TACKLING THE FALSE DILEMMA

A Communications Guide for Advancing Balanced and Effective Public Safety Approaches

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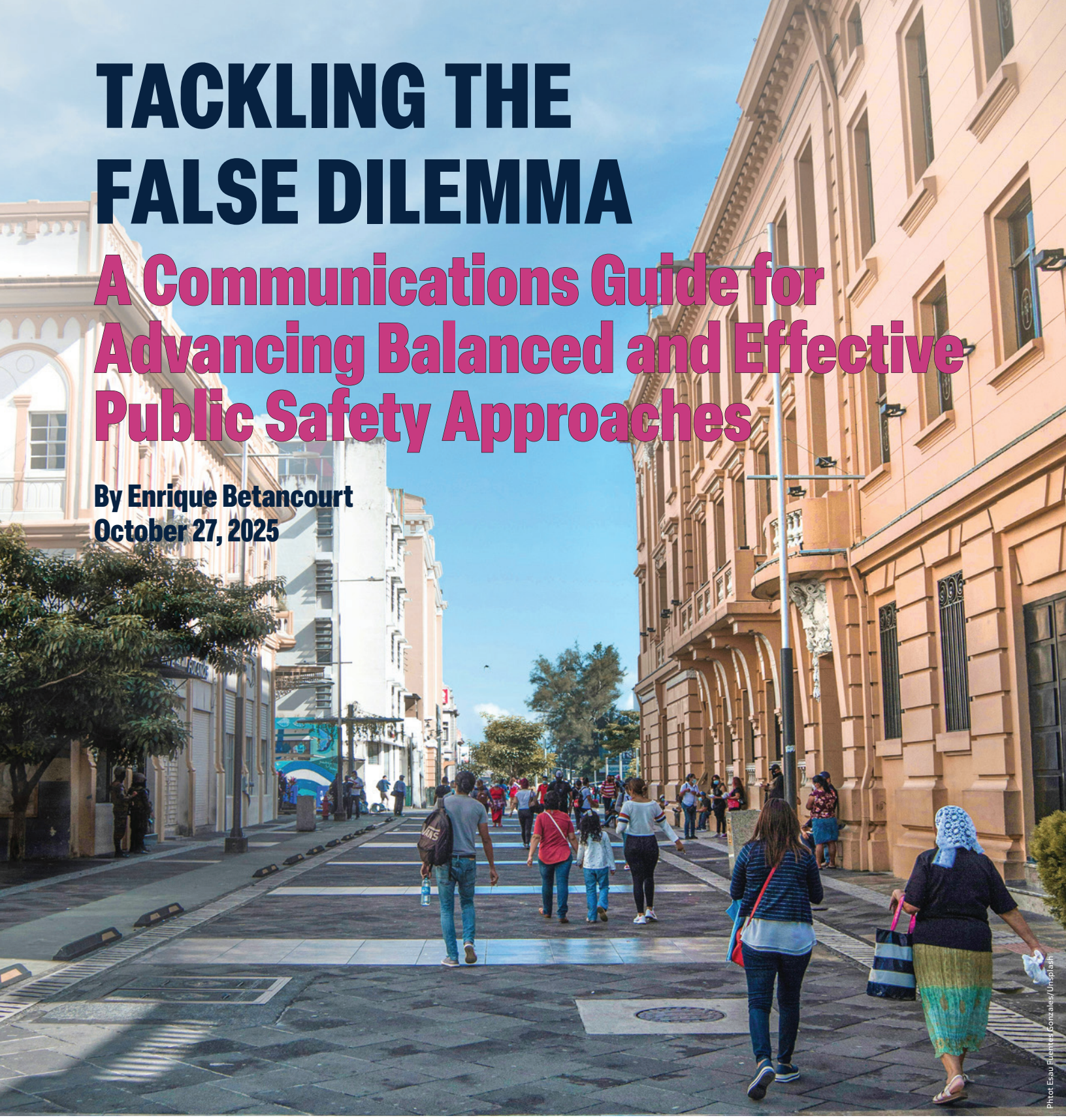

