

> Local governments can take many steps to ensure that their populations have adequate and fair access to services and can develop mechanisms that act early to solve problems so they do not require the intervention of the formal justice system to redress wrongdoing. The fair allocation of services, accessibility, adequate administrative responses to complaints, and the provision of information, advice, and conflict-resolution alternatives are all actions local governments can take to prevent issues from reaching the formal justice system.

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CHAPTER 5

HARNESSING THE JUSTICE SYSTEM TO REDUCE VIOLENCE IN CITIES IN TIMES OF GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

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The justice system plays a key role in violence-reduction efforts in cities. Given its complexity in fulfilling various functions from different institutions, it does so directly and indirectly.

In this chapter we look at the criminal justice system—the set of official institutions that deal with crimes and those who commit them as well as their victims—and at the wider justice system, here understood as the institutions and mechanisms, not necessarily provided by the state, that solve conflicts between individuals, organizations, and the state. When we refer to access to justice, we are talking about people being able to solve conflicts within the law, having their rights upheld, and the possibility to redress wrongdoings.

The criminal justice system plays a large role in addressing violence because, generally, interpersonal violence and its use for other purposes constitute criminal offences. However, access to justice in its broader sense can also help prevent and avoid violence by solving potentially violent conflicts in a timely manner, providing pathways to address grievances without breaking the law, strengthening the legitimacy of state institutions, and making people feel they are treated fairly.

The justice system should also ensure that citizens are able to exercise their rights and have access to state services in a fair and equitable manner. An effective system helps individuals solve conflicts and resolve disputes in a peaceful manner and, when necessary, addresses violence and crime by investigating, prosecuting, sentencing, and delivering sanctions against offenders. Performing these duties responsibly, effectively, and fairly reduces violent conflict and builds legitimacy and reduces tensions between citizens and the state.

When the justice system does not work effectively and is hard to access, that impairs violence-reduction efforts. Without faith in the system or capacity for constructive conflict management, conflicts can escalate, and people can turn to violent means to protect their property and their rights and/or to impart their own version of justice.[2] Chronically ineffective, unresponsive, or corrupt justice systems can allow criminal groups to flourish, increasingly using violence against each other to exact their own forms of justice.[3] Furthermore, without proper checks on institutional authority, the state can end up exerting violence on its own citizens.

For all these reasons, developing an effective, fair, trusted, accessible, and solutions-focused justice system is essential to achieve peaceful societies that sustain over time.

Cities, Local Government and Access to Justice

Formal justice systems in many countries may operate at different levels, with criminal justice often imparted by national or state institutions. Justice systems often have a hierarchy where the national or state level has precedent over local laws and institutions. Cities are in an intermediate place in these efforts, but they still have significant levers to develop parts of the justice system and justice-based approaches that better contribute to violence-reduction efforts. To do so effectively, they must work in close partnership with state, federal, and national institutions.

As the key operators at the local level, city governments are the primary service providers for citizens, making them more capable than higher levels of government of establishing a strong presence in local, vulnerable areas. Even when they are not the main justice service providers, local governments can take actions and work in collaboration with other institutions to make justice services accessible, user friendly, and responsive to local needs. Furthermore, this does not require that such services are only performed by justice authorities; there exist informal or nonjustice mechanisms, such as community mediation or advice and support services, that are crucially complementary to the formal justice system (and in some cases are recognized as part of it) that can be supported, designed, and delivered by local governments.

Cities and local governments, given their economic and political weight, also have considerable influence over national policies. This is especially true when they pursue their agendas collectively and can therefore help shape national and international justice frameworks.

Impact of Global Trends on Justice and Access to Justice

Some of the trends explored in this compendium are having a significant impact on justice and access to justice and consequently have implications for violence-prevention efforts.

The rise of authoritarian regimes are, in many countries, undermining independent oversight and the ability to limit abuse by those in power. The World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index for 2025 reports that the rule of law weakened in a majority of countries (68 percent), continuing a trend over the past few years. One of its conclusions is that "rising authoritarianism—defined by weakening checks and balances and shrinking civic space—has been a primary force in this year's rule of law downturn, driven by widespread declines in factors measuring Constraints on Government Powers, Open Government, and Fundamental Rights. Additionally, falling scores in the indicators measuring the judiciary's checks on executive power and judicial independence indicate that judiciaries are losing ground to executive overreach, with rising political interference across justice systems."[4]

In several countries, cities have to work with national leaders who are suspending or weakening the balance of powers and the capacity of the justice system to check government action. City leaders can also be prone to support or even call for authoritarian and tough-on-crime measures when faced with increasing violence and criminality. In some cases, these approaches are supported by significant parts of the population.

Many city governments are, therefore, working in an environment that has weakened judicial oversight and less space for consensually built policies and is vulnerable to arbitrary measures by national governments. Furthermore, popular backlash against increased levels of crime puts pressure on decision makers to adopt tough-on-crime measures that can in extreme cases go against the rule of law. The weakening of multilateral institutions in charge of overseeing the implementation of international treaties limits the possibility of checking abuses by authoritarian leaders and the credible threat of consequences for those who act against internationally agreed on standards.

Against this backdrop, cities can take measures to make the justice system more accessible and responsive locally and to provide nonlegal alternatives to solving many of the problems that end up in the formal justice system. Networks of city governments and other institutions that promote common agendas and multilateral cooperation can push back against the weakening of the multilateral system.

