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San Salvador, October, 2021.
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CHAPTER 1

CITIES UNDER PRESSURE

DELIVERING INTEGRATED SOLUTIONS FOR URBAN PEACE

By Enrique Betancourt

Context: What Is the Problem?

In November 2023, six months after the state of exception took hold in El Salvador,[1] on my way from the international airport to San Salvador, I had the chance to speak with my taxi driver for about an hour. As I listened from the back seat, I watched his face in the rearview mirror. A couple of years earlier, his fourteen-year-old daughter had been harassed by the son of a local gang leader. The day he decided to intervene, after failed attempts to get help from the school and police, the gang leader came to his home that same afternoon. There was a price, he was told, for being left in peace. "For more than a year we lived under indescribable stress," the driver said. At the time of our conversation, both men, father and son, were in prison following one of many police raids targeting the driver's neighborhood. He knew that critics of the state of exception had raised concerns about due process, constitutional limits, and democratic safeguards. He did not dismiss those concerns. But they competed with something more immediate and tangible. He did not dismiss those views. But they competed with something more concrete and urgent. For the first time in years, he felt relief that his daughter would come home safely.

Citizens rarely experience security as an ideological question. They experience it as a daily calculation about risk, predictability, and whether their families can plan for tomorrow. For policymakers, this creates a profound challenge. When democratic institutions fail to reduce violence in the short term, public demand shifts toward whoever appears capable of acting decisively. Support does not necessarily signal a rejection of democracy. It reflects a search for urgent relief.

In El Salvador, the state of exception—combined with well-documented negotiations between the government and gang leaders—produced one of the sharpest crime declines in modern history: The national homicide rate fell from approximately 52 per 100,000 residents in 2021 to roughly 2.4 per 100,000 by 2023. For communities living with chronic violence, crime reduction is not a statistic; it marks the boundary between fear and possibility. To be clear, the state of exception was not solely centered on stronger policing tactics and harsher incarceration measures. This policy also encompassed the suspension of key due process guarantees—including the right to legal counsel and the presumption of innocence—enabling mass arrests without individual charges.

The rising appeal of autocratic measures is only one of four major global shifts affecting the way local systems are required to deliver solutions to complex public problems. Along with autocracy, the widespread presence of new technologies in every aspect of private, civic, and institutional life; the disruptive effects of climate change; and the game-changing weakening of multilateralism exacerbate the challenges that public, private, and social problem solvers are facing globally.

Democracy's central tension is clear: Legitimacy rests on both procedure and performance. When governments cannot show tangible improvements in people's lives—sustained reductions in homicide, extortion, and serious violence—procedural commitments alone rarely sustain public confidence.

Fragmentation by Design: Why Cities Struggle to Deliver

These global shifts find their most concrete expression at the city level, where governments confront both the complexity of violence and the demand to deliver visible results. Cities sit at the intersection of global transformations and citizens' expectations for effective policy delivery. National governments establish legal and policy frameworks, but cities govern the street, the settlement, the school, the police station, and the community center where safety is ultimately produced or withheld. City leaders are close enough to violence to see it at the resolution that matters and politically accountable enough to experience the consequences of failure directly. Understanding why cities struggle therefore requires examining not only what they do but where and how they intervene within a complex governance system.

Public security is, by design, a fragmented policy domain. Responsibilities are distributed across institutions operating at different levels and branches of government, each with distinct mandates, budgets, cultures, and accountability structures. Police, prosecutors, courts, social services, municipal agencies, community organizations, and international partners operate according to institutional logics that were rarely designed to function in an integrated way. Cities compound this fragmentation because they simultaneously confront high-incidence crime, criminal economies, and organized violence operating at different scales and requiring different institutional responses. Security and justice systems have consistently struggled to govern this convergence. The result is a persistent gap between how violence is diagnosed, how strategies are designed, and what actually happens on the ground. From a systems-thinking perspective, violence often persists because local institutions intervene too late, too weakly, or in fragmented ways that fail to alter the underlying dynamics producing harm.[2]

This structural failure also has a spatial expression. In cities across the world, disadvantage concentrates geographically, clustering poverty, unemployment, family instability, inadequate housing, and institutional abandonment in the same neighborhoods where violence is most acute. Robert Sampson's work on concentrated disadvantage demonstrates that these conditions are mutually reinforcing: The colocation of multiple forms of deprivation produces social dynamics—weakened collective efficacy, eroded informal social control, and normalized exposure to violence—that no single sectoral intervention can resolve.[3] The taxi driver's neighborhood was not random. Fragmented institutions do not simply fail to coordinate; they fail to coordinate repeatedly in the same places, generation after generation, producing the territorial geography of violence that cities then struggle to explain and address. Integration is therefore not only a coordination challenge; it is also a question of spatial justice.

