



The City of Pelotas in Brazil: Example of a Balanced Approach



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“Addressing urban violence is often presented to the public as a choice between tough-on-crime policies directed at violence, or social-prevention policies aimed at its root causes. However, this dichotomy is misleading. . . . Tough-on-crime responses have in many instances proven ineffective and harmful, because they are ‘unfocused, imbalanced and deeply unfair.’¹ However, an appropriate deployment of law enforcement [can] be necessary for most violence-reduction interventions to succeed. Cities have effectively deployed the police through strategies such as focused deterrence, hot-spot policing, and community-oriented policing.”²

Research Team

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Introduction and Overview of the Intervention

The city government of Pelotas (Brazil)—in partnership with *Instituto Cidade Segura* and with support from *Comunitas* and the *Open Society Foundations*—established their flagship public security program *Pacto Pelotas pela Paz* (*Pelotas Pact for Peace* – “the Pact” from here onward) in 2017. Currently, the Pact engages with a wide range of technical cooperation partnerships, including Peace in Our Cities. Based on the two fundamental pillars of evidence-based law enforcement and social services provision, the Pact aims to reduce urban violence and crime, promote a culture of peace, and address risks and vulnerabilities. The Pact contains five operational pillars: (1) prevention, (2) law enforcement and justice, (3) reduction of illicit markets, (4) urbanism, and (5) the use of technology and data (all discussed in more detail below).

Background and Rationale

Between 2000 and 2017, Pelotas’s homicide rate jumped from 6.6 per 100,000 residents to 31.5. A baseline analysis of violence was carried out to understand the true scope of this security challenge and to establish a sound, evidence-based response. The analysis included a victimization survey carried out in 2017 by the *Instituto Pesquisas de Opinião* (IPO) and *Instituto Cidade Segura*. In response to the findings of this diagnostic and a series of extensive consultations involving representatives from public institutions and the community, five main goals were first outlined: the reduction of homicides, street

1 Thomas Abt, *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence—and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 162.

2 Hernán Flom, *Guiding Principles and Inspiring Actions: Operationalizing the Resolution to Reduce Urban Violence* (Peace in Our Cities, 2022), <https://stanleycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Guiding-Principles-Inspiring-Actions-PiOC.pdf>.

3 The authors thank Joana Monteiro and Flavia Carbonari for their review and feedback on this brief.

robberies, vehicle thefts, disturbances of peace, and juvenile vulnerabilities (focused on individuals prior to their 18th birthday). In 2021, additional initiatives started being developed with a stronger focus on prevention, including addressing risk factors among vulnerable groups.

Strategic Vision to Redefine What It Means to Advance Community Safety – *The What*

To reduce violence and promote peace within the city, the Pact redefined the traditional understanding of what public security means. Various participating institutions and sectors agreed on a strategic vision that encompassed a new, context-sensitive conception of public safety, involving:

- **Strong local leadership:** Assuming proactive leadership from local authorities by coordinating various efforts within existing local institutions, preserving their roles and responsibilities, and fostering spaces that strengthen institutional bonds

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for coordinated and more efficient actions. The political leadership of the mayor, combined with technical expertise of the different institutions, provided a clear roadmap and pathways to implement the Pact.

- **Integration of different institutions:** Creating a collaborative environment aimed at strengthening ties between institutions and sectors. The unity around common objectives has been the focus to maintain group cohesion, recognizing that preventing violence is an ongoing and “all-hands-on-deck” effort. This effort has been made possible by creating coordination bodies responsible for the operationalization of the Pact.
- **Multidisciplinarity:** Converging diverse perspectives and maximizing comparative advantages of the different roles and institutional responsibilities around the same objectives strengthens the skills and abilities of the group to address public safety and security challenges.
- **Prevention:** Identifying problems in advance to enable preventive actions, thereby avoiding potential issues (e.g., looming cycles of violence and retaliation) from occurring or escalating.
- **Focused actions:** Processing information, developing diagnoses, and monitoring indicators to help identify pockets of territories requiring systemic interventions. The focus on the highest at-risk territories and groups is considered a priority for

preventive investment.

