

# New Evidence on Crime and Violence:

## Insights from Low- and Middle-Income Countries

Many countries continue to face high levels of crime and violence, particularly in areas with limited state presence and access to justice. While Latin America and the Caribbean are especially affected, similar challenges exist across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in Asia and Africa. However, rigorous evidence on how to effectively reduce violence in these settings remains limited, as most studies have focused on high-income countries and often show only modest results, leaving policymakers with few proven strategies to strengthen citizen security.

Through our work in LMICs across Latin America, Asia, and Africa, IPA has partnered with governments, civil society organizations, and researchers to design, test, and scale innovative strategies to reduce crime and

violence. These collaborations have contributed to a growing body of rigorous evidence on how to improve citizen security in diverse settings. Our experience shows that addressing the root causes of crime and violence involves building long-term partnerships that support locally grounded, evidence-informed solutions.

**This brief highlights completed and ongoing evaluations supported and/or implemented by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) on interventions to reduce violence through both direct pathways such as policing, and indirect pathways such as strengthening health systems, preventing gender-based violence, and shifting public attitudes toward victims.**

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## Expanding the Evidence Base on Crime and Violence Reduction

Since 2019, with support from the Open Society Foundations' Latin America Program, IPA's Peace & Recovery Program has funded some of the first rigorous studies on homicide reduction in Latin America and the Caribbean. Building on this work, the Citizen Security Research Initiative (CSRI) is Peace & Recovery's new effort to advance evidence on justice, civilian security, and strategies to reduce crime and violence.

Learn more at [poverty-action.org/peace](https://poverty-action.org/peace) and [poverty-action.org/citizen-security-research-initiative](https://poverty-action.org/citizen-security-research-initiative).

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## Summary

- This brief highlights evidence on how to reduce crime and violence through both direct pathways such as policing, and indirect pathways such as strengthening health systems, preventing gender-based violence, and shifting public attitudes toward victims.
- Not all policing strategies are equally effective. Interventions that emphasize accountability, deterrence, and professionalization—such as focused patrols, body-worn cameras, and procedural justice training—have shown promising results in reducing crime and improving police behavior. In contrast, traditional community policing often falls short in low-trust, high-crime settings without broader institutional support.
- Criminal governance can persist—even alongside stronger policing. Evidence shows that gangs strategically adapt and expand control. Effective strategies must disrupt illicit economies, recruitment pipelines, and reinforce civilian trust in formal institutions.
- Interventions outside traditional security—like improving trauma care, providing mental health support, and preventing gender-based violence—can play a role in preventing violence and reducing harm. Programs that shift public attitudes and address the root causes of violence, including stigma and harmful norms, offer valuable complements to enforcement efforts.
- Isolated interventions rarely succeed on their own. Sustainable impact requires political will, coordination across institutions, and solutions tailored to local capacity and needs. Programs aligned with existing infrastructure and responsive to community dynamics tend to be more effective.
- While these findings are promising, significant gaps remain. IPA, through its Peace & Recovery program and its new Citizen Security Research Initiative, is committed to advancing research to close these gaps and support decision-makers in responding more effectively to the most urgent security challenges in LMICs.

# Evidence in Reducing Crime and Violence

## 1. Policing

### Improving Security through Concentrated Policing and Municipal Services in Bogotá, Colombia

- **Researchers:** Christopher Blattman, Daniel Ortega, Donald Green, and Santiago Tobón
- **Timeline:** 2016
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study Type:** Randomized Evaluation
- **Country:** Colombia

Police forces in cities tend to focus their efforts on the highest-crime areas, but increasing state presence in the highest crime spots may simply displace crime to other areas, leaving overall crime levels unchanged. In Bogotá, researchers partnered with the city government to measure whether increasing police patrols and municipal services—like fixing lights and removing graffiti—in high-crime areas could reduce crime and prevent displacement. The evaluation found that the two approaches reduced crime on targeted streets when implemented together, but not when implemented alone. While most crime, particularly property crime, appears to have shifted to nearby streets, there is suggestive evidence that violent crimes, especially homicides and rapes, decreased citywide due to the intervention.

