



The City of Cali in Colombia: Example of a Focused Approach



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“Violence is not randomly distributed in cities. Violent acts are concentrated in a few places, carried out by a minority of individuals (overwhelmingly young males), and associated with specific behaviors, such as gun possession, intergroup rivalry, and alcohol consumption. Government efforts to reduce violence must begin with a detailed diagnosis of its main characteristics, particularly its temporal and geographical distribution, to develop targeted solutions and avoid stigmatizing entire communities.”¹

Research Team

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Introduction and overview of the intervention

In Cali, Colombia, the program *Abriendo Caminos (Opening Roads)* aims to reduce the number of homicides, injuries, and other harms in neighborhoods with high levels of interpersonal and group violence. The program started between 2018 and 2020 as an adaptation of the “Cure Violence”² model with the implementation of a pilot in two neighborhoods with informal settlements. Based on the positive results identified through an impact evaluation, the program has since expanded to 40 areas of the city and neighboring municipalities. *Abriendo Caminos* is run by Fundación Alvaralice and is an important component of [Compromiso Valle](#), a region-wide collaborative initiative between the private sector, civil society, and public entities aiming to close inequality gaps and provide opportunities for young people with high levels of exclusion. Elements of the *Abriendo Caminos* model have been incorporated into the security strategies of Cali and the city of Palmira, and the project has partnered with local governments, advancing a forward-looking model of private–public partnerships to promote safety. The program operates by equipping community mediators to target, mediate, and de-escalate local conflicts before they devolve into cycles of violence. It also equips social workers to support the youth at highest risk of engaging in violence or displaying violent behavior by helping them access available city services and carrying out community-based activities and campaigns to shift attitudes towards violent behaviors.

Background and rationale

Cali has had high rates of homicide (i.e., recently hovering around 40 per 100,000) and

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

2 Founded in 1995 in Chicago, the Cure Violence program follows a violence prevention public health methodology that aims to (a) detect and interrupt potentially violent situations, (b) identify and change the thinking and behavior of individuals at the highest risk of engaging in violence, and (c) transform group norms that support and perpetuate the use of violence. For more information, see <https://cvg.org/>

other types of violence for decades. However, violence is not randomly distributed in the city. As elsewhere, violent acts are concentrated in a few places, carried out by a minority of individuals (overwhelmingly young males), and associated with specific behaviors, such as gun possession, intergroup rivalry, and alcohol consumption.³ Knowing these facts, efforts to reduce violence had to begin with a detailed diagnosis of its main characteristics, particularly its temporal and geographical distribution, to develop targeted solutions and avoid stigmatizing entire communities.

Focused approach—the *what*

Abriendo Caminos' focused approach to violence prevention recognizes that violence is a concentrated phenomenon and considers it a learned behavior that can be prevented. Because violence and epidemics follow similar patterns, the *Abriendo Caminos* prevention effort borrows from public health tools designed to fight epidemics by implementing a three-pronged strategy, namely (a) interruption of the transmission of violence, (b) identification and transformation of the mentality of the highest in-risk transmitters, and (c) change of group norms.

Abriendo Caminos' main purpose is to contribute to reducing violence and crime through an intervention that focuses at the individual level, changing the violent behavior of individuals, and at the community level, trying to transform the broader social norms that perpetuate violence. At the individual level, the program aims to build social skills, especially for at-risk youth, to process conflicts, change their perceptions of violence, reduce their consumption of psychoactive substances, and improve their education, occupation, and income outcomes. At the community level, the program aims to build safety and strengthen social cohesion by changing broader social norms.

Intervention design—the *how*

The program starts by hiring local community leaders to act as community mediators (“violence interrupters” was the name used by the original program, Cure Violence). These individuals are perceived as credible messengers within their respective communities, even by active participants in gang activities. Together, with a team of supervisors managing inter-institutional relations and support staff, the community mediators have the following responsibilities:

- **Identification and mediation of potentially violent conflicts:** Identify local tensions and brewing conflicts before they escalate and mediate them, seeking peaceful resolutions between the individuals directly involved and with their families and close associates.
- **Reduction of high-risk behaviors and access to opportunities:** Target the individuals most at-risk and engage them with incentives to take advantage of educational, job training, cultural, sports, and health opportunities (e.g., reduction in consumption of psychoactive substances). To gain the trust of

³ David Weisburd, “The Law of Crime Concentration and the Criminology of Place,” *Criminology* 53, no. 2 (2015): 133–57.

these individuals, community mediators meet at least weekly with them and work to secure legal economic pathways for income generation. The program provides (a) support to participants who want to change their life habits through a social inclusion plan, (b) a set of actions, and (c) short- and medium-term goals agreed upon by participants with the mediators. The program has a small fund to support each participant in taking steps to fulfill their social inclusion plan (e.g., paying tuition fees or purchasing items that enable participants to set up a small business or access a job).