Four global shifts are deepening these structural conditions, each shaping urban security through different mechanisms. The first is democratic erosion. The V-Dem Institute's 2026 Democracy Report documents that democracy has declined to levels not seen since the late 1970s, while Latinobarómetro surveys show declining support for democracy across Latin America.[4,5] Crime has become a powerful political argument against systems perceived as slow, fragmented, and constrained, and that argument often gains force even where objective security conditions improve because public narratives about crime consistently outpace crime statistics in shaping political demand.[6] As central governments consolidate power, municipal authorities often lose the autonomy, resources, and jurisdiction required to govern security effectively, even as evidence increasingly points to cities as the most appropriate level for designing and coordinating violence-reduction strategies.[7] (Muggah et al. 2016).

The second of these shifts relates to the way technology is simultaneously transforming criminal networks and the local systems mandated to counter them. Criminal organizations are rapidly integrating encrypted communications, digital financial tools, cryptocurrencies, and social media ecosystems into recruitment, coordination, and financial operations, often adapting faster than public institutions charged with responding to them.[8] In some contexts, criminal groups have also used influencers and digital platforms to normalize illicit economies and expand recruitment networks beyond traditional territorial boundaries.

At the same time, cities now possess unprecedented technical capacity to improve coordination through shared data systems, interoperability platforms, and predictive analytics capable of addressing many of the information-sharing failures that historically undermined interagency collaboration. Yet these same tools carry substantial risks. Research on predictive and algorithmic systems has shown that poorly governed technologies can reinforce patterns of unequal surveillance and discriminatory enforcement, often accelerating existing institutional biases faster than ethical and legal safeguards can adapt.[9] The challenge for cities is therefore not simply technological adoption but governance: building systems that improve coordination and responsiveness without deepening mistrust or reproducing exclusion.

Climate change, the third major shift, is reshaping urban security in ways that go beyond the familiar language of stress and instability. As the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina demonstrated, major climate events do not simply displace communities; they expose and accelerate preexisting governance failures, reshaping the territorial and social conditions that security systems must interpret and respond to. The widespread breakdown of public order, institutional coordination, and trust following the disaster illustrated how environmental shocks can rapidly intensify existing social vulnerabilities and governance fragmentation.[10] In Nairobi's flood-prone informal settlements of Mathare and Korogocho, climate-related displacement and environmental shocks continuously alter population density, economic vulnerability, and community composition faster than local systems and interventions can adapt. While the interaction between climate change and urban security governance remains unevenly understood, it is increasingly clear that cities must build adaptive coordination systems capable of operating in environments where territorial conditions and vulnerability patterns are constantly shifting.

The fourth major shift is the weakening of the multilateral system. At its strongest, this system made important contributions: financing experimentation, generating global evidence, and providing cities with political and technical support to pursue balanced approaches to violence reduction. Yet even at its height, the system struggled to solve a central implementation problem: how to adapt broad models and global evidence to highly specific local conditions. As development scholars such as William Easterly have argued, externally designed solutions often struggle when they are insufficiently adapted to local political and institutional realities.[11]

Cities were often presented with portfolios of interventions—community policing, violence interruption, youth employment, sports and social-cohesion programs—without sufficient institutional capacity to sequence, combine, and adapt them to local realities. What the current weakening of multilateral cooperation removes is not only funding but also the technical assistance, peer-learning infrastructure, and operational support that made local experimentation possible. Cities increasingly require a translational layer: institutional capacity capable of converting global knowledge into locally viable strategies. This means adapting evidence and interventions to specific combinations of violence drivers, institutional fragmentation, and political constraints. This challenge also reflects a broader shift identified by Beth Simone Noveck and other scholars of public problem-solving: Governments are no longer defined primarily by their ability to design policy but by their capacity to continuously learn, integrate knowledge across sectors, and adapt solutions collaboratively under conditions of uncertainty.[12] In the context of urban violence, this means building local systems capable not only of adopting external models but of translating, testing, coordinating, and iteratively adjusting them within rapidly changing political and territorial environments.