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public safety debates in Latin America are too often framed as a false dilemma: being either tough on crime or lenient on offenders. This polarized narrative obscures the reality that effective strategies must combine the urgency of enforcement with the staying power of prevention and justice. Neighbors, facing persistent fear and political leaders constrained by short-term cycles, might be naturally drawn to repressive approaches such as El Salvador's current "state of exception."[1] These measures have produced rapid and widely felt reductions in crime, helping many families recover a concrete sense of safety. For people living under daily insecurity, these immediate results are tangible while democratic guarantees can feel abstract or slow. Yet the approach has come at the cost of due process, institutional trust, and fundamental rights, jeopardizing the integrity of democratic systems. The lesson is not to weaken rights but to build the delivery capacity that makes safety possible without abandoning them.

This document provides evidence and narrative guidance to support a balanced and integrated approach that recognizes the political appeal of mano dura while also presenting evidence of its limits. By contrast, strategies that integrate law enforcement, justice systems, and social prevention deliver both immediate relief and durable security. The communications challenge is to move beyond polarized frames and equip city leaders with narratives that resonate with public concerns while advancing smarter, democratic solutions.

Drawing on global research and practice, the guide highlights four evidence-based principles:

- Target interventions on the people, places, and behaviors most associated with violence.
- Strengthen community institutions that prevent and mediate conflict.
- Build legitimacy through fairness, transparency, and respect in policing and justice.
- Improve safety through strategic visible environmental design changes.

Strategic communication is essential. Local leaders must frame security as a foundation for development, emphasize precision over toughness, and pair accountability with support. Trusted messengers—from mayors and police to community leaders and survivors—are vital to shaping credible narratives.

By reframing the debate, providing evidence, and amplifying trusted voices, this guide supports decision makers in advancing public safety policies that are not only more effective but also more just and sustainable.

RATIONALE FOR THIS STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE

This strategic communications guidance document aims to equip city leaders with:

- Framing and messaging to advance balanced and sustainable public security strategies.
- Evidence to question mano dura approaches and favor balanced and integrated approaches.
- Communication tools to shift public and political discourse.

It is important to note that this is not a comprehensive how-to manual or step-by-step toolkit. Rather, it offers strategic communications and narrative guidance to help decision makers align key stakeholders around more-effective and lasting security solutions.

TOUGH ON CRIME OR SOFT ON CRIME? A FALSE DILEMMA

Public security policies and the narratives that shape them are often framed as binary choices aligned with dominant conservative and progressive ideologies. Progressive approaches generally emphasize addressing the root causes of crime and violence, highlighting the long-term benefits, minimal harm, and potential cost-effectiveness of social prevention strategies.[2] In contrast, conservative policies typically prioritize crime control through increased penalties, policing, and the use of force through the criminal justice system[3] as their primary tool, aiming to address the urgent concerns of constituents demanding action.

Critics of social prevention strategies argue that such approaches are often prescribed only after crime is already a major public concern. The emphasis on restorative approaches and focus on helping perpetrators or potential perpetrators make the strategies appear too lenient, and, in some cases, also as neglecting the needs and rights of victims. Conservative strategies, on the other hand, are often criticized for overemphasizing the punishment of disadvantaged communities, certain identities, and vulnerable social groups and therefore reinforcing harms that not only ignore the historical context but actively sustain the very networks, perceptions, and grievances that fuel ongoing cycles of violence.

