



Adapting Violence Reduction Strategies Around the World

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The evolution of violence reduction strategies has taken a remarkable turn thanks to increasing insights and evidence into crime and violence dynamics, along with the innovations in adaptations in different parts of the world. This article will discuss how contemporary experiences and findings in Mexico, Honduras, and Sweden, demonstrate both the potential and challenges of applying culturally-specific violence reduction models while respecting the unique social and institutional characteristics of different communities.

Examples of Violence in Social Networks in Different Jurisdictions

Revealing ethnographic research by [Chomczyński and Clark \(2023\)](#) in Mexican drug cartel-dominated communities, details how violence concentrates within specific social circles and relationships. Their work across multiple Mexican communities, including Tepito, Iztapalapa, and Tacubaya, demonstrates that violence is not randomly distributed, but follows patterns of association among high-risk individuals.

These patterns of violence create ideal conditions for focused deterrence approaches that can target specific networks rather than entire communities. The researchers discovered clustered violence within these communities.

Through in-depth interviews and research with residents and cartel members, the authors mapped a complex web of relationships where violence clustered around multiple specific roles and associations within different violent groups; some of these roles included: *Plaza* bosses, *sicarios*, *halcones*, smugglers and “logistics specialists”. Developing understanding and clarity around this role-based network, provides crucial intelligence for focused deterrence strategies: leadership positions become targets for

disruption, recruitment pathways offer prevention and messaging opportunities before escalation, entry-level roles represent critical early intervention points, and support positions serve as leverage points for intelligence gathering and network mapping, including non-conventional sanctions and enforcement. Together, these insights enable authorities to design multi-level interventions that target violence at its source.

For example, in Honduras, ([Rojido and Cano, 2022](#)) found violence concentrated in specific neighborhoods with distinct demographic profiles. Their qualitative research uncovered how violence operates through tightly interconnected local networks. Unlike other organizations with geographic mobility, most homicides in these areas were committed by gang members embedded in their communities. As one prosecutor explained: "These criminal structures, although linked to their broader matrices (the Mara 18 or the Mara Salvatrucha) have a more local character, as evidenced by the fact that they take months to rebuild once they are dismantled."

The [Swedish adaptation](#) of Group Violence Intervention (GVI) in Örebro identified similar violence patterns. Through systematic mapping, Swedish authorities identified multiple high-risk groups, out of which less than half are involved in serious violent acts, which accounted for 45-82% of all homicides in the target area.

Patterns of Association

Across all research contexts reviewed for this article, violence followed remarkably similar patterns of personal association that extended beyond any formal group membership, many of which contained one or several of the following characteristics:

Conflict and alliance patterns. All studies revealed that violence primarily occurred between individuals with pre-existing relationships and histories of conflict:

In Örebro: Groups were connected through "clear patterns of conflict and alliance," leading authorities to implement weekly shooting reviews.

In Mexico City: Alto al Fuego analysis found violence driven by "cycles of retaliation." Violence followed predictable patterns where "local dynamics of retaliation perpetuate and amplify violence," informing the design of community moral voice interventions that specifically addressed revenge motivations.

In Honduras: Murders occurred in public spaces with witnesses, revealing a pattern where perpetrators rely on community intimidation rather than secretive operations.

Personal and intimate relationships. Beyond formal group membership, violence risk spreads through personal relationships and loyalty bonds across all studied contexts. Another account from a Mexican cartel organization member explained: "When you work for them, you have no private life. If one of them has a problem, you have a problem automatically." This automatic transmission of conflict through personal networks creates cycles of violence that extend beyond individual motivations.

This understanding shaped intervention messaging across contexts. Both Örebro and Mexico City developed communication strategies that acknowledged these loyalty bonds while offering pathways to exit. The Swedish program's custom notifications specifically addressed how leaving violent groups wouldn't mean abandoning personal relationships, while Mexico City's Mentoría program provided long-term case management that helped individuals navigate the complex process of maintaining personal ties while exiting criminal networks. Honduras' Paz y Justicia program built community networks that counterbalanced gang loyalty structures.

In Mexican communities, Chomczyński and Clark documented how violence risk transmitted through family networks. The researchers documented multigenerational involvement, where an account from a prison social worker obtained through their research, observed: "What narcos want is for you to be loyal. As long as you are loyal, they do not touch your family, but if you have family, they are (the) first to be punished." In some cases, drug operations associated with violence took place in an individual's personal home. In many instances this requires some degree of familiarity or association with the individual's family network. In situations like these, [Alto al Fuego's](#) Mesa de Apoyos specifically provided "targeted economic, logistical, and social support for individuals and families identified by the Alto al Fuego team," while Honduras' Paz y Justicia program, similarly acknowledge the effectiveness and relevance of engaging with families, it provided comprehensive support to witnesses and victims' families, including psychotherapy, relocation assistance, and transportation to court proceedings. Findings of this nature have influenced a hospital-based intervention program in Mexico (SANAR), to explicitly include family members of violence victims in support services.

Association through social ties

All three contexts revealed how violence perpetuated through social recruitment, informing prevention strategies:

- In Mexico, violent organizations used existing relationships (from different spheres of life) to identify and recruit new members, leading Alto al Fuego to implement the Fénix program, a cognitive-behavioral therapy intervention targeting individuals showing early signs of recruitment.
- In Örebro, group membership expanded through social networks in neighborhoods and schools, prompting authorities to extend their intervention reach to include school-based prevention programs.
- In Mexico City's Plateros, violence concentrated in specific geographic areas where social ties overlapped with criminal networks, resulting in place-based interventions that engaged entire micro-communities.

