

Authors

Christopher Blattman
The University of Chicago

Julian Jamison
University of Exeter

Margaret Sheridan
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Ana Tamayo Alariste
Senior Manager, Global Communications

Anna Mysliwicz
Senior Research Associate

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as a Cost-Effective Tool for Sustained Violence Reduction
10-Year Follow-Up Evaluation of the Sustainable Transformation of Youth program in Liberia

Uban crime and violence are among the most costly and divisive issues facing cities around the world. Policymakers and donors seek effective ways to reduce crime and violence, particularly among young men at high-risk of becoming involved in violence. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a method for mitigating self-destructive beliefs and behaviors, and promoting positive ones by helping people become aware of harmful thoughts and patterns, and guiding them to think and react differently. A growing body of evidence suggests that CBT is an effective crime and violence reduction strategy.

In Liberia, an 8-week CBT program paired with cash transfers, called the Sustainable Transformation for Youth in Liberia (STYL) program, successfully reduced criminal, violent, and other antisocial behaviors over a ten-year period. The STYL program, developed by the local community organization Network for Employment & Progressive Initiative (NEPI), involved therapy led by informed street youth and ex-combatants. The program was low-cost, with a budget of \$30 US per participant for CBT, cash, and administration.

Results after ten years
The 10-year follow-up evaluation—the first long-run randomized study of a CBT-informed program—found that the large short-term reductions in crime and violence persisted nearly ten years after the program concluded.

- Men offered both CBT and economic assistance reported large and sustained falls in criminal, violent, and other antisocial behavior immediately after and 10 years after participating in the program. The positive effects were slightly smaller and less precise when therapy was delivered alone, without cash.
- Men offered CBT and cash were much less likely to commit thefts and robberies. In the long run, those in the therapy group reported 67 percent fewer crimes compared to men in the comparison group, while those who participated in STYL reported a 57 percent decrease in crimes committed. Extrapolating this equates to roughly 268 fewer crimes per subject over 10 years—\$1.50 per crime avoided, given the low program cost.
- Men offered CBT and cash reported being less likely to sell drugs. Though members of the group that did not participate in the program also reported lower rates of drug selling, those that participated in STYL were 46 percent less likely to sell drugs after nearly ten years relative to the comparison group.
- The highest-risk men seem to be driving the sustained decline in antisocial behavior. Even though the program targeted high-risk young men, those who reported the largest declines in thefts, robberies, drug selling, and other antisocial behavior were those who reported the highest initial levels of crime and violence—implying higher than-anticipated returns to targeting the most criminal and violent young men.
- Cash itself did not lead to sustained changes in economic performance. While no agents involved in small businesses, most of those that failed one year after the grant, and there were no signs of improved economic performance after one or ten years—whether or not they received CBT. To the extent cash coupled with therapy improved antisocial behaviors, it is probably because it led to more sustained positive and behavior change.

RESEARCHERS
Christopher Blattman (University of Chicago), Sebastian Cheloni (University of Exeter), Margaret Sheridan (University of North Carolina)

PARTNERS
Network for Employment and Progressive Initiative (NEPI)

COUNTRY
Liberia

TIMELINE
2015-2021

SAMPLE
100-150 young men

TOPICS
Crime, Violence, Peace and Recovery, Psychology, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Cash Transfers

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as a Cost-Effective Tool for Sustained Violence Reduction

In Liberia, an 8-week CBT program paired with cash transfers, called **the Sustainable Transformation for Youth in Liberia (STYL) program**, successfully reduced criminal,

violent, and other antisocial behaviors over a ten-year period. The STYL program, developed by the local community organization Network for Empowerment & Progressive Initiative (NEPI), involved therapy led by reformed street youth and ex-combatants. The program was low-cost, with a budget of \$530 US per participant for CBT, cash, and administration.

This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

June 06, 2022