The rapid development and widespread use of digital technologies and the incorporation of algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) in all walks of life, including the justice system, create significant opportunities. But they also carry significant risks. While AI and other digital tools can make justice easier to access and navigate and institutions more efficient, they can also make mistakes with serious juridical implications. These tools can reproduce biases and inequalities against

certain groups and individuals. As a result, the challenge around digital technology for cities is twofold. They must (1) stay abreast of developments in technology to understand their implications in justice provision and (2) make use of it wisely to improve services and outcomes while avoiding injustices and discrimination. In this process, cities will have to work closely with agencies and institutions at other government levels.

Improving the Justice System to Achieve More-Peaceful Cities

As stated in the introduction, the justice system makes important contributions to violence-reduction efforts in cities in a variety of ways. The rest of this chapter highlights interventions and initiatives based on four ways access to justice and the operation of the justice system can contribute to reducing violence in cities:

1. Shaping frameworks that define and enforce duties and limits to state action in the pursuit of security and peace.
2. Helping individuals access rights and services provided by the state.
3. Offering individuals mechanisms to solve conflicts.
4. Using investigative, prosecutorial, and sanctioning powers against violent offenders.

1. Preventing Violence by Defining and Enforcing Duties and Limits of State Action

The justice system is responsible for ensuring that state and local institutions act within the law and, when relevant, international law. A judicial power independent from the executive power should be able to limit state actions to prevent excesses, especially when violating rights or exercising violence on the citizens and noncitizens within its borders.

The oversight of the justice system on state action should be a safeguard against extreme measures that can be part of mano dura, or tough-on-crime, approaches. These state-imposed strategies can be effective in achieving some results, but they often do so at the cost of violating rights or exercising unlawful violence against all or part of society, and the results are not sustained over time. Independent and effective justice systems put an effective limit to state action and require policy makers to think about solutions that are respectful of national laws, the constitutional order, and international standards.

Organized crime is rising in many parts of the world, putting security at the top of people's concerns.[5] Because organized crime has the capacity to challenge the state through direct violence or corruption, some local and national governments have chosen to invoke exceptional measures that suspend legal safeguards or to override the legal order to achieve visible results.

In recent years, El Salvador has received much attention for this kind of action, where the state of exception has suspended many constitutional rights since 2022. This has allowed state forces to take measures that are against the country's legal order to reduce violence. The notable decrease in violence and rise in perception of safety have made these measures popular, despite the fact that now up to 80,000 young people have been detained without due process.[6]

In other countries, states of exception have also been used to address security and violence problems. In the past four years, Honduras (2022–2026), Perú (2025), and Ecuador (2024–2026) have used this approach to tackle security crises.[7] How recurring and permanent these states of exception become in a context of increased transnational organized crime is an open question. While they can be effective in the short term at reducing violence, they can often be the first step in a process of increasingly authoritarian measures.

The growing use of authoritarian measures to tackle security issues and violence, in some cases with popular citizen support, combined with weakened multilateralism, is presenting a significant global challenge to peace and security.

International justice frameworks are essential for regulating state behaviors to ensure they are fair, rules based, and legitimate. Yet the weakening of the multilateral system, especially around international human rights frameworks and courts, makes it more difficult to limit national governments by applying international standards and mechanisms. This is especially true when national justice systems do not act effectively or when they are co-opted, dissolved, or ignored by the government.

In summary, authoritarian measures are often put forward as necessary to address out-of-control crime and violence. In some cases, harsh measures without judicial guarantees are implemented temporarily through states of emergency or exception. But in many cases these can be extended for many years, which further erodes justice systems and trust in them. The implementation of heavy-handed measures by authoritarian-leaning leaders can arouse popular support if they make people feel safe or perceive that something is being done about crime even if they overstep legal constraints and democratic oversight.[8] This is especially the case if there is a perception that crime is out of control and that the justice system is too soft on criminals.

Cities have three primary mechanisms to counter rising authoritarianism:

A. Cities can work preventively to avoid situations where crime feels out of control, the type of context in which authoritarian measures usually take hold.

Security and violence need to be taken seriously before they get to levels where addressing them becomes difficult and collective fear rises. Cities should focus on implementing evidence- based, balanced, and fair policies to control crime and violence[9] and work on improving communication and people's perceptions of safety when there is a gap between trends and perceptions, thus reducing the support or attractiveness of extreme solutions.[10]

B. Cities and local governments can challenge in court states of exception and other measures that overstep the legal order, provided there is an independent judicial power.

Legal challenges and interventions by high courts have held back security actions that do not comply with legal frameworks or have investigated specific operations. This has been the case with measures that the federal and state governments have taken in the United States and in Brazil.

In the United States, the federal government in 2025 deployed National Guard troops in several cities, partly arguing that it aimed to tackle crime and lawlessness and that there was a risk of rebellion, despite no evidence having been presented to support these claims. These actions have put the federal government at odds with state governors and city mayors.[11] In Brazil, the Supreme Federal Court is looking into the police operation carried out in Rio in October 2025 that resulted in more than 120 deaths. This hearing is part of a wider case that claims human rights violations in police operations in Rio.[12]

Mayors in cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis have spoken out against heavy- handed operations by federal authorities and in some cases started legal challenges. A group of 80 local leaders and cities filed an amicus brief supporting the request by the state of Minnesota and the cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis for a restraining order against the federal deployment in Minnesota, arguing it is unlawful.[13]

Some legal challenges have been successful. For example, an injunction was granted to 50 local US governments to stop the federal government from withholding funding for cities it considers "sanctuary jurisdictions."[14] Additionally, a federal judge blocked the deployment of National Guard troops in Chicago in October 2025, and in February 2026, a judge issued an injunction against Immigration and Customs Enforcement making detentions without warrants in Oregon.[15]

C. Cities can work together through networking to build a collective global voice that can push back against the drift toward the weakening of the multilateral system and rising authoritarianism.