In Latin America, public safety remains the top public concern. Persistent levels of violence and the expansion of organized crime in the region have created conditions for the adoption of authoritarian policies and narratives. According to the 2024 Latinobarómetro poll, for example, citizens in the region are "at ease with illiberalism" and willing to accept restrictions on freedoms in the name of security or stability.[4]

Mano dura as a policy alternative is not new in Latin America,[5] but since 2022, El Salvador's government has declared a constitutional state of exception to address the widespread presence and violence exerted by notorious local gangs. This measure has resulted in the arrest and incarceration of more than 84,000 individuals, making El Salvador the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world (1,659 prisoners per 100,000 people), more than three times the rate in the United States.[6] Human rights organizations and legal experts have denounced the lack of adherence to the rule of law and due process involved in these arrests. Similarly, a strong body of evidence sheds light on the limited effect incarceration has in reducing crime beyond specific thresholds and the negative effect it has in particularly vulnerable communities.[7]

DEFINING MANO DURA

"'Mano dura' refers to a set of punitive security policies that rely on mass incarceration, police and military deployments, and the restriction of rights as their main instruments. These approaches are politically attractive because they create an immediate perception of control, but they rarely address the structural causes of violence and tend to reinforce cycles of exclusion and insecurity."

–L. Dammert, "Mano Dura: The Politics of Tough-on-Crime Policies in Latin America."

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Nevertheless, since its implementation, the state of exception is credited with historic crime and violence reduction in the country. It has increased the approval rate of the country's leadership and justice institutions, demonstrating strong support for these heavy-handed approaches. Citizens and politicians across Latin America and beyond have expressed renewed interest in adopting mano dura tactics based on this recent experience.

The Appeal of Tough-on-Crime Policies and the Limits of Social Prevention

Despite overwhelming evidence that mano dura policies tend to deliver short-term gains at the expense of deepening the very structural inequalities that drive violence, these approaches continue to resonate with decision makers and citizens across the region. Understanding why is crucial for those promoting strategies that simultaneously promote safety and justice while advancing democratic values and sustainable development. Three primary conditions make heavy-handed approaches easier to "sell" despite strong evidence supporting more-balanced and integrated responses:

- **Demand for Immediate Results:** Insecurity generates political urgency. Elected officials facing short-term electoral cycles and communities experiencing daily fear tend to gravitate toward concrete, immediate responses that deliver short-term results, even if these responses have long-term, harmful consequences. By contrast, appearing to ignore citizens' urgent needs and focusing on longer-term efforts can make leaders appear to be genuinely out of touch with their constituents.
- **Simplicity over Complexity:** Repressive strategies often require less interinstitutional coordination, evidence, and long-term planning than balanced approaches, which demand collaboration across health, education, law enforcement, justice, and community actors. These simpler institutional arrangements are easier to implement and also easier to communicate with the public and opinion leaders.
- **Power Consolidation:** Repressive strategies reinforce state authority, especially under states of exception, by enabling control and silencing dissent. In contrast, balanced approaches require higher levels of accountability that make them politically costly. Repression, by comparison, protects the status quo, avoids accountability, and projects a quick illusion of control.

At the same time, proponents of social prevention strategies must confront an uncomfortable reality: This type of prevention alone is insufficient to address the scope and scale of violence in Latin America today. This is especially true of, but not exclusive to, the violence associated with organized crime. The persistence and escalation of violence in the region are partly a consequence of the failure to implement effective responses at scale. Reducing violence sustainably in contexts with disproportionate concentrations requires the close collaboration of the criminal justice system alongside the agencies and community-based organizations that provide specialized prevention services.

The Role of the Criminal Justice System in Balanced Approaches

A balanced approach to public safety does not sideline the criminal justice system; rather, it integrates its role in a way that is effective, proportionate, and legitimate. Police, courts, and correctional institutions are indispensable in controlling immediate threats, holding offenders accountable, and protecting victims. However, their actions must be narrowly targeted, procedurally fair, and coordinated with prevention and rehabilitation services to avoid reinforcing cycles of exclusion and violence. Punitive mano dura policies often rely on mass incarceration and restrictions of rights, producing short-term perceptions of control but failing to address root causes.[8] By contrast, a growing body of evidence shows[9] that when the justice system operates with legitimacy and collaborates with social services, it creates the breathing room needed to implement preventive strategies and build long-term safety.