Read more [here](#) »

### The Impact of Community Policing on Attitudes and Public Safety in the Philippines

- **Researchers:** Dotan Haim, Matthew Nanes, and Nico Ravanilla Timeline: 2017-2018
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study Type:** Randomized Evaluation
- **Country:** Philippines

When trust in government is low, delivering essential public services becomes more difficult. Community policing, which promotes collaboration between citizens and law enforcement, is seen as a way to build

trust and strengthen policing where state legitimacy is weak. A study in the Philippines tested this in villages in Sorsogon Province. Police engaged with citizens to share crime-reduction efforts and promote a crime-reporting SMS hotline. Local safety teams were created to address issues with small budgets, and some villages received extra oversight to improve accountability. Despite these efforts, the program did not improve crime rates, safety perceptions, trust, or citizen cooperation. Similar findings from Brazil, Colombia, and Uganda suggest that, in areas with low trust and weak institutions, broader structural issues may limit community policing's effectiveness.

Read more [here](#) »



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### The Effects of Procedural Justice Training for Police Officers in Mexico City

- **Researchers:** Rodrigo Canales, Alexis Cherem Maum, Marina González, and Juan Francisco Santini
- **Timeline:** 2017-2018
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study Type:** Randomized Evaluation
- **Country:** Mexico

Mistrust in police can weaken law enforcement, but research shows that fair, respectful interactions help build trust and legitimacy. A study in Mexico City, with the Ministry of Public Security, tested whether training officers in procedural justice—through a three-day course and follow-up reminders focused on respect, neutrality, trustworthiness, and giving citizens a voice—could improve police-community relations. The training improved officers' perceptions of fairness and their behavior with citizens, especially for those with pro-social attitudes and those whose commanders also received training. However, improvements were less evident for officers patrolling high-crime areas.



These findings suggest procedural justice training can strengthen police-community relations, but officers in tougher settings may need more support or time for training to result in meaningful behavioral change. Although the study did not directly measure impacts on crime, the training promoted more respectful and fair officer behavior, which can reduce conflict, build community trust, and ultimately support crime prevention.

Read more [here »](#)

## The Impact of Community Policing on Citizen Trust, Police Performance, and Crime in Uganda

- **Researchers:** Robert Blair, Guy Grossman, and Anna Wilke
- **Timeline:** 2018-2019
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study Type:** Randomized Evaluation
- **Country:** Uganda

In many countries, distrust of the police discourages citizens from seeking help. Community policing aims to build trust and enhance safety through respectful interactions. In this study, researchers partnered with the Uganda Police Force and local NGO YIDO to test whether community policing could improve public trust and perceptions of safety. The program included town hall meetings to educate citizens and address concerns, door-to-door visits to build trust through direct contact (though these were rare), and Community Watch Teams to monitor crime and liaise with police. The program increased police-community interactions and citizen knowledge of the justice system, but had little effect on crime or trust. Unofficial payments to officers increased, possibly due to more frequent contact. Similar patterns in other countries suggest that deeper structural and governance challenges limit community policing's impact in low-trust settings.

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## The Effects of Focused Deterrence: Implementing Ceasefire in Mexico City

- **Researchers:** Rodrigo Canales, Marina González, and Vaughn Crandall
- **Timeline:** 2019-TBD
- **Status:** In Progress
- **Study Type:** Randomized Evaluation (Pilot)
- **Country:** Mexico

Focused deterrence targets the individuals or groups most responsible for violence by combining enforcement, community engagement, and support to change behavior and reduce crime. First introduced in Boston in 1996 as Operation Ceasefire, it has shown promise in many U.S. cities and is now being adapted in Mexico City through the Alto al Fuego initiative. This program integrates focused law enforcement, social services for at-risk individuals, and communication to prevent violence and offer alternatives. The first pilot in Plateros, a high-crime area, has shown encouraging early results, with substantial and sustained reductions in homicides and shootings (as a contained pilot, however, causality cannot yet be firmly established). Strong leadership, inter-institutional coordination, and community involvement have supported progress. However, structural barriers remain. Further research and adjustments are key as the program scales citywide.

