime, but rather if these measures are the most cost-efficient way of doing it.

Imposing longer jail sentences and increasing the likelihood of conviction makes it necessary to take the very costly measure of building more prisons and maintaining them. In Chile, for example, the annual expenditure per inmate comes to around $4,000 U.S. dollars, without including fixed construction costs of prisons (Mertz and Reyes, 1999). The important figure, however, is not absolute costs but rather the cost benefit/relationship of building new prisons to other options, such as prevention and treatment.

The most extreme example of the tougher sentence strategy is the "three strikes and you're out" law in the state of California (U.S.): if a person already has been convicted twice of a felony, the punishment for a third

conviction is a mandatory life sentence. A Rand Corporation study (Greenwood et al., 1998) showed that the cost per crime prevented by this law is higher than the cost per crime prevented by three prevention programs (see Table 3).

► Curfews for Teenagers

Many cities have imposed curfews for residents under 18 years of age. In the U.S., this measure has resulted in a 10 to 27 per cent reduction in crime during curfew hours. One disadvantage of curfews, at least in the U.S., is that the incidence of juvenile delinquency is much higher during the afternoon than during the hours covered by the curfew (Kellerman et al., 1998).

► Restrictions on the Sale of Alcoholic Beverages

Alcohol and violence are linked by:

- The pharmacological effects that alcohol has on behavior. In more than 50% of crimes committed in the United States, the victim or the aggressor was under the effects of alcohol.
- The expectation that drinking a lot of alcohol and carrying out violent actions go hand in hand in certain situations (Roth, 1994).

Interesting efforts to control alcohol abuse and associated violence have been made in the region. One of the first experiences took place in Cali, Colombia, where the mayor's office enacted a "dry law" (ley semi-seca) that prohibits the sale of alcohol in stores after 1:00 AM on weekdays and after 2:00 AM the night before holidays. This measure was the result of research showing that most homicides in Cali occurred over the weekend, at nighttime and during public celebrations that are closely associated with alcohol consumption. According to the Mayor of Cali at the time, the immediate impact of the measure was significant, especially in hospitals, where it resulted in a consider-able drop in the number of people seen for injuries from traffic accidents and violence (Guerrero, 1996).

Table 3.
Life Sentences versus Prevention Options: The Case of California

The Rand Corporation Study compared the costs and benefits of five possible options for reducing crime rates in the state of California, U.S. The five options were:

- Home visits by childcare professionals, beginning at pregnancy and continuing throughout the early years of life of the infant. The purpose of visits is to teach prenatal care and childcare skills in order to avoid episodes of neglect or abuse.
- Parenting classes for parents of children who exhibited violent behavior.
- Monetary incentives for teenagers belonging to disadvantaged groups to successfully graduate from high school.
- Monitoring and supervising 14 to 18 year old teenagers who have a history of delinquency.
- "Three strikes and you're out" legislation. This California law requires that a person who has two prior felony convictions, when convicted for a third time, serve a mandatory life sentence. It also requires that the sentence for a second felony conviction be twice as long as the sentence normally given for the crime in question.

It is well-known that many crimes are committed by repeat offenders. Consequently, it has been estimated that implementation of the "three strikes and you're out" law would result in a 28% reduction of serious crimes committed by adults.

Nevertheless, when the authors of the Rand study calculated the number of crimes prevented for every million dollars spent, the "three strikes and you're out" law came in fourth place among the five options in terms of efficiency.

In conclusion, "three strikes and you're out" legislation has proven to be much less cost-effective in reducing crime than actions such as incentives for teenagers to finish high school or providing parenting classes (also see graph 1 of Note 5).

▶ **Gun Control**

In some countries of the region it is easy to obtain a permit to carry firearms. Given that most homicides are perpetrated with firearms, reducing the number of guns on the street can be a useful tool for reducing the homicide rate. In Cali, Colombia, the Mayor's Office was granted permission from the national authorities to invalidate licenses to carry a weapon when, in the judgement of the mayor, such an action was necessary. Cali also implemented an ordinance that prohibited the entire civilian population from carrying firearms on certain weekends (for example, when a weekend followed pay day for workers). According to a statistical analysis, the measure has contributed to a reduction in Cali's homicide rates (Guerrero, 1996).

▶ **Making Domestic Violence a Crime**

For discussion on this issue, see Technical Note 7: Domestic Violence.

Actions in the Prison System

The prison system could have an impact on criminal behavior in the short run (the impact of the inability of inmates to commit crimes from jail, as was mentioned previously in this note) and, in the long run (through successful rehabilitation of inmates).

▶ **Inability to Commit Crime from Jail**

As was discussed in the previous section, an increase in the prison population has been associated with a reduction in crime on the streets; nevertheless, this strategy yields diminishing returns. Almost every study assumes that the relationship between crime rate fluctuations and prison population is constant; in other words, in order to reduce violent crime by 4%, the prison population must be increased by 10% (according to Levitt's estimates). It must be pointed out, however, that the larger population when the policy is first implemented, the larger an increase is needed (in absolute terms) to achieve that 4% drop in violent crime. Consequently, the strategy of putting more people in jail in order to reduce the crime rate becomes less and less cost effective as the total prison population increases in absolute terms.