FRAMING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION FOR BALANCED PUBLIC SAFETY

Local authorities seeking to improve public security should adopt a communications strategy that reflects a balanced and effective approach emphasizing both the necessity of restoring order and the long-term value of preventive, community-based solutions. Communications that focus exclusively on social prevention or human rights, while morally important, often fail to resonate with public sentiment in contexts of acute insecurity. Worse still, they can be easily portrayed by proponents of repressive policies as naïve or out of touch. Communications strategies should work to achieve the following:

Neutralize the polarizing mano-dura-versus-prevention debate. Focus the public's attention on balanced approaches capable of achieving short-term and sustainable results that build the authorities' legitimacy[10] as they are implemented and reflect the necessary roles of law enforcement, justice institutions, community actors, and even the private sector. Communicating these approaches must highlight both concrete and sequenced outcomes for disadvantaged groups and the general population.

Reframe public safety as a condition for development and prosperity. Public safety is not the end game. Reestablishing safety in our cities, communities, streets, and schools is a baseline for improved levels of health, education, and economic growth. Safer cities create healthy conditions for democratic processes and improve relations between authorities and citizens.

Highlight that crime control is necessary to address root causes. Public authorities have the mandate and the responsibility of leveraging every legal and legitimate tool available to them. Reducing high levels of violence in specific communities or against specific social groups is an urgent matter that requires the coordinated efforts of law enforcement agents, the justice system, and social services under a procedurally just lens. Initial efforts to control high levels of crime and violence create the opportunity to focus next steps on addressing root causes.

ADOPTING AND COMMUNICATING EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT BALANCED AND INTEGRATED APPROACHES

A growing body of research confirms that the most effective public safety strategies are focused, behavioral, proportionate, and rooted in legitimacy. This section outlines four evidence-informed principles, each with clear communication guidance for public messaging and community engagement.

1. Focus on Risk: People, Places, and Behaviors

What we know: Violence is highly concentrated among small groups of individuals and in specific geographic areas. Strategies that prioritize high-risk people and places and integrate both criminal justice and behavioral support, are more effective than broad, reactive enforcement.

Where is the evidence

- A meta-analysis of violence reduction in Central America found that targeted interventions focusing on at-risk individuals, high-crime locations, and specific violent behaviors were more effective than general approaches.[11]
- Focused deterrence strategies in the United States have consistently reduced gun violence in cities like Boston and Oakland.[12]
- In Chicago, a program combining cognitive behavioral therapy and summer employment led to a 45 percent reduction in violent-crime arrests among high-risk youth.[13]
- A meta-analysis of 58 studies found that cognitive behavioral therapy reduced recidivism, especially when combined with supervision or sanctions.[14]

How to communicate

- Use visual data (maps, charts) to identify where violence concentrates geographically and understand

the social groups most affected by it.

- Emphasize precision over toughness by highlighting smarter targeting.
- Share personal stories of individuals who changed their behavior through support and accountability.

2. Strengthen Local Capacity to Prevent and Resolve Conflict

What we know: Community-based institutions, including nongovernmental organizations, mentors, civic justice programs, and outreach workers (e.g., mediators and interrupters), play a critical role in preventing violence and improving access to justice. These initiatives foster trust and address problems before they escalate.

Where is the evidence

- In the United States, neighborhoods with stronger nonprofit infrastructure saw double-digit declines in violent crime over time.[15]
- Mexico's civic justice model and Bogotá's Sistema Distrital de Justicia provide participatory, localized legal services that reduce impunity and improve legitimacy.[16, 17]
- A US study found that participants in a street outreach community violence intervention (CVI) program were 73 percent less likely to be arrested for a violent crime after engagement.[18]
- Cities such as Bogotá and Cali, Colombia, and Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago have successfully adapted CVI strategies to Latin American contexts.

How to communicate

- Showcase trusted community leaders—like outreach workers or mediators—as credible, homegrown solutions.
- Use storytelling and testimonials to make programs feel personal, not institutional.
- Emphasize collaboration, not replacement, between communities and public institutions.

