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# CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

V I E W P O I N T P A P E R

*Benefits and Costs of the Conflict and Violence  
Targets for the Post-2015 Development Agenda*

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# Benefits and Costs of the Conflict and Violence Targets for the Post-2015 Development Agenda

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Post-2015 Consensus

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*Cure Violence*

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>ESTIMATES FOR THE COSTS OF VIOLENCE .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>NEW UNDERSTANDING OF VIOLENCE.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>THE OLD APPROACHES TO VIOLENCE .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>SOLUTIONS DO EXIST .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>4</b>

## **Introduction**

The Millennium Development Goals have spurred an important conversation that will have a tremendous impact on the next 15 years of international efforts. We agree with the UN High Level Panel's priority of building peace for all and, specifically, ensuring stable and peaceful societies. Determining the actions and policies that should be supported to bring about these goals is a difficult task, however. This paper uses benefit/cost ratios in an attempt to identify areas that can be prioritized based on the estimated returns on investment.

The exercise of using benefit/cost ratios makes intuitive sense in that it can offer information that will assist in making more effective investments. But as with any benefit/cost analysis, the information is useful only to the extent that it provides an accurate prediction of the costs and benefits. The relative lack of viable estimates for levels of violence, let alone the costs associated with that violence, creates some significant problems. The many recent advancements in understanding violent behavior should also be considered, because they have the potential to fundamentally change how the world addresses violence of all types. With these caveats, this paper uses the available data to draw some conclusions about the areas where investments would be most effective.

Overall, we concur with the authors that violence reduction is crucial to economic and social development. We agree in particular that, given the magnitude and costs associated with interpersonal violence, it should be a particular priority. This analysis provided in the paper is imperfect and likely underestimates the problem, but even this underestimate shows that violence is a huge cost to society and warrants prioritization. Furthermore, investments in preventing violence not only have the potential to reduce violence and the costs associated with violence, but are also a prerequisite for significant progress in poverty, educations, health, and many other areas.

## **Estimates for the Costs of Violence**

As the authors acknowledge, few estimates have been undertaken of the costs of violence outside the United States. Even those estimates for the United States are mostly dated and incomplete. In the absence of other data, the authors' reliance on the McCollister study is understandable, but given that study's focus on the United States, it may not be appropriate. The study says explicitly: "the crime cost estimates may not be generalizable to other countries." While the extrapolation of these costs to other countries is helpful in establishing the exceptionally high costs of violence, it must be stated that they are not accurate and in fact likely underestimate the global costs.

The bigger issue with the estimates is that they are quite conservative in their tally of costs. As the authors note, they omit many of the consequences of violence such as welfare costs associated with fear and behavior modification, effects on economic organization and production, suffering costs for family members and friends, as well

as any costs related to child abuse and intimate partner violence. In addition to these identified costs that were omitted, no costs are supplied for the negative effects that violence has on many other efforts to improve social and economic conditions. For example, investments in education are compromised in schools where violence is prevalent because violence has strong effects on concentration, attendance, performance, and even IQ. Efforts to address chronic health issues in areas with violence are compromised by the negative health effects triggered by violence, including heart disease, asthma, stroke, cancer, and more.

An excellent example of how this narrowed scope misses many crucial costs of violence is the recent immigration crisis in the United States. In less than one year, more than 50,000 children illegally crossed into the United States from various Latin American countries. This crisis is largely seen as and is being addressed as an immigration issue, when in fact the origins are in the violence that ravages the home countries from which the children are fleeing.

## **New Understanding of Violence**

In the last few years, scientific studies have begun to give us a deeper understanding of why people behave violently. These studies have shown that exposure to violence is the primary driver of violent behavior. They have further shown that exposure to any type of violence increases one's risk of perpetrating violence.

The evidence for this relationship between exposure and perpetration has been well documented for child abuse, which has shown that approximately 30% of victims go on to become perpetrators. The same relationship has now been demonstrated for urban violence, suicide, elder abuse, war violence, and many other categories of violence. This connection between exposure and perpetration also occurs across types of violence, so that, for example, exposure to child abuse can increase one's risk of not only child abuse, but also intimate partner violence, urban violence, and suicide (IOM 2013).

The mechanisms for this transmission of violent behavior are also beginning to be understood, thanks to advances in neuroscience, behavioral science, and epidemiology. Generally, studies in these fields show that behaviors are learned unconsciously and reinforced by social norms. Exposure to a behavior increases one's risk of adopting that behavior, and repeated exposures or high-dose exposures increase one's risk even more. With violence exposure, this process is accentuated through the desensitization and hyper-arousal responses that violence can elicit.

These new understandings show that violence acts like an epidemic disease. In fact, violence displays all of the characteristics of epidemics, from how it clusters and spreads to its pathogenesis. Like an epidemic, violence it is not only an outcome but also a risk factor for violence and many other issues. Just as flu creates more flu, violence creates more violence.