Read more [here »](#)

## The Impact of a Military Policing Program in Cali, Colombia

- **Researchers:** Robert Blair and Michael Weintraub
- **Timeline:** 2019-2021
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study Type:** Randomized Evaluation
- **Country:** Colombia

In many Latin American cities, governments deploy armed forces to reduce high homicide rates. Supporters argue militarized policing helps control violence and paves the way for social programs, while critics warn of human rights abuses and worsening insecurity. A randomized evaluation of Plan Fortaleza in Cali, Colombia, tested this approach by sending intensive army patrols into high-crime neighborhoods to deter violence. The intervention did not reduce crime during implementation and was followed by higher crime rates. Residents did not feel safer, and some evidence suggests that reports of human rights abuses by police increased. A companion study found that, despite

these adverse outcomes, support for the military's role in policing increased. Approval also rose for anti-democratic responses to crime, such as extrajudicial punishment and military coups, highlighting the risk of eroding citizen's democratic values.

**Read more [here](#) »**

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### **Do body-worn cameras affect police behavior and citizens' perception? Evidence from a RCT in São Paulo**

- **Researchers:** Joana Monteiro, Leandro Piquet, Eduardo Fagundes, and Pedro Souza
- **Timeline:** 2021-2022
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study Type:** Quasi-experimental Evaluation
- **Country:** Brazil

Public concern about police brutality, especially in low-income areas, has grown with the spread of viral videos on social media. In response, police forces have introduced body-worn cameras (BWCs) to promote accountability and reduce excessive force. While BWCs have shown success in safer, wealthier areas, their impact in high-crime cities has been less studied. This evaluation tested BWCs among São Paulo police officers to improve transparency and public trust. Results showed reductions in police-caused fatalities and injuries, better compliance with protocols, and more reporting of domestic violence, suggesting improved accountability. Scaling BWCs in violent areas requires overcoming challenges like leadership changes, limited resources, and weak oversight. Political backing, training, and protocol adherence are key for long-term success.

**Read more [here](#) »**

### **Thinking Twice: Does Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Influence Police Officer Behavior? Experimental Evidence from Mexico City Police**

- **Researchers:** Rodrigo Canales, Juan Santini, and Emma Seppala
- **Timeline:** 2021-2023
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study Type:** Randomized Evaluation (Pilot)
- **Country:** Mexico

Police officers often face high levels of stress and trauma, which can impact their mental health, job performance, and interactions with the public. To address this, researchers partnered with IPA Mexico and the Ministry of Citizen Security to test two mental health programs. One focused on reducing anxiety through CBT-informed habit changes, while the other used breathing and meditation techniques to help officers manage stress. Officers responded positively, especially valuing tools like breathing exercises for both work and home life. However, surveys revealed an increase in reported depression, possibly due to greater self-awareness. Logistical challenges included high absenteeism and concerns about being evaluated. Despite these issues, the pilot highlighted the need for mental health support. A larger trial is underway.

**Read more [here](#) »**

### **Militarized, Motorized Patrols to Reduce Homicides and Other Violent Crimes in Ceará, Brazil**

- **Researchers:** Joana Monteiro, Michael Weintraub, and André Mancha
- **Timeline:** 2023-2024
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study Type:** Quasi-experimental evaluation(Pilot)
- **Country:** Brazil

Militarized policing, which uses highly trained officers and military-style tactics, is often implemented in high-crime areas to combat violence. This study evaluated the Rondas e Ações Intensivas e Ostensivas (RAIO) program in Ceará, Brazil, which deployed motorcycle-based patrols in violent neighborhoods. RAIO officers received rigorous training, better pay, and improved working conditions. The results were promising, showing significant reductions in homicides and robberies. These effects were driven by deterrence through

visible patrols and rapid response, rather than increased arrests. Surveys in Fortaleza, the state capital, indicated that residents viewed RAIO officers as more effective, professional, and less corrupt than regular military police. While RAIO's success offers lessons for other cities, replicating it requires major investment and depends on local institutional capacity and police-community relationships.

**Read more [here](#) »**

## 2. Organized Crime

### The Impacts of Intensive Municipal Governance and Community Organization on Gang Governance in Medellín, Colombia

- **Researchers:** Christopher Blattman, Gustavo Duncan, Benjamin Lessing, and Santiago Tobón
- **Timeline:** 2018-2021
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study type:** Randomized Evaluation
- **Country:** Colombia

Urban armed groups, like criminal gangs, are a growing threat to peace and economic growth in cities around the world. These groups often exercise state-like powers by enforcing contracts, policing, and taxing local businesses. In partnership with the City of Medellín and community officials, researchers implemented a co-designed program of intensified government outreach and service delivery to assess whether stronger municipal governance could reduce gang influence. The study found no evidence of a decline in gang rule. Additional quasi-experimental analysis suggests gangs respond strategically to state presence by reinforcing their control. This challenges the idea that crime thrives only where the state is absent, and highlights how criminal governance is often embedded within and shaped by state power.