3. Build Legitimacy through Procedural and Institutional Fairness

What we know: When people perceive authorities as fair, respectful, and transparent, they are more likely to comply with laws and resolve disputes peacefully. Procedural justice increases voluntary cooperation and public trust.

Where is the evidence

- Legitimacy is a stronger driver of law-abiding behavior than fear of punishment.[19]
- In Mexico City, training police in procedural justice increased public satisfaction and reduced complaints.[20]

How to communicate

- Center dignity and fairness in all messaging.
- Share examples where respectful treatment led to de-escalation and cooperation.
- Use resident voices to validate positive experiences with authorities.

4. Improve Safety through Strategic Spatial Interventions

What we know: Strategic improvements to the physical environment, like greening vacant lots, improving public lighting, or repairing abandoned buildings, can reduce violence and increase community safety, especially if combined with the other three principles above.

Where is the evidence

- A review of neighborhood-level interventions found strong evidence that improving the built environment reduces violent crime, especially in high-risk communities.[21]

How to communicate

- Use compelling before-and-after visuals to show environmental transformation.
- Emphasize this as a visible, low-cost, and nonconfrontational way to promote safety.
- Frame these projects as community-driven improvements, not external impositions.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION TOOLS TO BUILD SUPPORT

The following section provides practical recommendations for building support among key audiences. Effective core messaging, delivered by trusted voices through the right channels, is critical to shifting narratives and sustaining reform. These trusted voices typically include public officials, like the mayor or the local head of public safety, but also—especially in areas where institutional trust is low—relevant members of the community, such as religious and civic leaders, teachers, and business owners. Victims and perpetrators of crime (often overlapping groups) deserve particular attention. Individuals and families with direct experience of crime and violence can serve as powerful advocates for more-balanced responses, highlighting the long-term harm of relying solely on punitive measures alongside the need to feel safe within a shorter timeline.

Core messages

When violence is organized, the response must be as well. Coordinated strategies that combine enforcement, prevention, and intelligence are essential.

Justice must protect victims and prevent future harm for all. A fair system holds offenders accountable and invests in prevention to reduce reoffending.

Violence concentrates on a small group of people and places; solutions should follow suit. Targeted strategies are smarter and more effective than indiscriminate enforcement.

Trust in institutions makes communities safer. Fairness, respect, and transparency improve cooperation and compliance.

Support and accountability must go hand in hand. Programs that combine consequences with outreach and second chances reduce violence.

Engaged communities are the best defense against violence. Local leaders, mentors, and community-based institutions play a critical role in creating safer neighborhoods.

Safety enables prosperity. Public safety is essential for economic growth, civic engagement, and democratic renewal.

Target audiences and outreach strategies

The following table offers guidance for crafting specific messaging to target audiences, highlighting the message focus and channels of communication for each of them. Please refer to the last section of this guide for a list of frequently asked questions when communicating the need for a balanced approach to public safety.

Audience	Message Focus	Outreach Mechanisms—Channels and Tactics
General Public	Fairness, trust, community safety	Social media, local radio, explainers, town halls
Civic and Religious Leaders	Shared values, moral credibility, redemption	Op-eds, roundtables, faith-based forums
Law Enforcement	Professional legitimacy, public trust	Peer videos, internal briefings, site visits
Youth and Community Groups	Empowerment, healing, belonging	Storytelling projects podcasts, social media, youth panels
Business and Economic Leaders	Stability, return on investment, growth	Policy briefs, economic forums, chamber events
Policy Makers and Agencies	Evidence, cost-effectiveness, impact	Legislative briefings, scorecards, closed-door sessions
Media and Opinion Leaders	Data, narrative framing, local examples	Editorial meetings, op-ed campaigns, podcast interviews

Outreach mechanisms

Op-eds and editorials. Feature coalitions of public health experts, justice officials, and civic leaders. Focus on proven approaches like procedural justice, deterrence, and community engagement.