Under conditions of persistent insecurity, social pressure, and institutional fragmentation, political systems gravitate toward simplified responses. Leaders across regions have mobilized support around punitive strategies: militarization of urban space, mass incarceration, and states of exception. This demand emerges not only from citizen support for heavy-handed measures but also from communities that have resigned themselves to accepting rights violations as the price of approaches that at least appear to deliver results. This pattern is visible across Latin America: in Ecuador's emergency security declarations, in the electoral success of law-and-order platforms across multiple countries, and in

polling data showing broad support for *mano dura*—Spanish for "iron fist," and the term commonly used across Latin America to describe governing through the deliberate suspension or erosion of institutional constraints on security forces, using criminal threats as the justification—approaches even where democratic norms remain formally intact.

The demand for simplicity is political. But the inability to deliver complexity is structural.

Modern public administration still operates through largely sectoral and hierarchical structures inherited from the nineteenth century. Transportation, housing, health, education, and security systems were designed to address bounded and relatively stable problems. Contemporary urban violence does not fit those boundaries. The drivers of violence are transversal by nature, while the institutions responsible for responding to them often compete, duplicate efforts, or fail to coordinate altogether. The result is a structural mismatch between the architecture of the state and the complexity of the contemporary city. Repressive shortcuts remain politically attractive in part because governments struggle to deliver integrated responses at the scale and speed citizens demand. Urban governments that accumulate social agendas without the capacity to deliver fundamental services lose legitimacy, creating space for substitutes: corporate actors, populist movements, and informal powers that fill what the state cannot. In this context, governing urban security effectively requires both political legitimacy and institutional capacity for coordination and delivery.

Default Responses Under Pressure

When cities lack integration infrastructure, political pressure generates responses from whatever institutional capacity exists, producing recognizable defaults that are structural outputs of fragmented systems under pressure.

Mano dura requires minimal cross-sector coordination, systemic diagnosis, and portfolio logic. A vertical security sector can implement mano dura responses unilaterally and deliver visible results on short timelines. Critically, when the state holds a decisive power asymmetry over criminal groups, it can suppress violence durably. The tough-on-crime measures in the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte and, more recently, El Salvador demonstrate that repressive strategies can produce real, sometimes lasting reductions in different forms of violence and crime. Mano dura is not reducible to territorial control; it typically combines mass incarceration, militarized policing, suspension of due-process guarantees, and deliberate concentration of security decision-making in the executive. What distinguishes it from legitimate hardline enforcement is not the use of force but the removal of the constraints that govern how force is used and who it is accountable to.

What the violence numbers do not capture is how mano dura functions simultaneously as a political consolidation strategy. In El Salvador, the state of exception did not simply remove gang members from the streets, it provided the institutional cover for eliminating a functional opposition, capturing the judiciary, rewriting the constitution, and abolishing presidential term limits. The gangs were the justification; the dismantling of checks and balances was the product. Nayib Bukele's security strategy and his political consolidation were not separate projects—they were the same project.

The V-Dem Institute classifies El Salvador among the most rapidly autocratizing countries of the past decade, with the speed of democratic decline comparable only to military coups.[13] Even within the security policy community, there is recognition that mano dura strategies face structural limits: They depend on a power asymmetry that must be actively maintained, legal conditions that require continuous political authorization, and a governing coalition capable of sustaining both. These are not permanent foundations. The window that concentrated force opens is real, but what gets built inside that window determines whether results outlast the exceptional conditions that produced them. In El Salvador, what has been built is political consolidation, not integration infrastructure. The institutions that would hold gains beyond the exceptional moment—an independent judiciary, accountable police, accessible justice—are precisely those that mano dura required dismantling to function.

The deeper warning is this: Mano dura does not succeed despite democratic failure—it succeeds because of it. Where democratic institutions are fragmented, underresourced, and have repeatedly failed to protect families like the taxi driver's, the political ground for authoritarian consolidation is already prepared. Citizens do not turn to mano dura because they have abandoned democratic values. They turn to it because democratic governments abandoned them first—in the neighborhood, on the street, at the school gate. Every homicide that democratic institutions fail to prevent, every extortion that goes unanswered, every year of accumulated insecurity without a credible response, is a political gift to leaders who offer clarity through the removal of constraints. Reframing this dynamic—making visible what democratic security delivery can achieve and why it matters—is itself a strategic imperative.[14] Unless democratic governments organize themselves to deliver safety, autocracy will not need to argue for itself. It will simply fill the space that democratic failure leaves open.