- **Change of group norms:** Work to change the mindset and social norms that validate violence as a normal or acceptable behavior with the target individuals and at the community level. This effort involves families, neighbors, and associates of the targeted individuals. It brings them together for peaceful coexistence activities, including monthly efforts to intervene in some public spaces and collective reflections regarding the impacts of violence. In recent phases, the project has worked to improve confidence among neighbors in the local justice system by carrying out service fairs, making referrals, and supporting people with unmet needs in accessing local services and following up on the outcomes and experience of the services by those who take them up.

Implementation experience—the *who*

In its initial phase, *Abriendo Caminos* was implemented by the private foundation Fundación Alvaralice in partnership with the Undersecretary of Territories of Inclusion and Opportunities (TIOs), part of the Secretariat of Territorial Development and Citizen Participation of the Mayor’s Office of Cali. Following a popular uprising that shook Cali during national strikes in May–June 2021, *Abriendo Caminos* extended its reach from the initial two intervention sites to forty areas in Cali and two new sites in the neighboring cities of Palmira and Buenaventura. At the operational level, the program is implemented by and includes the following direct beneficiaries:

1. **Supervisors** coordinate the teams in the field and oversee generating alliances in the territories with other types of actors. Each neighborhood has a supervisor, selected by Alvaralice’s and TIO’s undersecretary based on their leadership profiles for community work. The supervisor’s knowledge of the territories helps to complete the teams, bringing in “interrupters.”
2. **Community mediators/violence interrupters**, also called “coexistence mediators,” are hired based on their knowledge and credibility about the territory. Several of them have had criminal trajectories before, giving them direct knowledge of the dynamics they are now trying to change. They receive constant training to carry out the mediation work.
3. **Outreach workers**, one for each neighborhood, are responsible for accompanying the management of social inclusion plans developed for program participants. In some phases of the project, this role has been standalone within the project teams. However, in recent implementations, community mediators have combined the two roles of conflict mediation and supporting participants

in their social inclusion plans (i.e., outreach work).

4. **Participants** are composed of women and men between 14 and 30 years of age. At the beginning of the project, they are caught up in the dynamics of community violence or at risk of being linked to them. They are accompanied by management of a social inclusion plan that allows participants to overcome their situation of vulnerability and change the meaning of their lives. Among its indirect beneficiaries is the community: people of all ages who benefit from mediation services and participate in community education activities aimed at changing social norms that validate violence.

Initial impact and results

A mixed-methods and comprehensive impact evaluation was carried out by Unicesi University in 2020. The evaluation, based on the program's 2018 pilot intervention implemented in the two neighborhoods of Charco Azul and Comuneros, found significant results.⁴ Evaluators conducted several types of analyses aimed at (a) assessing the effectiveness of *Abriendo Caminos* in the interruption of cycles of violence; (b) determining if there was a reduction in the rates of violence in the targeted territories that could be attributed to the program; (c) identifying changes in the attitudes of the population and beneficiaries of the program; (d) calculating the social return on investment of the implementation of the project; and (e) analyzing and monitoring the information recorded in the CiviCore platform, which is a tool that is part of the cure violence methodology.

Results showed the program's implementation managed to interrupt the cycles of revenge in both territories, allowing the cycles of physical violence (i.e., lethal and nonlethal) to be broken. For Charco Azul, other neighborhoods in the same district had a 43% higher probability of having a subsequent homicide in the 7 days following a previous homicide. In the case of Comuneros I, the probability of a subsequent homicide was 17% higher in other neighborhoods in the district than in the intervention area. The effects were significant when using as control neighborhoods with similar levels of violence and averages for the whole of the eastern side of the city where both areas are located. The evaluation also found statistical evidence of reduced probability of revenge following nonlethal aggressions.

In terms of overall number of homicides, there was a clear reduction in Charco Azul, with 74% fewer crimes of this type registered compared to before the program started and considering the control areas where the program was not implemented. On the other hand, the Comuneros neighborhood had mixed results, with more homicides since the program began but a reduced number of personal injuries and threats.