The perspective of the current study sees different types of violence as separate and competing areas for investment. With limited resources this perspective is understandable, but the new research shows that all types of violence must be addressed to positively affect any type of violence. Otherwise, a civil war will turn into urban violence; urban violence will turn into child abuse; child abuse will create a climate of violent behavior that could flame into civil war. A community that allows abuse of women will be a society that experiences violence in the community and in war. Or, a country where violence is a real issue will have many types of violence occurring at the same time.

## **The Old Approaches to Violence**

As the authors point out, some existing techniques are effective and should continue to be used. However, replication of effective programs is notoriously difficult. Furthermore, it is not clear that even effective programs would be generalizable other parts of the world. With nearly all of the studies cited occurring in the United States or other parts of the developed world, these programs require developed criminal justice and law enforcement systems in order to be effective.

In many low income, third world countries the law enforcement institutions actually exacerbate the problem of violence. These countries clearly do not have the institutional capacity to implement law enforcement programs effectively. If the benefit/costs ratios assigned to these programs are not generalizable, then they will be of little use in prioritization.

Furthermore, there is the added concern of subsidizing corrupt criminal justice systems that commit violence themselves. Clearly these institutions need to be strengthened, but efforts to address the corruption are difficult. If the groundwork alone for establishing a program is exceedingly difficult, the program promises to be a poor investment.

## **Solutions Do Exist**

The authors concentrate on criminal justice responses and other methods of containment, which certainly need to be one piece of the effort to reduce violence. But in addition to criminal justice approaches, the world would benefit from using the new understanding of violence to undertake a whole new approach to preventing violence.

Since violence acts like an epidemic disease, like epidemic diseases it can be prevented using health-based approaches. These approaches use the same methods that have stopped epidemics like AIDS, cholera, and tuberculosis by concentrating on interrupting transmission, changing behaviors of the highest risk, and changing norms around the use of violence. As with other approaches to stopping epidemics, local workers and organizations are used in order to gain access to the highest risk population so that the behaviors and norms that encourage the spread of violence

can be effectively changed. This use of local workers enables the health approach to be adapted to different cultures and for different types of violence.

Furthermore, health institutions are in an excellent position to prevent violence. First, health workers have a unique opportunity to stop further spread of violence because victims of violence come to hospitals for treatment. Second, health professionals have much experience at changing behaviors – sexual, dietary, exercise-related, and many others. Violence is simply another behavior that can be changed with health methods. Finally, health workers are often highly trusted in the communities. Because health workers do not have the power to arrest, a history of corruption, or a history of involvement in violence, they are in a position in their communities to be able to address violent behavior with the highest risk.

## **Conclusion**

Violence is typically thought of as an outcome, but that view of the problem is incomplete. As the authors state, “In general, peaceful societies are more able to combat poverty and the evidence suggests that more prosperous societies experience less civil war and other types of violence.”

Violence is both an outcome of and a factor in many of the problems that the world faces. The epidemic disease outbreaks around the world happen largely as a result of war violence. The disparities in health outcomes in urban areas can be tied to urban violence. Problems in education are tied to urban violence and child abuse. Over the last 15 years, there has been a greater acknowledgement that violence must be addressed in order to truly address other economic and social development.

Focusing explicitly on interrupting violence before it happens is the one single thing that we can do with the greatest potential for fundamentally changing levels of violence in the world. The presence of violence greatly impedes the world’s ability to address almost all the issues that have traditionally been identified as underlying causes of violence – issues like poverty, poor education, and lack of employment opportunities. If we focus more resources on interrupting and stopping the spread of violence, not only will we have less violence, but we will significantly increase the potential of success for interventions that address all of these underlying causes of violence.

While the current estimates are quite conservative, they still show an enormous cost that violence inflicts on the world - estimated at 1.44 per cent of world GDP for the average country for interpersonal violence and 0.19 per cent of world GDP for collective violence. Right now, a mere 0.27 per cent of total aid spending is devoted to “crime prevention,” with most of this aid going to enhance criminal justice systems in post-conflict countries as part of institution building. Many violent countries have received no aid targeted at reducing violence.

We see a great opportunity to take on violence and make a big impact that will not only affect violence but will have a ripple effect in many other areas. The benefit/cost ratios cited here cannot capture this ripple effect, but even without taking into account the additional positive effects, the benefits of violence prevention easily outweigh the costs. The goals set out by the paper seem ambitious, and clearly they are if we expect a new outcome using the same old approaches. But with new approaches to augment the current approaches, violence can be overcome.



This paper was written by Charles Ransford, Director of Science and Policy at Cure Violence. The project brings together more than 50 top economists, NGOs, international agencies and businesses to identify the goals with the greatest benefit-to-cost ratio for the next set of UN development goals.

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