Prevention Without Integration: Three Failure Modes

Performative prevention, naive preventionism, and ideological preventionism share a common failure—programs and interventions deployed without enforcement accountability, sequencing logic, or measurable targets tied to violence outcomes—but they arrive at that failure through different routes and require different responses.

Performative prevention is a political strategy—distinct from genuine prevention efforts that are simply deployed without the sequencing, coordination, and enforcement accountability that would make them effective. The distinction matters: The critique here is not of prevention as a domain but of its deliberate deployment as a substitute for the harder integration work. For governments facing progressive constituencies or donor pressure, prevention provides rhetorical cover: Crime is structural, solutions are long-term, and metrics are difficult to define. For nongovernmental organizations, it sustains organizational relevance and funding streams without requiring the uncomfortable proximity to enforcement that integrated approaches demand. For private sector actors, corporate social responsibility programming in violence-affected communities generates reputational value largely decoupled from measurable safety outcomes. For international partners, it funds cleanly, reports well, and transfers neatly into global indicators that bear little relationship to whether anyone in the taxi driver's neighborhood is safer. Across all four, the incentive structure is the same: Activity is visible, attribution is diffuse, and accountability for results is structurally absent. The program exists to demonstrate action, not to deliver results. When procedure becomes the product—meetings replacing decisions, documentation replacing coordination, process replacing outcomes—the gap between what institutions report and what communities experience is not a failure of design. It is the design.

Naive preventionism is a different problem entirely. Practitioners who lead with upstream social intervention are often motivated by genuine evidence: The causal links between deprivation, exclusion, and violence are real, and the long-term case for prevention is intellectually sound. What naive preventionism underestimates is not the value of prevention but the sequencing constraint it faces: Prevention programs cannot take root in territories where criminal actors retain physical and social control. In those conditions, the first task is not to prevent—it is to intervene, stabilize, and create the conditions under which prevention becomes possible. Prevention is not retroactive; it requires a territorial and social baseline that enforcement must first establish. Prevention deployed without that baseline is not wrong in theory—it is wrong in sequence. The sophistication gap is not about values or evidence. It is about the capacity to define the right problem before pursuing the right solution. As Noveck argues, effective public problem-solving requires building a shared understanding of an urgent challenge that matters to real people, diagnosing before prescribing, and resisting the tendency to default to preferred interventions when circumstances demand a different response.[15] It is about recognizing that an integrated strategy must design all elements together while deploying them in the order that conditions on the ground demand, and that leading with prevention in the wrong conditions produces the same visible inaction as performative prevention, even when the intention is entirely different.

Ideological preventionism is a third variant, and the hardest to address. Some practitioners reject enforcement on principled grounds: State coercion is inherently suspect, engagement with police and prosecutors compromises community trust, or the security system that integration would strengthen is itself a source of the harm being addressed. These are not naive positions—they reflect real historical experience of institutional violence, particularly in communities where the state has been predator as much as protector. That experience is rational and must be taken seriously in any honest diagnosis. What it cannot become, however, is a permanent reason to foreclose engagement. The question is not whether enforcement institutions are imperfect—they are, often profoundly so. The question is whether refusing to engage with them produces better outcomes for the communities that preventionists are trying to protect. In most contexts, it does not. Integration requires working with institutions as they are while building toward what they should become, which is a more demanding position than either endorsing them uncritically or refusing to engage with them at all.

All three leave communities unprotected, but the response to each is distinct. Performative prevention requires political accountability and outcome-linked metrics that expose the gap between reported activity and actual results. Naive preventionism requires not criticism but a more complete theory of change, one that locates prevention within an integrated portfolio rather than treating it as a standalone strategy. Ideological preventionism requires the harder conversation: acknowledging the legitimate grievances that drive the refusal to engage while making the case that transformation requires presence, not abstention. The failure mode differs; the consequence is the same.

The compounding effect of these defaults is structural. Mano dura concentrates power and removes constraints. Prevention without integration absorbs resources and produces activity without results. What remains is a system in permanent fragmentation: cities accumulating disconnected programs with no shared diagnostic, no integration mechanism, and no one responsible for the portfolio; national governments simultaneously stripping municipal authority through direct security deployment, resource capture, or legislative centralization of security competencies. Individual interventions may show local results—the aggregate does not move. Mayors are left operationally responsible for violence they cannot govern. The layer of government closest to the problem and most capable of reading its specific configuration is progressively disempowered. This is a description of a system producing exactly the outcomes its architecture was designed to produce, and one that makes mano dura and performative prevention perpetually attractive because the alternative requires a level of coordination that the system structurally resists.