**Read more [here](#) »**

### Gang Rule: Understanding and Countering Criminal Governance

**Researchers:** Christopher Blattman, Gustavo Duncan, Benjamin Lessing, and Santiago Tobón

**Timeline:** 2018-2021

**Status:** Completed

**Study type:** Randomized Evaluation

**Country:** Colombia

Criminal governance remains a challenge in cities where gangs fill gaps left by weak state institutions. In Medellín, many neighborhoods are jointly governed by the state and gangs, or “combos,” which enforce their own rules. An evaluation based on the city's reorganization into comunas allowed researchers to study how state proximity influences gang behavior. Contrary to the belief that stronger state presence crowds out gangs, researchers found that combos often expand their control in response, especially near profitable drug markets. Neighborhoods closer to new police and service hubs experienced more gang rule, as combos increased governance to avoid police attention. In these areas, residents' trust in both the state and gangs declined due to drug-related disorder. These findings suggest that disrupting illegal economies is key to reducing gang control.

**Read more [here](#) »**

### Understanding How to Reduce Adolescent Recruitment into Gangs: Evidence from Medellín, Colombia

**Researchers:** Christopher Blattman, Arantxa Rodríguez Uribe, and Santiago Tobón

**Timeline:** 2021- TBD

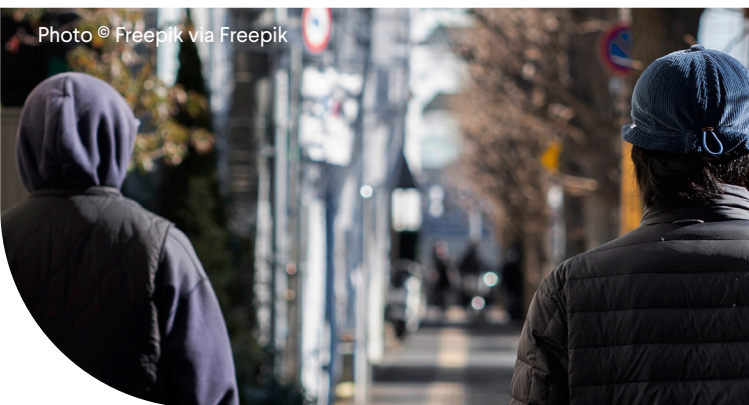
**Status:** In Progress

**Study type:** Randomized Evaluation (Pilot)

**Country:** Colombia

Preventing youth from joining gangs requires understanding why adolescents get involved in the first place. In Medellín, Colombia, gangs often recruit boys as young as 10 using coercion and misinformation. To address this, researchers are piloting a randomized evaluation that tests mentorship, career development, and information sessions on the risks of gang involvement for at-risk adolescents in gang-affected areas. The goal is to offer safer, legal alternatives while correcting false beliefs about gang life. Alongside the interventions, a large-scale survey is being conducted to identify risk factors linked to youth recruitment. By

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combining targeted support with data on adolescent decision-making, this research could inform more effective strategies to prevent gang recruitment in similar contexts.

**Read more [here »](#)**

### **Randomized Impact Evaluation of a CBT-Based Intervention with At-Risk Youth in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil**

- **Researchers:** Juliana Camargo, Eduardo Mello, and Bruno Pantaleão
- **Timeline:** 2024 - TBD
- **Status:** In Progress
- **Study Type:** Randomized Evaluation (Pilot)
- **Country:** Brazil

Violence and homicides are often linked to individuals' difficulty managing aggression and harmful beliefs. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has proven effective in building self-control, which can reduce crime in both the short and long term. In Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, researchers are testing the SEJA Methodology, a school-based program that combines CBT, mindfulness, and socio-emotional learning to support vulnerable adolescents. Delivered during school hours, SEJA helps students develop emotional regulation, empathy, and decision-making skills. It targets those most at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of violence. A randomized evaluation is underway to assess whether SEJA can reduce future violence and be scaled in Brazil and beyond. Though results are not yet available, it offers a promising, low-cost solution.