In terms of attitudes, the program helped improve the perception of security and trust in local leaders and authorities, in great part due to the city government's support of

⁴ Moreno León, Carlos Enrique, María Isabel Irurita Muñoz, and Juan Carlos Gómez Benavides, *Informe Final de la Evaluación de Impacto del Programa Abriendo Caminos de la Fundación Alvarallice* (Cali, Colombia: Universidad ICE-SI, 2020).

the program. The program, however, was not able to transform the idea that, in some circumstances, the use of violence is justified—especially when referring to honor and respect. Interviews with participants showed the program helped youth exit the life of crime, breaking long-term histories of spirals of violence. The program offered them employment, job training, and academic opportunities, as well as the chance to participate in activities with the community; it improved their abilities to manage anger and emotions, increased their autonomy and self-management, improved family relationships, reduced substance abuse, and increased their use of public shared spaces. Finally, the social return of the program was estimated at \$6,59 Colombian pesos for each peso invested.⁵

Data from the most recent implementation of the program in forty areas showed that, in 2021–2022, more than 10,000 conflicts were mediated under the project, with almost 7 of every 10 mediated conflicts having a risk factor such as previous violent incidents on the part of those involved or having access to firearms. According to the latest data, 85% of mediations have reached either a total resolution or a partial agreement that de-escalated the conflict. More than 700 young people made progress with their social inclusion (i.e., risk reduction) plans. Around half of these youths went back into education or training, with 70% of those who use substances now stating they have reduced their consumption and 23% accepting employment opportunities. The program contributed to Cali achieving the lowest recorded homicide rate in the last 35 years for 2022.⁶

Lessons learned and observations for replication

The success of the program, as well as its positive evaluation and results, led the new city administration to incorporate it into its recently launched Public Security and Citizen Coexistence Policy⁷, emphasizing the importance of partnerships between public, civil society, and private sector in the promotion of safety, and of investing in evaluations. The recently elected local government has started a violence-prevention program that includes community mediators in the most violent areas of the city, building on the results of *Abriendo Caminos*.

The success of *Abriendo Caminos* also reinforced the importance of implementing evidence-based policies that have proven to be effective, being loyal to the models that have worked, and simultaneously adapting those policies to the local context. For example, in its first years, the main interveners of this program were called violence interrupters—*interruptores de violencia*—because that is the name used by the original program, Cure Violence. In recent years, program implementers decided to change their

⁵ León et al., *Informe Final de la Evaluación de Impacto*.

⁶ “2022 fue el año menos violento de la ciudad y también hubo disminución de otros delitos. Conozca el balance general,” Mayor’s Office of Santiago de Cali, last modified February 1, 2023, <https://www.cali.gov.co/seguridad/publicaciones/173714/2022-fue-el-ano-menos-violento-de-la-ciudad-y-tambien-hubo-disminucion-de-otros-delitos-conozca-el-balance-general/>

⁷ “Por primera vez, Cali tendrá una Política Pública de Seguridad y Convivencia Ciudadana,” Mayor’s Office of Santiago de Cali, last modified July 6, 2024, <https://www.cali.gov.co/seguridad/publicaciones/181651/por-prime-raz-vez-cali-tendra-una-politica-publica-de-seguridad-y-convivencia-ciudadana/>

name to community mediators for various reasons: (a) in areas with organized crime, the name community mediator raises less concern from groups that have criminal control in the area, and (b) interrupting violence implies only that a violent action is not realized, but does not imply necessarily that a local conflict is resolved satisfactorily by the parties. Mediation goes beyond avoiding violence, as it tries to reach a suitable agreement by the parties, potentially avoiding future violence and bringing in the idea of justice.

Based on this acquired knowledge, the latest phase of *Abriendo Caminos* has had the support of an inclusive justice program financed by USAID that promotes community mediation as part of a toolbox of conflict resolution methods.

Conclusions

The implementation of *Abriendo Caminos* in Cali confirmed that targeting interventions at the most needed areas and at-risk groups is effective in reducing violent crime and breaking cycles of violence. Through this focused but also multisector and integrated approach, the program achieved the goal of reducing homicides and positively diverting trajectories of youth. It also showed the importance of working with partners from several sectors (e.g., government, civil society, private sector, academia) and, most importantly, engaging with communities to build ownership and ensure sustainability of interventions.