This is the condition the cities examined next chose to confront—and found ways to demonstrate that these defaults are not destiny.

How Cities Are Responding: Integration in Practice

What distinguishes cities that have produced sustained safety improvements—ones that simultaneously strengthened rather than eroded the state's legitimate authority—is the construction of integration as a governance function: a persistent institutional capacity to align actors across fragmented systems, sequence interventions into a coherent portfolio, and sustain that alignment across the political pressures that routinely destroy coordination efforts.

The evidence from city experience across contexts points to four integration practices that recur wherever progress has been made. The cases below are not complete portraits; they are evidence for a structured argument about what integration requires.

Problem Framing: The First Integration Move

The most consequential integration move comes before any intervention: developing a shared, data-supported definition of the specific public safety problem to be solved. This is harder than it sounds. Noveck (2021) argues that effective public problem-solving begins with disciplined collaborative problem definition: a process of identifying the specific problem to

be solved, its root causes, the populations it affects, and the conditions that sustain it.[16] Institutions operating in parallel develop their own problem definitions calibrated to their mandates—police frame violence as an enforcement deficit, social agencies frame it as a deprivation problem, justice institutions frame it as a capacity issue. Each framing is defensible within its silo. Together, they produce fragmentation: parallel diagnoses of the same reality that generate parallel responses with no shared logic. The precondition for integration is a problem frame that all key actors accept, built from evidence granular enough to identify who is driving violence, through what mechanisms, in which specific places, and shared explicitly enough that it creates genuine common ground rather than nominal alignment around vague shared goals.

Baltimore's Gun Violence Reduction Strategy illustrates what disciplined problem framing looks like in practice.[17] The city's systematic shooting reviews—regular structured meetings where police, probation officers, prosecutors, community representatives, and outreach workers examined every shooting incident together—were primarily a problem-framing mechanism before they were anything else. Rather than each institution working from its own partial picture, all actors were required to look at the same granular data: who was involved, what network relationships connected them, what prior interactions each agency had already had with the individuals involved, and what the incident revealed about emerging conflict dynamics. The shared picture that emerged was the foundation on which everything else—direct notifications to individuals at high risk of violence, coordinated enforcement actions, and referrals to outreach and social services—was built. Close to real-time information-sharing systems allowed that shared frame to be continuously updated, creating a living diagnostic rather than a static assessment. Underlying this approach is Mark Kleiman's core insight: that swift and certain consequences alter behavior more effectively than severe ones, and that delivering certainty requires coordination across agencies that typically operate in isolation.[18] Independent evaluation found that homicides and shootings declined by approximately 25 percent in the Western District during the strategy's first 18 months of implementation.[19] (Kapustin & Chalfin, 2024) . Results remain contingent on sustained political protection; the coordination infrastructure has not yet reached the threshold of self-sustaining institutionalization that would allow it to survive a wholesale change in political direction.[20]

What Baltimore also demonstrates is that problem framing is itself a coordination technology. The shooting review did not just produce information—it created a recurring obligation for institutions to confront the same reality together, building the interagency relationships and shared vocabulary that coordination depends on. The diagnostic process was the integration process.

Nairobi, Kenya and Cali, Colombia show that the diagnostic finding varies radically by context—and that deploying the wrong intervention for the problem configuration is worse than deploying nothing, because it consumes political capital and community trust without producing results.

In Nairobi's informal settlements of Korogocho, Kayole, and Mathare, the primary fragmentation was relational: a fundamental rupture between communities and security actors. Between April and August 2020, Mathare recorded 17 deaths attributable to excessive police force. The Pamoja Mtaani program, implemented by The Legend Kenya in partnership with the Life & Peace Institute from July to December 2021, addressed this prior condition directly (Peace in Our Cities, 2024).[21] Structured dialogue sessions, joint peace actions—including shared meals at police stations—and community mapping exercises involving youth, women, police officers, and local administrators has helped to rebuild the foundational relationship that any subsequent enforcement or prevention work requires. Over six months, more than 700 people participated in 300 dialogue sessions and nearly 400 community activities. The program's gender architecture reflected a dual imperative. Separate sessions for women addressed gender-based violence and the specific trauma of mothers who had lost children to extrajudicial killings. Separate sessions for male youth addressed identity, purpose, and alternative constructions of male belonging, drawing on the insight that Richard Reeves identifies in his analysis of male disadvantage: When legitimate institutions withdraw structured pathways to meaningful roles, criminal networks fill the

vacuum with precisely the identity and belonging that young men are seeking.2[2] The decision to disaggregate before integrating was itself a diagnostic finding: The fragmentation ran within the community along gender and generational lines, not only between the state and the community. Deploying an integrated, balanced approach in Mathare without first addressing the police-community relationship would have accelerated violence. The sequencing is the strategy.