- **Evidence-based decision making:** Allocating efforts and public resources based on management principles such as the strength of the evidence, cost effectiveness, and efficiency. Thus, the Pact uses high-quality data to design objectives and define actions in a rigorous way. This practice is considered crucial to minimize risks and waste of public resources.
- **Accountability:** Disclosing results to those involved in the process and to society contributes to fostering a culture of transparent feedback that strengthens participation, engagement, and community empowerment.

Intervention Design – *The How*

Building from these fundamental principles, the full Pelotas Pact for Peace strategy has five operational pillars:

1. **Prevention:** Implementing primary and secondary prevention programs for at-risk juveniles, with social services provision informed by public health lessons, such as addressing early risk factors (e.g., school-based interventions to prevent dropouts)⁴, and tertiary prevention efforts for justice-involved individuals. This line of work aims to prevent violence and defend human rights, seeking to minimize risk factors and increase protective factors.
2. **Law enforcement and justice:** Concentrating law enforcement capacities following evidence-informed strategies, such as: (a) focused deterrence, which consists of targeting police and other state efforts toward a small group of violent offenders to disincentivize violent behavior, including through the engagement of leaders of criminal groups to hold them accountable for their violent acts and informing potential perpetrators of the consequences of their actions under the criminal justice system;⁵ (b) improving the qualifications of municipal guards with continued training and internal regulations; (c) focused attention to street segments disproportionately vulnerable to crime; (d) integrated operations between security actors (i.e., state police forces) and municipal agencies (e.g., the municipal guard, traffic office, health department, and city management and inspection department) to reduce outbreaks of violence; and (e) integrated policing plans that include municipal agencies to assess indicators and gauge forthcoming actions.⁶ Although the goal of the first key activity of this line of work—focused deterrence—is to reduce homicides in the short term, the others also aim at preventing robberies and other crimes.
3. **Reducing illicit markets:** Conducting municipal inspections to prevent the commercialization of items and products (particularly used cell phones and vehicles) that originated from criminal activity and that may be used to facilitate additional

4 Michelle Degli Esposti et al., “Effects of the Pelotas (Brazil) Peace Pact on Violence and Crime: A Synthetic Control Analysis,” *Lancet Regional Health—Americas* 19 (2023): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lana.2023.100447>.

5 The Pelotas Pact for Peace describes *focused deterrence* as “a strategic action to combat lethal crimes by increasing the costs for the most violent individuals and groups or better informing them of the negative consequences of their conduct.” For more details, see <https://www.pelotas.rs.gov.br/pacto/21/874>.

6 See <https://www.pelotas.rs.gov.br/pacto/21>.

acts of illicit activity or even violence.

4. **Urbanism:** Pursuing urban redevelopment initiatives that promote public safety and perceptions of security in the community. For example, the initiative Adopt a Green Area (*Adote uma Área Verde*⁷) partners with companies and different private sector entities to preserve and develop new community green areas. This line of work seeks to increase the use of public spaces (e.g., more foot traffic), strengthen families and community ties, and promote a culture of peace and safe coexistence in community spaces, focusing on child and youth development. Improvements to the city's infrastructure, with a focus on public lighting, were also intensified.
5. **Use of technology and data:** Introducing new technologies, such as video monitoring and a program of data sharing between the education, health, and social assistance networks to provide integrated and tailored care to the highest at-risk youth as early and as coordinated as possible. All actions under the use of technology and data protection and sharing were designed to abide by the Brazilian General Personal Data Protection Law (*Lei Geral de Proteção de Dados Pessoais, Lei nº 13.709/2018*).

Implementation Experience – The Who

The Pelotas for Peace Pact framework is structured across several entities to advance all efforts:

- **Special Advisory of the Pelotas Pact for Peace:** The Special Advisory's role is to carry out the coordination of the Pact by monitoring all efforts and outcomes of programs and projects and by promoting the integration of sectoral public policies, institutions, civil society organizations, the private sector, and society at large. This entity is linked to the Mayor's Office. It includes the roles of a special advisor and executive coordinator, an administrative advisor, a strategic planning advisor and international relations director, a social worker, a cross-functional project director, and an early childhood program coordinator.
- **Observatory of Public Security and Social Prevention:** The Municipal Observatory of Public Security and Social Prevention is responsible for generating knowledge to inform decision-making processes. The observatory prioritizes knowledge production that supports strategic management and tactical decision making. It also seeks partnerships with universities and local and international institutions and follows an epidemiological perspective, prioritizing interventions in risk factors. The observatory promotes the principles of transparency and participation and evaluates processes and outcomes based on efficacy, efficiency, and focus.
- **Municipal Integrated Management Office:** The Municipal Integrated Management Office (*Gabinete de Gestão Integrada Municipal, GGIM*) works to convene and coordinate all institutions that work in the areas of violence prevention and reduction, including law enforcement and the justice sector. The integrated approach aims to analyze the information produced by the observatory, jointly discuss problems, exchange information, define violence reduction priorities, promote synergistic efforts