Podcasts and storytelling. Launch or support audio storytelling from those affected by violence and those working to prevent it, like intervention workers, survivors, and law enforcement officers.

Social media. Use localized data visualizations and short-form videos to explain key concepts. Feature trusted messengers from affected communities.

Radio and television. Use morning shows, talk shows, and local news to amplify voices from frontline interventions and highlight evidence-based strategies.

Public events. Host town halls and community forums with mixed panels of police, civic leaders, and CVI professionals. Promote transparency and inclusion.

Evaluation and metrics (Illustrative)

- Track communications impact across multiple dimensions:
  - Public awareness and perception: Pre- and post-campaign surveys, social media engagement
  - Stakeholder mobilization: Endorsements, partnerships, and funding commitments
  - Media impact: Volume, tone, and reach of coverage across platforms
  - Participation: Attendance at forums, briefings, and events
  - Policy adoption: Movement in legislative priorities, budget allocations, and implementation outcomes

PUBLIC CONCERNS AND BALANCED SECURITY: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The following questions and answers reflect the concerns we hear most often from citizens who are angry, afraid, and demanding quick results. They are based on real experiences from Latin America, the United States, and other regions where tough-on-crime strategies have reduced violence in the short term but created new problems in the long run—such as communities shifting from fearing gangs to fearing the police. These answers are not naïve or wishful; they are grounded in evidence and practice. The central lesson is clear: Firm policing is essential to deter or contain crime today, but lasting safety depends on integrating and sequencing enforcement with prevention, services, and rights-based approaches that build trust and resilience for the future.

Questions and Answers

1. **El Salvador shows that tough-on-crime works. Why not just do that?**
   El Salvador did reduce crime sharply, but at huge cost. To do so, government eliminated the protections families rely on. Now, in El Salvador, your son can be imprisoned for years without trial based on his tattoos or neighborhood; if police beat your husband during an arrest, no independent court hears your complaint; if soldiers search your home without cause, there's no legal recourse. The reductions in violence are real, but so is permanent damage to democracy. Our best bet is serious investment in combining improved justice and policing with social prevention services so safety doesn't require giving up the freedoms we all want and need.

2. **If addressing crime is urgent, isn't social prevention too slow?**
   Prevention isn't just long-term. When combined with targeted policing, it can lower shootings and homicides within months. Police contain violence at the moment, while support services stop it from coming back or escalating.

3. **Don't criminals only change through punishment?**
   Punishment can change behaviors temporarily but doesn't stop the cycle of reoffending. That's why so many end up back in prison. What actually works is pairing swift, certain consequences with real support: job training, addiction treatment, housing help, and mental health services. This combination reduces crime immediately and addresses root causes, breaking the cycle for good.

4. **Why waste time on services when people are dying now?**
   Because services and policing together save more lives. Police can freeze crime, but unless we cut off the pipeline of kids entering gangs or break cycles of revenge, violence rebounds. Services tackle that pipeline while police handle the immediate threat.

5. **More police on the streets—that's what makes people feel safe, right?**
   It depends on who you ask. Research shows that increased police presence can reduce fear of crime for some community members, particularly in areas experiencing high rates of violence. However, for others, especially communities with histories of overpolicing, surveillance, and discriminatory enforcement, more police can actually increase fear and anxiety rather than reduce it.

6. **Isn't "prevention" just an excuse for doing nothing?**
   Not at all. In cities like Cali and Glasgow, prevention plus policing cut murders by 40–60 percent. That's action. Prevention means interrupting cycles of retaliation, investing in high-risk youth, and fixing broken spaces—things that actually move the numbers.

7. **Why not go tough first, then think about services later?**
   Because "tough only" burns out fast. Once the crackdown ends, violence comes back—sometimes worse—or other times criminals simply adapt. If we add services at the same time, policing buys us space while prevention builds a safer future.