In Cali—a city operating under severe organized crime pressure, with multiple armed actors competing for territorial control—the diagnostic step was more complex and more consequential.[23] Standard community violence intervention approaches assume a baseline of territorial accessibility that organized crime conditions frequently deny: Credible messengers may be co-opted, community mediators may be mistaken for negotiators with criminal actors, and external operators may lack safe access to the neighborhoods where intervention is most needed. Cali's integration work, therefore, began by mapping which territories were controlled by which actors, under what conditions external operators could safely function, and which community figures retained sufficient autonomy from criminal networks to serve as credible intermediaries—before any program design decisions were made. The Abriendo Caminos program that emerged from this prior step coupled violence interruption with community mediation and youth development, calibrated to the specific organized crime geography rather than imported from an external model. An impact evaluation documented a 74 percent homicide reduction in the Charco Azul neighborhood and successful interruption of revenge violence cycles.[24]

Coordination Architecture: Making Integration Work

Two cities illustrate how coordination architecture can be built under radically different institutional conditions—one without command authority, one without additional resources—and what both share is more instructive than what distinguishes them.

Bogotá's Sistema Distrital de Justicia demonstrates that coordination does not require command authority.[25] Colombia's centralized legal structure places criminal justice authority at the national level—Bogotá's mayor cannot command prosecutors, judges, or corrections officials. Yet between 2016 and 2020, the city demonstrated that convening power—backed by democratic legitimacy and mayoral visibility—can substitute for formal command when deployed intentionally. Bogotá's most consequential innovation was the design and integration of differentiated attention routes—pathways through the justice and security system built around the actual experience of citizens navigating institutional mandates, not around the convenience of the institutions themselves. Casas de Justicia were the physical expression of this logic: prosecutors, public defenders, social workers, psychologists, police, and community mediators brought together under one roof in neighborhoods where residents had historically faced prohibitive barriers to the formal justice system. Community justice mechanisms—conciliation, mediation, arbitration—provided legally recognized resolution pathways for conflicts that would otherwise have escalated to violence, reducing the load on formal courts while simultaneously building the community-state relationship that enforcement depends on. Angélica Durán-Martínez's analysis of criminal violence in Colombia and Mexico provides essential context: Where state legitimacy is structurally weak, justice accessibility is itself a security intervention—which is precisely what the Casas de Justicia were designed to deliver.[26]

Pelotas, Brazil, provides the most complete documented example of coordination architecture institutionalized at the portfolio level.[27] The Pacto Pelotas pela Paz's five operational pillars—prevention, law enforcement and justice, reduction of illicit markets, urbanism, and technology and data—function as a portfolio with internal logic rather than parallel programs. The Observatory of Public Security and Social Prevention generates diagnostic intelligence. The Municipal Integrated Management Office coordinates across institutions and serves as the backbone agency. The Special Advisory, anchored directly to the mayor's office, provides the political authority to sustain cross-sector alignment across electoral cycles. Technology is embedded as integration infrastructure—the shared operating picture that prevents agencies from

reverting to separate logics. An independent impact evaluation found that the pact was associated with a 9 percent reduction in homicides and a 7 percent reduction in robberies citywide.[28]

What Bogotá and Pelotas share is more important than their differences. Neither waited for the perfect institutional conditions. Neither required new additional financial resources. Both treated coordination as a governance design problem—and solved it by building the architecture that fragmented systems do not generate spontaneously: shared diagnostic capacity, a backbone agency with cross-sector authority, and political protection anchored at the highest available level of municipal government.

Legitimacy as Infrastructure, Not Outcome

The third integration practice is treating legitimacy as a prerequisite rather than a downstream result—the condition without which enforcement cannot function and prevention cannot take root.

The Nairobi case makes this argument most directly. The pattern recurs across contexts. Mexico City's Alto al Fuego—adapting the focused deterrence model of Boston's Operation Ceasefire—paired deterrence messaging with credible offers of assistance to individuals willing to disengage from violence.[29] The program targeted specific neighborhoods and networks, convening law enforcement, social service providers, and community organizations around a shared list of highest-risk individuals. Those individuals received a direct message: Continued violence would trigger a coordinated enforcement response, while disengagement would open access to employment, housing, health services, and personal support. The offer was credible only because the coordination infrastructure behind it was real—not a promise from a single agency but a commitment from a coalition that had aligned around the same individuals.