7 See <https://www.pelotas.rs.gov.br/pacto/24/899>.

between the institutions in the ecosystem to advance an integrated approach, and establish a practice of coordination among multiple governmental levels (i.e., municipal, state, and federal). The GGIM acts as a backbone agency to advance safety and security and serves as the main point of contact with law enforcement.

- **Integrated Prevention Committee:** The Integrated Prevention Committee’s (*Comitê Integrado de Prevenção*, CIP) responsibility is to gather the sectors and institutions working in urbanism and social prevention, particularly those focused on youths—without engaging directly with law enforcement. Besides the actions of the Pact, the committee monitors the implementation of the Municipal Plan for Early Childhood, considering the relevance of such actions in preventing violence and building a culture of peace for present and future generations.

In addition, the Pact also hosts an annual **Public Security Forum** organized by the Special Advisory of the Pelotas Pact for Peace. The forum is a meeting open to all communities and network members involved in planning and executing actions of the Pact to provide accountability and dialogue regarding its efforts and results. The forum aims to be a platform for deepening knowledge about public security and violence prevention, promoting reflection, discussion, and broad participation. In March 2024, the forum in Pelotas was expanded to an international conference on public security and social prevention, titled CONNEX 2024, with 1,145 people attending. One of the most important outcomes of this event was the peer connection with cities worldwide committed to preventing violence.

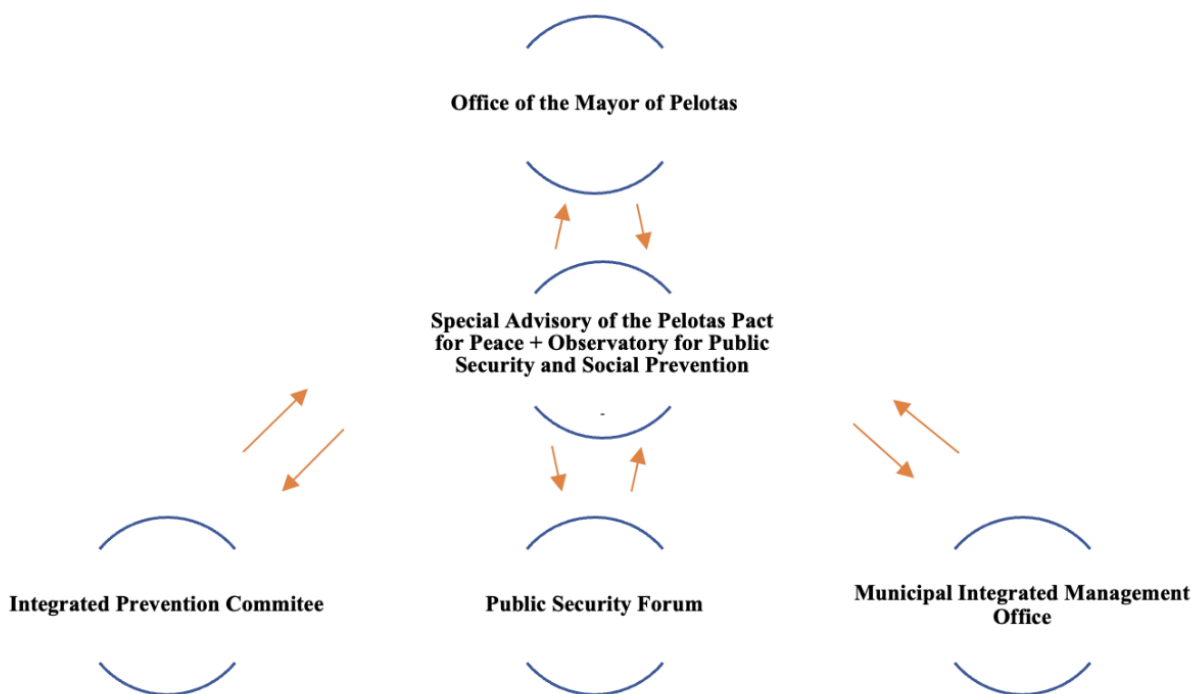


Image: Governance structure of Pelotas Pact for Peace, 2023.