Strengthening the voice of cities globally can help counterbalance national governments with an authoritarian inclination. Peace in Our Cities is an example of a network of cities that works to promote balanced approaches to violence reduction.[16] The European Forum for Urban Security is another network that brings together nearly 250 cities and regions from 17 European countries to promote cooperation and support on crime prevention and security issues.[17] The recently launched Latin American and Caribbean Group on Security and Democracy, a "regional platform focused on strengthening evidence-based public security policies, multilevel cooperation and respect for the rule of law," is not exclusively city based, but cities and former city mayors are expected to play a significant role in it.[18]

There is growing interest in multilateral organizations in strengthening justice systems and making them more accessible and people centered, as is the case with the OECD's work on access to justice[19] and the Justice Action Coalition that is part of the Pathfinders initiative.[20] City-centered perspectives can be put forward through networks such as the World Organization of United Cities and Local Government, a network of cities across the globe that amplifies the voices of local governments and serves as an advocacy platform. In other areas of global concern such as climate action, networks of cities have managed to achieve a meaningful collective voice by networking and taking action together.[21] Against a potential crisis in the rules-based global order and rising authoritarianism, cities could also build together a vision of a different path.

2. Preventing Violence by Helping Individuals Access Rights and Services Provided by the State

The justice system plays a key role in ensuring citizens can access and exercise their rights and services that states have a duty to provide. It also participates in solving and adjudicating disputes between private parties and between citizens and the state. When laws, rules, and their enforcement are perceived as legitimate, individuals are more likely to comply and accept them.[22]

Local governments can take many steps to ensure that their populations have adequate and fair access to services and can develop mechanisms that act early to solve problems so they do not require the intervention of the formal justice system to redress wrongdoing. The fair allocation of services, accessibility, adequate administrative responses to complaints, and the provision of information, advice, and conflict-resolution alternatives are all actions local governments can take to prevent issues from reaching the formal justice system.

When the justice system needs to act, a system that solves problems and is a universal and fair guarantor of rights reinforces confidence in the state and strengthens its legitimacy. Trust between the state and citizenry around judicial matters has important implications for violence prevention and public safety.

Unfortunately, legal systems are often difficult to access and navigate for ordinary citizens, making them seem distant, complicated, and unable to solve everyday needs. Additionally, the state can be perceived as inaccessible, corrupt, or not impartial, and as a result, people are less likely to comply with its laws and rules. These obstacles generate mistrust and a lack of confidence in the capacity of the justice system. Consequently, in many cases where people cannot access and exercise rights, they will find ways of solving disputes, which can lead to parallel authorities (criminal governance) and the escalation of conflict into violence.[23]

In summary, improving access services, strengthening the credibility of the justice system, and ensuring justice services solve people's problems contribute to the reduction of violence in important ways:

- When the justice system is perceived as accessible, reliable and fair people are more likely to comply with laws that maintain peace.

– People can exercise their rights and solve their problems within institutional frameworks, reducing the pressure to solve problems outside the law, including through criminal groups or the use of mob justice.[24]

Recent reports have reinforced these shortcomings of the justice system, and they recommend making justice more people centered, accessible, and solutions oriented.[25] One such report is Justice for All, published in 2019 by the Task Force on Justice. It estimated that 5.1 billion people are deprived of justice worldwide, with 1.5 billion having criminal, civil, or administrative problems they are unable to solve and 4.5 billion being excluded from the social, economic, and political opportunities that the law provides.[26] The report recommends addressing structural issues within society that lead to justice problems as a key prevention approach, solving problems before they reach the justice system.

The report invites the reader to think about the "justice journey," the steps someone takes to resolve a justice problem, with the aim of achieving a satisfactory resolution through a process that is perceived as fair. It is important to note that a justice journey may be done outside the formal justice sector. The Justice for All report breaks down the justice journey into three stages: (1) empowering communities so that they can act when they need to solve a problem within the justice system, (2) improving access to people-centered justice services that respond to people´s needs, and (3) helping people achieve a fair resolution to their problems. In each of these stages, the report sets out a set of actions, which are summarized in table 1.

Table 1: The Justice Journey and Actions to Promote It

Empower people and communities	Access to people-centered justice services	Fair outcomes
Help people understand the law	Accelerate and simplify processes	Meet standards in human rights
Support people to seek solutions	Support alternative pathways to justice	Offer the right remedy
Invest in legal aid for the vulnerable	Provide one-stop services	Collect and disseminate data on outcomes
Increase participation in justice	Tailor services to justice needs	Establish effective grievance mechanisms

Similarly, the OECD in 2025 published the report Making Justice Systems More Effective and People Centered, which also emphasizes preventive and accessible justice. Its key proposals include clarifying points of entry and triaging in one-stop-shop or embedded settings, providing self-help and guided assistance, offering nonlawyer legal services, building community-based models, and emphasizing postresolution support to enforce outcomes and build resilience.[27]

A number of initiatives have helped facilitate access to justice for more people, especially vulnerable populations. Some of these initiatives are national in scope but can be replicated or harnessed by cities within those countries or in other places.