Evidence from procedural justice training across Mexico City's police force reinforces the legitimacy argument from a different angle. Tom Tyler's foundational research demonstrates that people are more likely to comply with the law and cooperate with authorities when they perceive the process as fair—when officers explain their decisions, treat people with dignity, and apply rules consistently—regardless of the outcome of any specific encounter.[30] When Mexico City officers received structured training in these principles, public satisfaction increased and complaint rates declined.[31] Legitimacy gains at the officer level translated into measurable community-level outcomes, demonstrating that the relationship between enforcement and trust runs in both directions—and that communicating this relationship publicly is as important as building it operationally.[32] Like Pelotas, Mexico City now faces the challenge that follows early success: institutionalizing what worked as pilots into governance arrangements durable enough to survive leadership transitions, budget cycles, and the political pressures that routinely cause cities to abandon what is working precisely when it begins to produce results.

Adaptive Precision: Dynamic Concentration in Practice

The fourth integration practice is adaptive portfolio management—the institutionalization of real-time learning and adjustment across the full intervention portfolio as conditions change. The intellectual foundation of this approach draws from Kleiman's concept of dynamic concentration: the idea that violence prevention and enforcement resources should adapt as violence shifts across territories and groups, rather than remain fixed in static zones.[33] Criminal actors respond to pressure by moving, adapting, and exploiting new territorial opportunities, requiring cities to continuously recalibrate their interventions.

Beginning in 2022, Rosario, Argentina, faced an acute escalation of organized crime violence driven by competition between local drug trafficking groups. In response, the city implemented Targeted Neighborhood Interventions across nine priority zones, deploying interdisciplinary teams tailored to each neighborhood's specific dynamics. Rather than applying a standardized intervention model citywide, authorities combined enforcement, outreach, social services, and

environmental improvements based on evolving local conditions. To sustain this adaptive approach, the city established the Integrated Benefits Forecast (IBF) committee, which met weekly to analyze incoming violence and intelligence data, identify shifts in criminal dynamics across neighborhoods, and rapidly reallocate resources across the intervention portfolio.[34] This created a continuous intelligence-to-action cycle capable of responding to violence as it evolved, rather than relying on static annual or quarterly planning processes.

The Fragilities of Integration

The cases discussed also reveal that integration is not self-executing. Person-dependent coordination is the most common failure mode: When key officials depart, coordination mechanisms built on personal trust collapse. Baltimore's Gun Violence Reduction Strategy has survived multiple leadership transitions but required intensive rebuilding each time; Bogotá's Casas de Justicia represent the alternative: physically and legally institutionalized infrastructure designed to outlast the individuals who built it. Resource dependence without protected funding is the second structural vulnerability; coordination capacity is consistently the first casualty of fiscal pressure, precisely because its value is hardest to communicate when nothing is visibly failing. Integration is a structural solution to structural fragmentation; it is not a substitute for the political and accountability conditions that make honest delivery possible in the first place. What the city experiences documented here make clear is that these fragilities are manageable, but only through deliberate design choices that anticipate them from the start.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Effective integration requires the core capacity of public problem-solving: the ability to work across institutional boundaries, assemble the right expertise for the specific problem at hand, and adapt continuously as conditions and knowledge evolve. Four priorities define this capacity in practice for urban security.

What Integration Requires: Priorities for Practice

Engage in shared problem framing. The first question is not which program to run but what problem the city actually has—and whether all key actors are looking at the same answer. Problem framing must be granular enough to identify who is driving violence, through what mechanisms, and in which specific places, and must account for the structurally distinct dynamics that shape how different social groups experience and generate violence. A large body of evidence shows that the pathways that make young men disproportionately vulnerable to criminal recruitment are not the same as those that expose women disproportionately to intimate partner violence and gender-based harm (Reeves, 2022);[35] nor are they uniform across age, ethnicity, or community context. Local policymakers and service providers can assess minimum viable alignment by asking whether four conditions are simultaneously present: a shared diagnostic that all key agencies accept; a coordination mechanism with authority to convene across silos; data flowing in real time to operational decision makers; and a political principal willing to defend the strategy publicly.