Lessons Learned and Observations for Replication

The following points are crucial for the effectiveness of the Pact. The first is that **political will and leadership** are needed for the success of municipal programs. By bringing together many stakeholders to find effective solutions, the mayor must prioritize a politically sensitive topic for municipalities and proactively manage its implementation while allowing sufficient space for the institutions to advance their goals and leverage their technical expertise. **Technical expertise** is indeed fundamental. External technical input kickstarted the Pact, and the municipal staff have sustained its implementation. Initially, the civil society organization *Instituto Cidade Segura* played a pivotal role as the Pact's technical experts. Being external to the public sphere allowed the institute to be perceived as an **impartial actor** in the face of institutional or corporate interests. This relative neutrality was reinforced by the legitimacy conferred by the scientific evidence, enabling constructive dialogues with diverse stakeholders and crafting solutions that transcended institutional fragmentation. With that, the institute provided support and enhanced the skills of municipal staff across institutions, instilling a common language and providing specialized literature on various subjects.

There must be a strong **emphasis on prevention**. The Pact's efforts take a proactive approach in prevention, incorporating actions geared toward law enforcement and aiming most initiatives and resources at prevention. Strategies vary widely in terms of prevention type (e.g., primary, secondary, tertiary), target population (e.g., children, youth, older adults), and topics (e.g., education, employment). Due to their nature, several of these preventive initiatives only yield results in the medium to long term. Nonetheless, they hold significance in engaging multiple agencies in public security and addressing some of the root causes of violence and crime. In addition, the Pact concurrently encompasses law enforcement actions such as integrated police operations in hot spots, serving as a positive example because it challenges a dichotomy between prevention and enforcement, thus pursuing a balanced approach. Another important feature with a positive impact is the pursuit of **integration among institutions**. This approach does not entail negating the responsibilities of each institution. Rather, it includes striving to enhance collaboration and synergy among the public prevention services and public security institutions and involves external stakeholders beyond City Hall, such as the police. One of the lessons learned is that institutions need to maintain an agenda of permanent meetings to constantly align and plan actions based on the indicators bulletin presented by the observatory.

Preceding the inception of the Pact, a **city diagnosis** was conducted that involved, among other aspects, a victimization survey. These statistics facilitated an understanding of the reality and contributed to outlining the program's key elements, intervention zones, and baseline parameters. The **data gathering and assessment** through establishing an Observatory of Public Security and Social Prevention that generates regular reports remains pivotal. The emphasis on monitoring performance indicators and evidence-based interventions is a central feature of the Pact and

facilitates impact assessment processes.

The Pact has had to be implemented with a tight budget because no additional resources have been allocated. Against this reality, the Pact had to reallocate resources already earmarked for public security and prevention (e.g., education, social assistance, health), focusing on optimizing their use. Maximizing existing resources was achieved through the willingness of key individuals within institutions to trust and engage in the initiative, highlighting the importance of broad buy-in, ownership, and legitimacy to maximize resources.

Impact and Results

An impact evaluation concluded that the Pelotas Pact for Peace demonstrates the “significant potential of a combined public health and criminal justice approach at the municipal level.”⁸ It concluded the Pact was responsible for a 9% reduction in the city’s homicide rate and 7% in robberies. Furthermore, the same impact evaluation found a 38% reduction in homicides could be directly associated with the “focused deterrence” intervention, underscoring the importance of following the evidence for effective deployment of law enforcement.

Conclusion

Results obtained by Pelotas with the Pelotas for Peace Pact demonstrate the returns of investing in the reduction and prevention of violence. The Pact emphasizes strong coordination between the security forces and prevention actors, seeking to protect the fundamental rights of citizens, especially in the city’s most vulnerable areas and populations. Therefore, an approach balancing law enforcement with prevention of violence has proven, once more, to be a path capable of addressing the complexity of the challenge; directing short-, medium-, and long-term results; and cultivating a culture of peace.

8 Degli Esposti et al., “Effects of the Pelotas (Brazil) Peace Pact,” 2.