One-stop local justice centers. Some countries have set up one-stop-shops where citizens can access a variety of justice services in one place. These centers can be built in areas where vulnerable communities live and where people generally have more difficulty accessing centralized justice services.[28]

One such program, the Casas de Justicia (Houses of Justice), has been implemented in major cities across Colombia. The casas are located in areas where vulnerable populations can reach them easily. They house different justice services (and in some cases other services as well) under one roof, such as police inspectors, family courts, and conciliation services.[29]

Casas de Justicia deal with a variety of cases. One impact study that looked at their operation in three cities found that 33 percent of the cases they dealth with were family conflicts, around 25 percent were related to criminal law, about 15 percent were conflicts between neighbors, and 12 percent were debt related.[30] The same study found that for people who accessed Casas de Justicia, 50 percent of cases were effectively solved and that this is significantly higher than the resolution rate for a control group that did not use the services of Casas de Justicia.[31]

Although Casas de Justicia is a national program, the centers are set up by request from cities that have to fulfil certain criteria: catchment populations larger than 100,000 inhabitants, a physical space for the casa to operate, and local budget investment in infrastructure and maintenance. This is a good example of how cities can take the initiative in improving access to justice in partnership with national-level institutions. In this case, cities provide infrastructure and funds for operating costs, while institutions from different levels (local, national) provide services, all within operating guidelines that are articulated at the national level.

There is evidence that timely and effective access to justice services can reduce violence. A recent analysis of factors related to homicides in the city of Cali found that proximity to a Casa de Justicia constituted a protective factor against homicides and had a statistically significant effect in reducing homicides in adjacent areas.[32] Similar one-stop-shop initiatives to access justice services have been implemented elsewhere. In Ontario, Canada, for example, justice centers have been set up in several urban areas to bring together justice, health, and social services.[33]

Another approach is to place justice services within wider state-service provision centers that citizens already use, such as libraries, schools, health facilities, or domestic violence shelters. Some interventions, such as the Centros de Acceso a Justicia in Argentina, do not just house different services in one place but also have multidisciplinary teams that support people in solving their problems, using an integrated approach.[34]

Advice and nonlegal solutions to problems. The OECD and Justice for All reports also emphasize the need for identifying out-of-court solutions to legal problems. These include mediation and conciliation services to solve disputes (to which we will come back later), providing plain-language information, and regulating and promoting the use of paralegal services. Another important recommendation is for civil society organizations to offer support and advice to vulnerable populations for whom the legal system may be complicated and difficult to understand. The network of citizen advice centers in the United Kingdom is a good example of this form of support. Citizens Advice is a nonprofit organization that gives free advice to people on a variety of issues, including debt, access to state benefits, housing, consumer issues, and legal matters. The centers use different channels, such as telephone and online advice. Citizens Advice also has advisers in health centers throughout the country. Though independent, it is funded by a mix of public resources and other contributions. Citizens Advice reported that in 2024–2025, it had 1,900 advice centers and helped 2.7 million people.[35]

In the United States, some district courts have set up community justice centers, often in urban areas, that are an example of an integrated approach and problem-focused justice. These justice centers connect courts with wraparound services that are deeply tied to community, reinforcing strong connections to local communities and community-based organizations.[36]

Using technology to make services more accessible. AI and other kinds of technology are increasingly being harnessed to make access to justice easier. Their uses range from translating legal documents into different languages to providing advice on particular issues to using chatbots and apps to guide users through legal processes. For example, the OECD

report highlights the I-ACCESS My Rights Project, a chatbot that uses AI to provide age-appropriate and easy-to-understand legal information to children in Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania. It is designed for children 13 to 18, especially for those who have experienced abuse or crime. It provides information on rights and procedures and gives guidance on how to access support services.[37]

Another example, the Recovery and Resilience Plan, part of the Justiça+ program in Portugal, invested in new technologies to improve people's experience with the justice system. Technology was used to make judges work more efficiently and to process, manage, and store judicial information. The technology also improves the user experience by providing more alternatives to solve problems and access to services. A report on its implementation states that between 2022 and 2024, there were four million online consultations of court cases by citizens, and 410,000 services were accessed in 2022 through Balcão+, a single repository for different court services.[38]

Clearly, AI and other new technologies can support the process of making justice more accessible. They can facilitate more points of access by connecting systems and permitting online access to services and procedures. Chatbots and other apps can guide citizens and provide accessible information and simplify procedures. Some of these measures will require coordination with national jurisdiction institutions, but cities can take a proactive role in promoting new approaches that facilitate access to services. However, initiatives that improve access to services using new technologies should always be aware that some people do not have access to the latest technology or may not know how to use it. Even though the availability of different types of communication (voice, camera, chatbots) and AI can make technology easier to use, some people may still have access problems.

Based on these examples, there are several ways cities can improve access to justice system services and make the justice system more people centered:

- Provide guidance and support to vulnerable people and those most often excluded so they can more easily access justice services. This can be done directly by city staff or in partnership with community or civil society organizations such as Citizens Advice.
- Set up one-stop-shop facilities in vulnerable areas for citizens to access a variety of services in one place that is user friendly and easy to reach. This can be done through models such as the Casas de Justicia or Centros de Acceso a Justicia.
- Provide entry points to justice services in other accessible, community-focused locations (e.g., community centers and libraries).
- Provide plain-language, easy-to-understand guides and information on rights, procedures, and services. This can be done using new technology, some of which incorporates AI, such as chatbots.