Build an architecture for collaborative design and implementation. Cities require coordinating structures capable of convening agencies across sectors and sustaining implementation over time. In several contexts, offices of violence prevention (OVPs) have played this role by aligning data, interventions, and operational coordination across public safety, health, education, and community actors.[36] Recent research on OVPs highlights the importance of politically authorized entities that can maintain continuity across administrations, align agencies around shared priorities, and translate violence-reduction strategies into operational routines. Effective coordination also depends on shared data infrastructure, regular interagency decision-making processes, and mechanisms that reduce fragmentation across institutions. Even strong individual programs often fail to sustain impact when coordination mechanisms are weak or disconnected. These structures, therefore, require both political backing and fiscal protection to maintain collaboration over time.

Iterate to adapt to progress and evolving implementation capabilities. Solution design must build in flexibility from the start, not as a contingency but as a governance function. Sequence explicitly: legitimacy-building before enforcement intensification in low-trust contexts; territorial stabilization before prevention programs in organized-crime-controlled areas. Deploy technology as integration infrastructure, evaluated by whether it strengthens the shared operating picture and enables information flow across agencies, not by whether it adds capability to a fragmented system with no one responsible for the whole. Institutionalize the feedback loop between intelligence and resource allocation so that the portfolio adjusts as violence migrates, implementation reveals new information, and capabilities evolve. A strategy that cannot learn is not a strategy—it is a program.

Anchor solutions to political narratives. Integration is technically demanding and politically exposed. Without deliberate narrative work, complexity loses to simplicity every time, and mano dura will always be simpler to explain than a coordinated portfolio. Make the integrated logic visible: Show what sequencing produces, document results concretely, and connect outcomes to the political priorities that decision makers must defend publicly. Use trusted voices—community leaders, officers whose working conditions have improved through legitimacy building, residents of neighborhoods where integration has produced results—rather than institutional messaging. The political sustainability of integrated approaches depends as much on the quality of the narrative infrastructure defending them as on the quality of the operational infrastructure delivering them.[37] Alignment between what the strategy does and what political principals can credibly claim credit for is not a communications afterthought—it is a design requirement.

Conclusion

For multilateral organizations and international networks, these city-level realities point toward a different model of engagement. The most valuable function they can perform is creating the conditions for cities to build their own integration capacity: investing in local diagnostic infrastructure, supporting governance design, and convening structured peer exchange that surfaces how portfolio logic operates in practice across different contexts. This means shifting from a prescription model to a capacity model: from certifying which interventions have worked elsewhere to supporting cities in developing the translational function that converts global knowledge into locally grounded strategy. Peace in Our Cities represents this alternative, organized around peer learning and mutual accountability rather than program replication. The compendium this chapter contributes to is an exercise in exactly that function.

The taxi driver who felt relieved when his daughter's harassers were imprisoned was not voting against democracy. He was choosing safety. He chose the ability to sleep. For the first time, the state acted in a way that made his daughter less afraid—and him less powerless. For years, he had heard about reforms: more patrols, new initiatives, revised policies. None of it changed the fact that his family remained exposed. Until suddenly, it did.

This is democracy's test. Authoritarian approaches can reduce community violence, sometimes durably. What they cannot do is build the institutional capacity that holds safety beyond the exceptional conditions that produced it. Democratic governance does something harder and more cumulative: It combines credible accountability with credible opportunity, aligns fragmented institutions around shared goals, and builds delivery capacity that compounds over time into a governing capability applicable far beyond public safety. That capability requires political authorization, intentional design, protected funding, and leadership willing to defend complexity when simplicity is more attractive.

If democratic governments fail to organize themselves to provide safety, they risk something more corrosive than electoral defeat: the gradual erosion of the belief that democracy can protect ordinary families. Citizens rarely abandon democratic values outright, but when governments persistently fail to deliver safety, the political conditions for authoritarian consolidation compound. The responsibility is practical: Build institutions capable of protecting families like the taxi driver's without surrendering the principles that make democratic governance worth preserving.

Endnotes

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peace
IN OUR CITIES

About Peace in Our Cities

Peace in Our Cities (PiOC) is a unique global network of over 30 cities and more than 50 community-based and international partners.

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 Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies at New York University's Center on International Cooperation; the Stanley Center for Peace and Security; Co-founder and Principal, Rachel Locke; and Expert Advisor and Membership Liaison, Flavia Carbonari. To learn more, donate, or join, please contact info@peaceinourcities.org or visit www.peaceinourcities.org.