Cross-cutting relationships

The research revealed complex webs where individuals maintained relationships across rival groups, creating both opportunities for conflict prevention and management, including risks of escalating violence. The Örebro evaluation noted these "föränderliga"

(changeable) relationships required constant monitoring; a similar phenomenon noted by law enforcement authorities in other jurisdictions.

This insight led to adaptive management structures. Alto al Fuego's bi-weekly performance reviews tracked shifting alliances and conflicts, allowing rapid adjustments. As one Swedish coordinator noted: "Assessment of whether an individual belongs to a group or not) became a continuous process rather than a one-time determination."

Violence: The GVI Swedish Experience

The Swedish adaptation of Group Violence Intervention (GVI) in the city of Örebro provides another compelling example of systematic violence dynamics identification that directly informed their focused deterrence strategy. A process evaluation revealed violence patterns remarkably similar to those found in Mexico.

Through systematic mapping, Swedish authorities identified several high-risk groups with membership between 150-180 individuals that accounted for 45-82% of all homicides in the target area.

This concentration enabled Swedish authorities to design targeted interventions: direct communication for specific individuals, focused enforcement on the most violent groups, and tailored social services for identified high-risk individuals. The Swedish analysis revealed violence was "primarily driven by a small number of highly active, somewhat fragmented, small criminal groups; connected through patterns of conflict and alliance."

Mexico City's Alto al Fuego: Mapping Violence and Networks

The Alto al Fuego initiative demonstrates how understanding violence concentration can drive successful focused deterrence interventions. In the Plateros sector, systematic analysis revealed patterns that shaped their entire strategy by:

- Specific identification of victims and perpetrators connected to violent incidents, allowed victim-centered interventions alongside offender-focused approaches.
- Detailed identification of high-risk groups, through social network analysis, enabling group-based messaging and interventions.
- Members of local groups involved in at least 45% and up to 82% of homicide cases, justifying intensive resource allocation to these specific networks.

As the Minister of Citizen Security in the city at the time noted: "Even with large-scale organized crime, urban violence in Mexico often boils down to micro-level conflicts between gangs. Understanding and addressing these localized dynamics is crucial to reducing violence." This insight drove Alto al Fuego's three-component approach: focused enforcement operations, specialized community support services, and direct preventive communication to high-risk individuals.

Implications for Focused Deterrence Design

Understanding patterns of association through targeted intelligence management can contribute to more nuanced and tailored focused deterrence interventions:

1. Relationship-based assessment

Rather than focusing solely on group membership, successful interventions mapped the full network of personal relationships. Alto al Fuego's shooting reviews examined not just who was involved in violence, but their connections to other high-risk individuals, their family situations, and their positions within social networks. This mapping allowed for more precise targeting of deterrence messages and support services.

2. Family system approaches

Recognizing how violence affects entire family networks, programs adapted their approaches:

- Mexico City's Mesa de Apoyos provided support to both individuals and families.
- Örebro's intervention included family counseling services.
- Custom notifications in both cities often occurred in family settings, allowing messages to reach broader networks.

3. Alliance management

Understanding patterns of conflict and alliance allowed authorities to predict and prevent retaliation cycles. Alto al Fuego's management cycle included:

- Weekly shooting reviews to identify emerging conflicts.
- Coordination meetings to align intervention resources.
- Performance reviews to assess conflict disruption effectiveness.

4. Social network disruption

By identifying key relationships, interventions could strategically interrupt violence transmission while building alternative support networks. The Örebro program specifically targeted "persons assessed to have a position within groups that enables the message to spread."

Building Effective Focused Deterrence Interventions

These insights enabled the design of more effective interventions:

Direct communication

Understanding relationship patterns, informed how deterrence messages can be delivered:

- Messages acknowledged existing loyalties while offering alternatives.
- Communication occurred through trusted intermediaries when possible.
- Group-based messaging leveraged peer influence dynamics.

Targeted enforcement

Knowledge of violence concentration allowed for precise enforcement:

- Resources focused on the groups driving violence in Örebro.
- Mexico City prioritized the groups responsible for 45-82% of homicides.
- Enforcement actions specifically targeted violence drivers, not entire communities.

Support service design

Relationship mapping informed support service development:

- Programs addressed both individual and family needs.
- Services recognized the challenge of maintaining personal relationships while exiting criminal networks.
- Long-term support acknowledged the extended process of lifestyle change.

Cross-Cultural Adaptations for Focused Deterrence

Despite universal patterns in violence concentration, cultural context shaped intervention design:

Approaches

- Mexican programs emphasized family and community involvement.
- Swedish interventions balanced individual autonomy with group dynamics.
- Both recognized that effective deterrence must align with cultural values.

Institutional trust

- Mexico City built intervention capacity within police due to limited civil society infrastructure.
- Sweden leveraged existing social services but faced information-sharing restrictions.
- Both contexts required building new forms of institutional collaboration.

Conclusion

The consistency in how violence manifests through personal relationships, from Mexican cartel territories to Swedish urban areas, provides a strong foundation for focused deterrence approaches in multiple contexts. These studies reveal that effective

violence reduction requires understanding the complex web of personal relationships, family ties, and social bonds that connect high-risk individuals.

Successful focused deterrence programs leverage the cycles of violence by:

1. Mapping relationship networks with precision.
2. Designing culturally-sensitive interventions that address entire social systems.
3. Creating management structures that can adapt to changing dynamics.
4. Building alternative pathways that respect existing social bonds.

As these international examples demonstrate, focused deterrence principles can be successfully adapted across cultures when grounded in deep understanding of local violence patterns and social structures. The key is not wholesale importation of models, but thoughtful adaptation that maintains fidelity to core principles while respecting local realities. This approach has already shown promising results: Mexico City's 58% reduction in homicides and Örebro's systematic disruption of violence cycles demonstrate the potential for culturally-adapted focused deterrence to transform communities worldwide.