3. Offering Individuals Mechanisms to Solve Conflicts

Another way the justice system can help reduce violence is by solving disputes and conflicts through processes that are perceived as legitimate, fair, and timely. This may be done within the legal and courts systems or outside of them.[39]

Some of the measures outlined above have aimed at making it easier for people to solve their legal problems by making justice services more accessible and friendlier. Still, solving disputes through the court or legal system can be cumbersome, resource intensive, and slow. Many people either do not reach out to the formal justice system to solve their problems or do not find their problems adequately addressed when they do so. An analysis of access to justice in Ibero-American countries found that only 34 percent of people with nontrivial legal needs know where to find good information

and advice, only 50 percent of those who want help with solving a dispute access an authority or organization for help, and only half of them have a resolution to their issue. Even then, a significant proportion of those who achieve a "resolution," 22 percent, do not feel it solved their problem.[40] So, most people do not manage to access support to solve disputes, and only a fraction of them have a resolution they feel has solved their problem.

An alternative to formal processes of dispute resolution is the use of mediation. Some state-run justice centers and courts can offer mediation as an alternative to a formal process. In other cases, mediation is offered by community organizations. Community mediation can solve many conflicts at an early stage without the need to go through a formal legal process and can be facilitated by trusted organizations or persons. By some estimates there might be 400 mediation centers in the United States that can mediate 400,000 disputes annually. Three quarters of them provide mediation for small claims courts and half for civil courts.[41]

In Cali, Colombia, community mediation has been used in excluded areas to help people where there is a low trust in formal justice institutions to solve community conflicts by reaching agreements with the help of local leaders trained as mediators. Most of the conflicts attended by community mediators have a positive resolution, thus solving many conflicts before they escalate and doing so quickly and on the spot. Community mediators are trained in how to refer more-complicated cases to local courts and Casas de Justicia. They also refer community members to other support services that may not be the legal justice system. In this way, community mediators act as a local form of problem-solving justice, focusing on addressing the root causes of a situation. A recent evaluation of this program concluded that community mediation and the formal justice system work hand in hand and complement each other, strengthening access to justice in areas with high levels of exclusion.[42]

A review of evaluations of conflict resolution and restorative justice interventions found that the evidence suggests these programs help reduce further community violence, which is reflected in lower recidivism rates and a decrease in gun violence in neighborhoods where they have been implemented.[43] The evidence therefore suggests that well-implemented mediation programs can contribute to reducing violence.

There are examples of mediation services that have used technology to make them more accessible for some people, for example, by carrying out mediations online. An evaluation of an online dispute resolution service for family cases in Ottawa County, Michigan, found that those who accessed online mediations had higher satisfaction levels with process fairness and were more likely to reach agreements than those who accessed nononline services. It also found that both types of mediations had similar levels of satisfaction with the outcome among users.[44]

In areas with high levels of violence where accessing formal justice services can be difficult or where people do not trust authorities, mediation can address many conflicts that could potentially turn violent. Cities can promote and support mediation either through their own service provision or through community-based organizations that often are trusted within communities with high levels of conflict.

As with other community-based approaches, mediation can be perceived as more legitimate and trusted than actions taken through law enforcement agencies or in formal legal settings. There is a parallel here with the way some cities are experimenting with health and social services teams acting as first responders to emergency calls involving people in distress or with mental health issues, with a view of trying to prevent a situation from escalating.[45] Community mediation can seem less aggressive and intimidating than solving a dispute with the intervention of a law officer or a judge. As with emergency responses, law enforcement and courts can be called in in case mediation does not reach a satisfactory solution.

Where there is a vexed history of relationship between communities and law enforcement agencies, where abuse in the use of force or corruption have been common, alternative conflict-resolution mechanisms can play an important role

in solving problems. Facing a rise in authoritarian measures in some parts of the world, cities can promote alternative community-based conflict-resolution mechanisms to reduce levels of conflict even within a context of harsh approaches taken by other levels of government.

4. Preventing Violence by Addressing Violent Crime and Criminal Offenders

The previous sections looked at ways the justice system can contribute to put limits on state abuse and help people exercise their rights and access services, helping build legitimacy and confidence in institutions. They also showed how justice systems can help solve disputes over a wide variety of issues, reducing the likelihood that conflict is settled through violence.

We now turn to the area of justice that intersects most directly with violence, especially violent crime: the criminal justice system and how offenders are dealt with.

Homicides and most cases of physical violence fall within the remit of criminal justice because of the harm they cause to other individuals and to communities. The criminal justice system tends to operate in primarily reactive ways, that is, responding to crime that has already happened, including punishing people who have broken the law. However, the system should also be considered one of the most powerful parts of any strategy that aims to prevent future crime and violence. This requires strategies that don't just focus on individual outcomes but rather on orienting criminal justice systems around effective deterrence and broader ecosystem approaches to violence and crime prevention.[46]

In some cases, criminal justice systems can reproduce harm, not only failing to prevent crime from happening but contributing to generating more violence. The criminal justice system, and especially the prison system when it doesn´t work, can be, as criminologists put it, "criminogenic."[47]

Impunity, especially if coupled with opportunities for illegal activities that generate high profits, can become fertile ground for high levels of violent crime. Identifying, bringing to trial, sentencing, and sanctioning offenders appropriately and fairly not only reinforces the law and punishes the offender but, when done impartially and efficiently, communicates something to potential offenders and to communities.