8. **If people are dying, isn't it better to sacrifice rights for safety?**
   It's a false choice. In El Salvador and in the United States, communities went from fearing gangs to fearing the police. Real safety comes from rights-based policing—firm when needed, but respectful. That way people cooperate, report crimes, and help keep peace.

9. **How do we know this balanced model isn't just theory?**
   Because it's been tested. In Palmira, Colombia, targeted enforcement plus youth programs cut homicides by half. In Costa Rica, police and civic centers reduced robberies by 700 percent more than expected. Balanced approaches are evidence, not theory.

10. **So what's the real formula?**
    Strategic and fair law enforcement to deter crime today. Services and rights-based justice to stop it from coming back tomorrow. That's how we get safety now and build a smarter, more-sustainable future.

11. **Why should criminals get human rights when victims are suffering?**
    It's a false choice. Human rights aren't for criminals instead of victims. Human rights keep everyone safer. In systems that routinely violate rights through censorship, torture, and massive detention, communities don't feel safer; they just fear different perpetrators. Real safety comes from rights-based justice—fair accountability when someone causes harm but humane, and smart, treatment that prevents reoffending. That way victims get justice, communities can trust the system, and we break the cycle instead of creating new victims.

CONCLUSION

The public is right to demand urgent results. Families need to feel safe walking their streets today, not just years from now. But we cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of past crackdowns, where fear of gangs was simply replaced by fear of the police. The evidence is clear: Balanced strategies that integrate and sequence firm, legitimate policing plus prevention, services, and rights are the only way to deliver both immediate relief and lasting peace.

Balanced public safety strategies are not only more effective but also more sustainable, inclusive of available tools and approaches, and politically viable. By focusing on evidence, legitimacy, and inclusive messaging, Latin American cities can build the support needed to move beyond fear-driven policies and deliver real, lasting security.

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ANNEX

Seven Essential Quick Readings and Podcasts for Balanced Public Safety

This curated list highlights seven evidence-based ideas that move beyond the mano-dura-versus-prevention debate. Each idea is paired with a concise reading and, where available, a supporting podcast for busy decision makers.

1. Target Violence Where It Concentrates

Violence clusters around specific people, places, and behaviors. Targeted interventions outperform broad enforcement.

Reading: T. Abt, What Works in Reducing Community Violence: A Meta-Review and Field Study for the Northern Triangle (USAID, 2016)

Podcast: *Reducing Crime*, episode 66, with David Weisburd.

2. Use Focused Deterrence, Not Mass Punishment

Enforcement paired with credible communication and support services can reduce violence without sweeping criminalization.

Reading: A. A. Braga, D. Weisburd, and B. Turchan, "Focused Deterrence Strategies and Crime Control: An Updated Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Empirical Evidence," *Criminology & Public Policy* 17, No. 1 (2018): 205–250.

Podcast: *NIJ Justice Today*, "Driving Down Gun Violence, Part 1."

3. Recognize the Appeal and Costs of Mano Dura

Heavy-handed crackdowns can generate fast results—but they erode trust, due process, and democratic institutions.

Reading: L. Dammert, "Mano Dura: The Politics of Tough-on-Crime Policies in Latin America," in *Public Security and Policing in Latin America,* ed. M. Bergman, L. Dammert, and R. Muggah (Routledge, 2021).

Analysis: A. M. Méndez Dardón, *Mass Incarceration and Democratic Deterioration: Three Years of the State of Exception in El Salvador*, (Washington, DC: Washington Office on Latin America [WOLA], May 9 2025).

4. Be Smart on Crime: Swiftness, Certainty, Fairness

Policies built on proportionality, procedural fairness, and predictable consequences outperform punitive frameworks.

Reading: M. A. R. Kleiman, "Smart on Crime: Designing Effective and Fair Crime Policy," Democracy: A Journal of Ideas, no. 28 (2005).

Podcast: *Reducing Crime*, episode 18, "Policy Lessons," with Thomas Abt.

5. Invest in Behavior Change

Combining cognitive behavioral therapy with youth employment and mentoring can sharply reduce violent crime among high-risk youth.