**Read more [here »](#)**

## **3. Indirect Approaches**

### **Improving Health Services to Prevent Homicides in Colombia**

- **Researchers:** Michael Weintraub, Gina Cabarcas, Juanita Durán, Andrés Rengifo, and Santiago Tobón
- **Timeline:** 2024-TBD
- **Status:** In Progress
- **Study Type:** Quasi-experimental evaluation
- **Country:** Colombia

Reducing homicides in high-violence areas may require more than law enforcement alone. This study examines whether better emergency and trauma care can lower

the chances that an attempted homicide results in death. Using national data from Colombia on hospital admissions, homicide records, and health service capacity and availability, researchers are assessing the life-saving potential of health system improvements. A detailed case study of Cali, one of the world's most violent cities, explores the challenges healthcare workers face when treating trauma in violent contexts. Preliminary findings suggest that hospital quality, patient insurance type, and the location of care facilities all significantly affect survival. Expanding access to trauma services may help prevent deaths from violence, complementing traditional approaches to crime reduction.

**Read more [here »](#)**

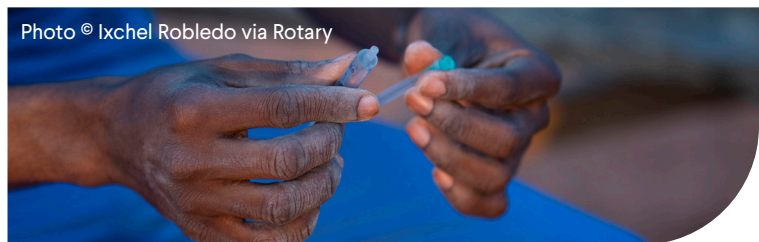
### **Countering Prejudice and Discrimination toward Victims of Criminal Violence: A Field Experiment in Mexico**

- **Researchers:** Natán Skigin
- **Timeline:** 2022-2024
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study Type:** Randomized Evaluation (Pilot)
- **Country:** Mexico

Stigma against victims of violence can fuel cycles of crime and hinder justice. In Mexico, where over 125,000 people have gone missing since the War on Drugs began in 2006, many assume victims were involved with criminal groups, especially young men and women. To challenge these beliefs, researchers tested strategies like screening documentaries, promoting direct contact with victims, and facilitating discussions about violence. Conducted both in-person and online, the study measured changes in prejudice and support for punitive responses. Preliminary results show that some approaches –including the screening of a documentary about forced disappearances and video testimonies from victims' families– reduced stigma and increased empathy, solidarity with victims, and support for accountability, while also boosting punitive attitudes toward perpetrators. These findings highlight the power of public messaging to shift attitudes and support justice in violent settings.

**Read more [here »](#)**

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## Civilian alternatives to policing: Evidence from Medellín's community problem-solving

- **Researchers:** Christopher Blattman, Gustavo Duncan, Benjamin Lessing, and Santiago Tobón
- **Timeline:** 2018-2021
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study type:** Randomized Evaluation
- **Country:** Colombia

As cities seek safer, community-based approaches to crime, Medellín has tested civilian alternatives to traditional policing. Operación Convivencia deployed unarmed liaisons in 80 neighborhoods to help residents resolve disputes, access social services, and connect with local government. In half the neighborhoods, teams worked full-time for 20 months with support from a citywide task force. On average, the program had no clear effect on crime or perceptions of governance, but results varied by context. In areas with existing state presence, it improved legitimacy and reduced crime and emergency calls. In neighborhoods with weaker institutions, the program underperformed and trust declined. These mixed outcomes underscore the importance of aligning interventions with local state capacity and avoiding promises governments cannot fulfill.