In this way, a criminal justice system that is effective can act as a deterrent to potential generators of violence. Focused deterrence, one of the most consistently well evaluated violence-reduction strategies,[48] relies to a great extent on the ability to deliver on the threat of sanctioning individuals and/or groups through the criminal justice system.

Focused deterrence strategies, when delivered with quality, must be credible and have swift and certain sanctions; indeed, the swiftness and certainty matter more when it comes to deterring crime than does the severity of punishment.[49] Delivering a message that those who continue to behave in a violent way will be prosecuted and sanctioned, and following up on that message, is a core part of focused deterrence. Not having the capacity to do so will compromise the ability to properly implement such a strategy. As Anthony Braga and Philip Cook note, "Deterrent impacts are ultimately determined by offender perceptions of sanction risk and certainty."[50] This is an example of harnessing the justice system in a targeted manner to obtain the best results in reducing violence.

The inability to identify and prosecute violent crime can contribute to the normalization of crime and criminal careers that overburden justice systems and can compromise national security. This is what Marcelo Bergman calls high-crime equilibriums, to which the failure of the criminal justice system has contributed.[51] He argues that reforms to criminal justice systems in Latin America in the past decades have not resulted in a more effective deterrence of crime. Part of the problem, in his view, is that the justice system does not perceive itself as a part of a crime-deterrence apparatus.[52] Places that have managed to significantly reduce violence from high-crime equilibriums have required a strong law

enforcement strategy focused on disrupting illegal economies and criminal groups. The challenge is doing it while respecting the rules-based order, without resorting to authoritarian measures, and making it legitimate.

An effective criminal justice system includes the capacity of law enforcement agencies to identify and apprehend offenders, building sound cases in court to determine responsibility, and delivering proportionate sentences aimed at reducing the likelihood of future crime, alongside its targeted deployment to disarticulate criminal organizations and disrupt illegal economies (alongside other administrative measures).

The remainder of this section will be divided in two parts, one on improving the work of prosecution and criminal courts, especially with the use of new technologies, and the other on how offenders are dealt with, thinking about preventing further violence.

Using AI and Other Technologies to Improve Criminal Justice Outcomes

The capacity and effectiveness of criminal justice and its contribution to reducing urban violence can be enhanced with the use of new technologies. This has been a field of rapid development, and how much it will change the playing field remains to be seen. It is also an area where there are concerns about some of the implications of new technologies in terms of rights, biases, accuracy, and opaqueness of the programs used.[53]

As technology evolves, allowing the capture of more information, and the analysis of different types of digital footprints increases massively, new technologies are being used to gather, review, and analyze evidence for criminal cases. These technologies include ballistics imaging, cell phone location and contact information, analysis of social media, analysis of myriad surveillance cameras now found in cities, body-worn cameras, license-plate-reading imaging, facial recognition software, and DNA analysis.[54] The capacity to collect and process more information is greatly enhanced by new technologies, but the information collected still needs to be reviewed and pieced together by detectives and prosecutors. In combination, the use of technology along with more and better detective teams can produce solid results.

For example, the Boston Police Department homicide-clearance project strengthened the homicides unit and brought in new techniques and protocols between 2012 and 2014 and managed to raise clearance rates from 47 percent in 2007–2011 to 66 percent when the intervention was made.[55] Additionally, the Oxford Institute of Technology and Justice has developed an AI Justice Atlas to map examples of how AI is being used and regulated in criminal justice systems in different countries. It serves as reference for cities and countries seeking to understand how this technology is being used in this field.[56] The atlas categorizes examples by roles: law enforcement, prosecutors, courts, defense.

Many jurisdictions have incorporated AI technology to improve their efficiency in managing cases as they are prepared to be brought to court and during proceedings. These include the use of software to prioritize urgent cases when there is a large caseload; tools for summarizing precedents, drafting motions, and generating legal research outlines; and technology to transcribe and analyze interviews and other information. These technologies have enabled prosecutors and courts to be more efficient at building cases and processing them in court.

In Buenos Aires, it is reported that the Prometea case-management system has automated 50 percent of the prosecutor's office workload and increased its productivity by 300 percent.[57] A similar case-management system is being used in Colombia.

Other technologies that aid decisions based on AI analysis have proven to be more controversial, and some examples bring attention to the challenges posed by the rapid incorporation of emerging technologies into criminal justice. These especially include technologies that assess the risk posed by people based on their previous history and personal characteristics. Some jurisdictions allow the use of such technology but with a human review and final decision-making

by people. In these cases, there is also fear that a lot of the data and programs that analyze it are owned by private companies, which makes it more difficult to regulate, access, and reinforce legal protections and privacy standards.[58]

Most US courts in all states now use some form of AI-based risk-assessment tools in the pretrial and sentencing stages of criminal litigation, though there are documented cases where these technologies have proven to be ineffective or have biases. One case was the smart policing initiative LASER (Los Angeles Strategic Extraction and Restoration Program) implemented by the Los Angeles Police Department: a predictive policing tool used to identify chronic offenders and crime hotspots. An audit revealed that half of the offenders identified had zero or one arrest for violent crime and 10 percent had no noteworthy interactions with police. After this audit, the police department abandoned the use of the technology. In Chicago, the use of a similar person-based risk assessment program by its police force also led to poor results.[59]

In Colombia, the prosecutor's office developed a program called PRISMA (Perfil de Riesgo de Reincidencia para Solicitud de Medidas de Aseguramiento) to help decide whether to request preventive detention of someone under investigation, based on their risk of recidivism. Using data from the police and the prosecutor's office, the algorithm predicts whether there is a high risk the person will commit a crime while awaiting trial and thereby helps inform decisions on whether to employ preventive detention. The system was implemented in 2016 but was later dropped because of its high risk of bias.[60]

Two big questions arise from the incorporation of these new technologies into criminal justice, especially AI, to analyze data and prioritize actions: How accurate, precise, and actionable is the information produced and how is this information used and followed up on?