Reading: S. Heller, A. K. Shah, J. Guryan, J. Ludwig, S. Mullainathan, and H. Pollack, "Thinking, Fast and Slow? Some Field Experiments to Reduce Crime and Dropout in Chicago," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 132, No. 1 (2017): 1–54.

Podcast: *Freakonomics Radio*, "Preventing Crime for Pennies on the Dollar," episode 284.

6. Strengthen Communities as Violence Prevention Engines

Robust local nonprofit and civic infrastructures build trust, expand opportunity, and provide alternatives to violence.

Reading: P. Sharkey, G. Torrats-Espinosa, and D. Takyar, "Community and the Crime Decline: The Causal Effect of Local Nonprofits on Violent Crimev," American Sociological Review 82, no. 6 (2017): 1214–1240.

Podcast: *Why Is This Happening?*, "A More Violent America," with Patrick Sharkey.

7. Build Legitimacy through Fairness

When authorities act fairly, transparently, and proportionately, they earn compliance and cooperation more effectively than through fear.

Reading: T. R. Tyler, "Procedural Justice, Legitimacy, and the Effective Rule of Law," in Crime and Justice: A Review of Research, ed. M. Tonry, vol. 30 (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Podcast: *The Criminology Academy*, episode 108, "Legitimacy and Procedural Justice" with Tom Tyler.

ENDNOTES

[1] The state of exception was declared by President Nayib Bukele on March 27, 2022. The exception gives unlimited power to security forces and restricts constitutional guarantees; it has been continually renewed by the Legislative Assembly since its inception (see Méndez Dardón, 2025).

[2] Social prevention is the set of strategies, programs, services, and policies that aim to reduce the individual and social behaviors associated with crime and violence.

[3] The criminal justice system is the set of institutions (police, adjudication, and corrections), rules, and processes a society uses to respond to crime.

[4] *The Economist*, "Latin Americans Are Worryingly Relaxed about Authoritarianism," December 18, 2024, https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2024/12/18/latin-americans-are-worryingly-relaxed-about-authoritarianism.

[5] *Mano dura* policies in Latin America have followed a recurring pattern: short-term crime drops through mass arrests, military-style policing, and reduced legal safeguards, followed by institutional strain and rising prison populations. In El Salvador, early strategies like Plan Mano Dura in the 2000s gave way to fragile prevention and negotiation efforts, including a 2012 gang truce that lacked public and institutional support. By the time President Nayib Bukele launched his state of exception in 2022, violence was already declining, but weak institutions and public fear paved the way for an aggressive security model with wide public backing.

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[10] Tom R. Tyler's research in *Why People Obey the Law* demonstrates that the perceived legitimacy of legal authorities—built through fair procedures, respectful treatment, and unbiased decision-making—is a stronger driver of voluntary law-abiding behavior than fear of punishment or instrumental incentives. T. R. Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law*, Yale University Press, 1990.

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About Peace in Our Cities

Peace in Our Cities (PiOC) is a unique global network of 24 cities and over 40 community-based and international partners with the ambitious goal to halve urban violence by 2030. The network represents over 25 million people in cities across the world.

PiOC seeks to reduce and prevent urban violence worldwide—preserving lives and helping cities thrive. It does so by creating concrete, participatory, and evidence-based platform exchanges to reduce and prevent severe violence in member cities, while also building a global movement of urban-violence-reduction advocates. The PiOC approach is based on three lines of action:

- **Amplify** policymaker awareness of the genuine scope and scale of urban violence and opportunities available to help cities address it.
- **Advance** evidence-informed, balanced policy solutions and peacebuilding approaches to reduce the most severe forms of violence in urban contexts.
- Accompany city leaders, community partners, and civil society through peer exchanges and information access to realize ambitious targets for violence reduction.

Peace in Our Cities is co-facilitated by three US-based independent institutions: the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies at New York University's Center on International Cooperation; the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego; and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security. For more, visit: peaceinourcities.org.