▶ **Rehabilitation Programs**

There appears to be a wide gap between theory and practice in the region with regard to the rehabilitation of criminals. Studies conducted in industrialized nations have showed that rehabilitation programs can have a significant impact on the recidivism rate. This does not mean that all rehabilitation programs have a positive effect, but rather that those programs that have certain characteristics have proven to be successful. Characteristics of successful criminal rehabilitation programs include:

- Focus on modifying traits linked to criminal behavior (attitudes, education, peer groups, substance abuse, etc.)
- Delivery of services by qualified professionals
- Significant contact with the offenders over time
- Teaching methods and styles tailored to the inmates' skill levels and learning styles (MacKenzie, 1999)

Nevertheless, it would be naïve to think that rehabilitation programs have much of a chance for success in most prison systems of the region if prison overcrowding is not addressed and if the resources required to implement such programs are not allocated.

Actions in the Health Sector

The most obvious contribution that the healthcare sector can make to deal with the problem of violence is providing services to treat the physical or psychological secuelae of violence. Because domestic violence against women and children is so prevalent in the countries of the region, offering services to all those who have suffered from violence may entail significant expenditures. (For a detailed discussion on the costs of violence, see Note 4.)

Hospitals and healthcare centers can also provide services that fall under the label of tertiary prevention, that is, keeping victims of violence from being victimized again. Very few examples of this type of program have been implemented in any part of the world, but it is a promising approach.

Control of Two Important Risk Factors: Drugs and Youth Gangs

Drugs

The link between drugs and violence is not entirely due to the pharmocological effects of drugs on human behavior, but also to conflicts generated by the sale of drugs: disputes between cartels or dealers, conflicts between purchasers and sellers, and violent crimes committed in order to collect payment for the purchase of drugs (Roth, 1994).

A debate on the most appropriate strategies to confront the problems of drug use and production is beyond the scope of this note. The fact that most violence is not the product of pharmocolgical effects of drugs, however, has major implications: control of drug-related violence should go far beyond focusing on rehabilitation of drug users and, instead, emphasize prevention of drug use in order to bring about a reduction in the demand for narcotics.

Gangs

The data is conclusive: teenage members of gangs are more prone to commit crimes than teenagers from the same communities with similar characteristics who do not belong to a gang (see table).

What, then, is the best way to reduce gang-related violence? According to experts, there are three options to deal with the phenomenon of gangs:

Table 4.

Comparison of criminal behavior of teenage gang members and at-risk non gang member teens: Cleveland, Ohio (U.S.)

Crime	Gang	members At-Risk Youth*
Assaults on rivals	72.3%	16.3%
Assaults on third parties	29.8	10.2
Homicide	15.2	0.0
Carrying weapons in school	40.4	10.2
Sale of drugs (outside school)	61.7	16.7
Kidnapping	4.3	0.0

*At risk of joining a gang, but not yet members
With the exception of the percentages for the crime of kidnapping, there are significant statistical differences between the percentages of crimes committed by teenage gang members and at-risk non gang members.

Source: Huff, 1998.

▶ ***Trying to keep at-risk teenagers from joining a gang.*** This option involves "anti-gang" education programs in school or training courses for parents of at-risk kids. Very little evidence exists to confirm the effectiveness of these programs and, therefore, high priority must be assigned to conducting evaluations of these types of programs (Tolan and Guerra, 1998).

▶ ***Using law enforcement to dismantle gangs.*** Effective suppression of gangs requires intelligence gathering on gangs and their members, specialized training of police officers on gang-related issues, and initiating and maintaining an on-going dialogue between the police and gang members (Spergel et al, 1994). In light of the hostile climate that currently reigns between police and gangs in the region and the risks of committing violations of human rights inherent in a policy of dismantling a group, only a highly trained, professional police force with a strong democratic culture would be capable of undertaking such a campaign without committing human rights violations.

▶ ***Implementing programs to weaken ties between individual members and the gang.*** These types of programs include basic skills training, preparation for the labor market, and employment placement services.

There is also a fourth option that can at least have a short-term effect in alleviating gang violence: promoting peace agreements and peaceful coexistence contracts between different gangs and between gangs and communities. An interesting example of such agreements can be found in Medellin, Colombia. A municipal government office, the Advisory Office on Peace and Coexistence (*Asesoría de Paz y Convivencia*) brokered the signing of 27 non aggression and peaceful coexistence contracts in 1998 (Asesoría de Paz y Convivencia, 1999). The methodology employed consists of three stages:

1. Pre-negotiation: contact, preliminary talks, preliminary proposals, etc.

2. Formalization of the process of dialogue: composition of negotiating teams, structure of negotiations, and initiation of talks

3. Process of dialogue and negotiation: negotiation agenda, cessation of criminal activity, turning in weapons, etc.

The right to life and the freedom to travel freely within and between neighborhoods take precedent over

anything else. Additionally, the community and various civil society organizations become involved both before and after the signing of the contract, in order to promote the integration of gang members into the community (Asesoría de Paz y Convivencia, n/d).

For more information

Visit the Justice Information Center Web Page at the following address: http://www.ncjrs.org/

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