AI and other advanced technologies are already being leveraged in many parts of the world, and their use will rapidly become more ubiquitous. Their application in administrative support tasks and in analyzing large amounts of data will significantly speed up many processes and can help make the justice system more efficient. City governments can provide police forces, prosecutors' offices, and judges access to these technologies and training and support to use them appropriately. Even in government arrangements where local authorities do not have direct control over justice sector institutions controlled at the national or state level, they can often support the work of these institutions with technology, training, and other facilities.

Improving the efficiency of the criminal justice system is necessary to reduce violence in areas with high levels of violent crime and impunity where the caseload overwhelms the system. Incorporating new technologies to help focus efforts, speed up processes, and deal with a larger number of cases is a promising area of development. On the other hand, the use of algorithms and more recently AI to aid decision-making in law enforcement, prosecution, and sentencing, and in deciding measures for offenders, is a field still riddled with uncertainty and dilemmas. Its deployment, especially the use of person-based prediction, raises questions about accuracy, biases, and infringement of individual rights.

Cities should pay careful attention to this field because of its rapid development, its potential impact on improving justice outcomes, and the dangers it poses in harming confidence and trust in the system and hurting community relations. Cities should review guidelines and recommendations on the use of technology and develop their own standards, protocols, and guidelines.[61] Cities can also consider carrying out pilots of promising technologies, with oversight and evaluation to monitor and control for potential biases and conflicts with individual rights.[62] Rolling out the use of technologies that could generate poor results and unfairly treat individuals and communities can undermine trust in authorities.

On balance, cities, in partnership with other levels of government and other institutional actors, should aim to use technology to improve the outcomes of the criminal justice system in helping deter violent crime, but they should do so carefully, monitoring its deployment and with oversight to reduce potential undesirable effects.

Preventing Violence by Working with Offenders

The sanctioning role of the justice system (either through sentences, fines, or other penalties) is intended to reinforce justice by holding offenders accountable in accordance with the law, but it can also contribute to improving safety and preventing further violence.

In some countries (the United States and many parts of Latin America), prison populations have become very large as justice systems have introduced harsher penalties to a larger number of offenses. In theory, incarceration can have several overlapping functions:

- **As punishment.** Restricting the freedom of movement of offenders is a way to make them pay for the harm they have done.
- **As incapacitation.** When behind bars, someone who might otherwise continue to commit crimes will not be able to do so, protecting the community.
- **As a period for rehabilitation.** Even though rehabilitation does not require being in prison, an emphasis on rehabilitation shifts the way an offender is treated during the period behind bars. The emphasis is on building up skills to avoid recidivism postincarceration.
- **As a deterrent.** Harsh custodial sentences are proposed as a message to other potential offenders of the consequences of committing a crime, which should deter them from doing so. However, several authors suggest that the deterrence effect of long, harsh sentences is overstated.[63]

The effectiveness of mass incarceration and severe sentences in reducing levels of crime has come under question because these measures can also inflict much harm on parts of the population and whole communities .[64] At the same time, reducing prisoner numbers in the United States has been possible without an increase in crime.

Marcelo Bergman has argued that in Latin America, the increase in the prison population not only has not helped to reduce criminality but has been a factor in the growth of criminality. This is due in part to the high rotation of people in prisons. According to Bergman, criminals in Latin America perceive periods in prison as a normal part of their life trajectory, so there is little deterrence effect.[65] Prisons in many countries are violent environments where convicted people connect to other criminals and criminal groups and often learn from them. In many places, prisons do not rehabilitate. Furthermore, there is often little support for formerly incarcerated individuals who are released and have to return to harsh living conditions where crime is one option for surviving.[66]

For many crimes there are alternatives to custodial sentences that can be more effective at preventing future crime and violence. Decriminalization of offenses that can be addressed in other ways can help reduce prison populations. So can diversion programs where offenders are given the opportunity to agree to commit to carrying out certain actions instead of going through a trial. Sentences can be noncustodial and focus on repairing the harm caused and rehabilitating offenders. There are many examples of the application of these measures to decrease numbers of people who serve custodial sentences.[67]

It is important that sentences respond to victims' desires and needs. Lenore Anderson has documented that many victims do not feel that the harm they have received is redressed by court trials and harsh sentences and that they would prefer that sentencing focus on working with offenders so they have opportunities and skills that allow them to find options outside of crime.[68]

As with criminal justice more broadly, technology can also play a role in offering alternatives to imprisonment for some types of crime. For example, some countries use electronic monitoring as an alternative to imprisonment. In Sweden, where it has been widely adopted since the 1990s, studies suggest that electronic monitoring reduces criminal recidivism and improves labor outcomes of offenders.[69]

Technology can also help reduce prison populations, but doing so without negative safety impacts requires accurate data, including on a range of variables beyond just incarceration levels. The MacArthur Foundation, through its Justice + Reform program, has been working with a group of cities since 2015 to reduce prison populations. By 2024, these cities had managed to reduce jail populations by 18.6 percent.[70] Collecting and processing data on the jail population allowed these sites to design and monitor their prison-population-reduction plans.