Read more [here »](#)

## Training Local Leaders to Prevent and Reduce Intimate Partner Femicide in their Communities: Evidence from Peru

- **Researchers:** Erica Field, Ursula Aldana, Livia Schubiger, and Javier Romero
- **Timeline:** 2018-TBD
- **Status:** In Progress
- **Study Type:** Randomized Evaluation
- **Country:** Peru

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global challenge, and while the evidence base is growing, gaps remain in understanding what works best to prevent it. In Peru, researchers are working with the government to evaluate the Leaders in Action program, which trains local leaders as Community Health Volunteers to shift harmful gender norms, prevent violence, and improve women's health. Villages are randomly assigned to receive the program immediately or later. In participating villages, leaders complete intensive training on gender roles, violence

prevention, and leadership, then lead sessions to build local volunteer networks. Working with Centers for Women, volunteers also design year-long campaigns that include awareness activities, door-to-door outreach, and monitoring GBV cases. A final survey will assess the program's impact on attitudes, violence, and women's mental and physical health.

Read more [here »](#)



## Improving Access to Justice for Internally Displaced Women in Somalia

- **Researchers:** Prabin Khadka and Nicholas Haas
- **Timeline:** 2021-2024
- **Status:** Completed
- **Study Type:** Randomized Evaluation (Pilot)
- **Country:** Somalia

In fragile settings, weak institutions leave women vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV) and without access to justice, leading many to turn to informal militant courts that undermine state authority. To address this, researchers partnered with the Somali Police Force to test whether female police patrols and community engagement could improve trust and reporting among displaced women. A randomized trial in IDP communities compared patrols alone, patrols with awareness leaflets, and patrols with group sessions led by female officers. Preliminary results showed that visible female officers increased demand for policing, encouraged norms favoring GBV reporting, and reduced reported gang violence. However, there was no decline in assault or GBV cases or improved perceptions of police. Still, the approach shows promising insights for improving justice.

Read more [here »](#)



# Where next?

**IPA is seeking to support research that addresses some of the most urgent and complex challenges related to crime, violence, and justice. Based on insights from research and partnerships around the world, we have identified the following research priorities**

- 1. Understanding and preventing participation in violence:** What drives individuals to engage in violence or join armed or criminal groups? Beyond economic motives, more evidence is needed on psychological factors, exclusion, social ties, and access to criminal networks. Research should explore how these incentives influence behavior and how to disrupt them.
- 2. Testing violence prevention strategies:** What kinds of interventions can reduce violence among high-risk individuals and prevent participation later in life? Promising approaches include CBT, social-emotional learning, cash transfers, and norms messaging. Research should identify the most effective combinations and delivery mechanisms, and assess the durability of these effects over time.
- 3. Combating and disengaging armed groups:** How do non-state armed groups operate and recruit? What reduces their appeal and capacity for violence? Research should explore how to cut off recruitment and financing, increase civilian trust in institutions, and incentivize exit at different levels.
- 4. Building trust in state institutions:** How can institutions (formal or informal) build legitimacy and trust in contexts marked by criminal control? What interventions make institutions feel more inclusive and fair, particularly for marginalized groups? Studies might examine the impact of local governance reforms, community engagement, or inclusive service delivery on perceptions of the state and willingness to cooperate with authorities.
- 5. Strengthening security force accountability and capacity:** What tools can help build capable and restrained police or military forces? Research topics include the effects of body-worn cameras, CBT, community accountability systems, or changes in recruitment and training processes. Studies should explore how these interventions shift behaviors and improve citizens' sense of safety.
- 6. Improving justice system effectiveness:** What reforms can make justice systems more effective and increase the cost of committing violence? Key areas include strengthening prosecution, reducing delays and bureaucratic barriers, and addressing judicial corruption. Research can also examine how justice systems can better protect vulnerable groups and ensure accountability for violence.
- 7. Supporting effective reintegration and preventing recidivism:** What works to reintegrate former gang members, or offenders, and reduce reoffending? Studies might explore the long-term effects of psychosocial support, economic programs, or mentorship, and how communities and institutions support safe transitions after violence or incarceration.
- 8. Disrupting criminal governance from within prisons:** How does incarceration affect organized violence? What is the role of prison policies in facilitating or disrupting criminal networks? Research may focus on prison-based governance, prison gangs, and reforms to reduce violence coordinated from within penitentiaries.

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## Acknowledgment:

*This brief builds on a previous version developed by Nessa Kenny and Bárbara Sparrow. We thank them for their contributions.*

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is a research and policy nonprofit that discovers and advances what works to improve the lives of people living in poverty. IPA brings together researchers and decision-makers to design, rigorously evaluate, and refine these solutions and their applications, ensuring that the evidence created is used to improve the lives of people living in poverty.

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