New technologies and the use of data can therefore support efforts to reduce levels of imprisonment and pretrial detention without significantly affecting crime levels. Prison sentences should be reserved for the most serious types of crimes and for those who pose the highest risk to society. This could avoid the criminogenic effects of imprisonment that generate more crime rather than reduce it. Efforts to reduce the prison population should be accompanied by other measures that make sure there is accountability by offenders, victims feel they are heard, and justice is made. Authorities must include measures to monitor those who are completing nonprison sanctions, especially by programs that support offenders, so they can reintegrate into society in a meaningful way away from crime.

Recommendations for Cities to Respond to Current Challenges With Regard to the Justice Systems

A fair, accessible, and effective justice system can contribute to efforts to reduce violence in cities in multiple ways, some more direct than others. The justice system deals with issues that range from effective access to basic rights for everybody and addressing everyday conflicts to fighting organized criminal groups that use violence in a systematic way. There is no silver bullet to reduce violence, but an effective justice system will put checks on state violence; ensure rights and fair treatment for everybody; be easy to understand, access, and navigate; effectively solve problems and conflicts; and sanction offenders who commit serious crimes in ways that prevent further violence.

In many cases, city-level leaders and actors will be able to directly implement justice-related measures to help reduce violence. However, because the justice system spans institutions in various sectors and at different government levels, city-level authorities will also need to collaborate with other actors to harness the justice system for violence-reduction efforts.

As with other issues, the global shifts this compendium covers are bringing about big changes and challenges to the justice system. The rise in authoritarian regimes and the weakening of the multilateral system challenge the role of international and national justice systems in defining a fair framework for state action and limiting its use of arbitrary force and violence. Rapid developments in technology open up the possibility of making justice systems easier to access and more efficient in managing large caseloads and solving criminal cases. However, the speed of developments and the opaqueness of AI and large-language models also carry risks, including making mistakes in identifying offenders and reproducing biases against individuals in certain social groups.

Based on this review of how cities and actors at other levels have responded to current challenges and opportunities, the following are some recommendations on actions cities can take to help in their violence-reduction efforts with interventions in the justice system.

Timely, balanced, evidence-based, and effective violence-prevention strategies that are perceived as fair and legitimate should be implemented before escalations of violence. This is especially true for crime-related violence and will help reduce the popular demand for tough actions that often lend support to exceptional and authoritarian measures.

When exceptional measures that suspend constitutional guarantees and the normal rule of law are taken, or when heavy-handed interventions are proposed at the national level against legal safeguards, city governments and other city-based actors should challenge them by legal means. As we have seen, some cities have been successful in challenging states of exception and measures that overstep national and international legal frameworks through high courts and international jurisdictions. To do so, however, cities should have strong legal counsel and legal departments to push forward such challenges when there is a risk of authoritarian measures.

Coalitions, networks, and associations of cities and local governments, within countries and across national boundaries, should push back against an authoritarian agenda by promoting rules-based and fair violence-reduction strategies. Multiple existing platforms play or could play that role. If multilateralism among nation-states is weakened, international cooperation and developing common agendas between cities can counterbalance this trend, promoting rules-based approaches to violence and crime reduction.

Cities should work to make justice systems and procedures easier to access and navigate. Many legal problems can be solved outside the formal judicial system, in community settings, with good advice provided, for example, by paralegal services. Cities can build spaces in excluded neighborhoods where a range of legal and justice services are provided in a welcoming atmosphere to support those who need it. Technology can be harnessed to make justice services more accessible, and cities can invest in such technology. This ranges from chatbots that provide advice and apps that translate laws and guides to online mediation services. Technology, including AI, can make justice services easier to access and navigate and make them more responsive if they can address legal problems more efficiently.

Cities should also work with law enforcement agencies, detective and attorney offices, and the court system to progressively adopt, with safeguards, new technologies that can improve the agility and capability to manage high caseloads and solve cases. A criminal justice system that is swift, can handle larger caseloads, and produces better outcomes that are perceived as fair and legitimate can contribute to reducing violence. Technology, including AI, can help achieve this, and cities can incorporate it in the areas under their responsibility or support other agencies in adopting them. This includes case-management software, software to analyze documents and legislation, technology to collect and analyze evidence (license plate recognition, body worn cameras, facial recognition, telephone data), and technology to help assess risks posed by certain individuals or places (e.g., person- and place-based predictive policing).

Cities should, however, act with caution when adopting new technologies. They must dedicate efforts to understand the way predictive technology and learning models operate and test for errors and biases to avoid discrimination against specific populations. Cities should have mechanisms for training staff, and understanding, testing, and piloting technologies—including the capacity to research, oversee, and potentially limit their use—before rollout rather than jump to wholesale adoption of emerging technologies.

Ultimately, cities have to find balance between adopting new technologies that could help them improve the operation of the justice system and implementing their use at a pace that allows for an understanding of potential biases and errors they may reproduce with serious consequences on imparting fair justice and potentially damaging trust in the system.

Endnotes

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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.