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PREVENTING ARMED VIOLENCE:

An Overview of Approaches
and Practical Experiences

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The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) is a joint initiative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), funded by the EU, aimed at strengthening national and regional capacities to control and reduce the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons, thus contributing to enhanced stability, security, and development in South Eastern and Eastern Europe.

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For further information contact:

Head of SEESAC

Bulevar Zorana Đinđića 64

11000 Belgrade, Serbia

Tel: +381 11 415 5300

www.seesac.org

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INTRODUCTION

The widespread availability and misuse of small arms and light weapons (SALW) contributes to persistently high levels of armed violence and fatalities worldwide. In recent years, firearm-related deaths have increased globally, and these weapons are often linked to serious human rights violations. Proliferation and misuse of SALW place women, girls, and young people at particular risk. The direct and indirect effects of SALW proliferation undermine peace and sustainable development by overwhelming health systems, impeding access to education and economic opportunities, and creating insecurity that negatively impacts overall well-being.

SEESAC's available data and research confirm that armed violence continues to have a substantial economic, physical, and social impact in the Western Balkans. Economically, armed violence incurs substantial expenditures in medical care, law enforcement, lost productivity, and legal proceedings. Physically, it results in hundreds of deaths and injuries each year, with survivors often facing long-term health consequences. Socially, it creates pervasive fear and trauma, disrupting community cohesion and eroding the quality of life. Firearm misuse in domestic violence presents grave concern, and it is a leading cause of firearm-related deaths in the region, with a significant portion of femicides resulting from such incidents. Recent mass shootings have reignited debates around firearms control and the necessity for comprehensive violence-prevention strategies that are significant not only for the direct parties involved, but also for creating a safer and healthier society overall.

The Armed Violence Monitoring Platform (AVMP) run by South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) has tracked armed violence trends in the region since 2014. With a database of more than 30,000 incidents, the AVMP provides comprehensive insight into the prevalence and characteristics of firearms misuse in the region. It collects and analyses real-time data on firearm-related incidents, gathered daily from local media clippings, online search engines, and, where available, reports from public institutions. Each recorded firearms-related incident, includes type of incident, sex, and age of victims and perpetrators, location, weapon used, and outcomes, enabling evidence-based policymaking and targeted prevention efforts. The AVMP, particularly through the thematic [In Focus Armed Violence Monitors](#) and [quarterly reports](#), supports governments, civil society, and international actors in designing focused interventions, such as legal reforms, firearm surrender campaigns, and survivor support services.

The [Western Balkans Roadmap for a sustainable solution to the illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of SALW, their ammunition and explosives](#), adopted in 2018, places special importance to the prevention of armed violence and firearms misuse, both at policy and operational levels, including through data collection, research, and awareness raising. Such commitments are operationalized through SALW control strategies and action plans adopted by the Western Balkans jurisdictions, which envisage a set of contextualized measures. To facilitate such efforts, SEESAC provides comprehensive technical assistance to the authorities, ranging from capacity building to support for policy development and strengthening the evidence base.

In response to regional challenges and to further support institutions, SEESAC initiated the mapping of good practices in armed violence prevention. This effort aims to collate and disseminate knowledge on effective prevention and intervention measures, emphasizing the need for a multi-faceted approach that includes international cooperation, policy reforms, law enforcement, community engagement, and education. This report aims to delve into the specifics of armed violence prevention, considering the broader socio-economic, cultural, and legal contexts that influence the prevalence and nature of firearm misuse (Armstead, et al., 2021), to highlight effective strategies and practices that can mitigate the scourge of armed violence. The ultimate goal is to inform and guide policymakers, government officials, practitioners, and civil society organizations toward implementing targeted, evidence-informed interventions that can significantly reduce armed violence and its detrimental impact on society.

The report is structured as follows. First, it establishes that armed violence is not merely a matter of criminal justice; it is fundamentally a human rights issue. The rights to life, security, and protection from violence are core human rights enshrined in international declarations and treaties. When these rights are violated by armed violence, the consequences are far-reaching, affecting not only the immediate victims but also their families, communities, and the broader social fabric. Addressing armed violence, therefore, is imperative to uphold human dignity and ensure the safety and well-being of all individuals.

Second, the report explains how armed violence manifests in numerous forms, each with distinct dynamics and implications. For example, armed violence occurring in community, often concentrated in urban areas, disrupts social order and perpetuates cycles of fear and retaliation. Domestic violence involving firearms adds a lethal dimension to intimate partner violence, heightening the

risk of fatal outcomes. Suicides by firearms, accounting for a significant portion of firearm-related deaths, reflect the intersection of mental health issues and access to lethal means. Accidental shootings, frequently involving children, underscore the dangers of improper firearm storage and handling. Mass shootings, though statistically less common, capture public attention due to their catastrophic impact and the sheer number of victims involved. Recognizing these distinct forms of armed violence is crucial for developing tailored solutions that address the specific nature of each problem.

Third, this report focuses on three areas that when combined can create a holistic armed violence prevention strategy: (1) legal interventions within the criminal justice system, including stricter arms control laws and robust enforcement of existing regulations; (2) hybrid solutions, which combine criminal justice and community efforts, including focused deterrence strategies. Such strategies target high-risk individuals with a combination of enforcement and support, and situational crime prevention strategies, which modify the environment to reduce opportunities for armed violence, including suicide by firearm; and (3) community-based solutions, which address the root causes of armed violence and foster a culture of peace and resilience. These include street outreach programs, which involve credible messengers engaging with at-risk individuals to mediate conflicts and provide support, hospital-based interventions that connect survivors of armed violence with relevant services and support networks to prevent any retaliation and further violence, and risk education, public information, and advocacy initiatives.

In sum, this report explores the multifaceted nature of armed violence and how a combination of legal, hybrid, and community-based solutions are needed to address it.

While efforts have been made to include experiences from diverse geographic contexts, a significant portion of the highlighted examples and practices are informed by experiences in the United States. This is primarily due to the magnitude of the armed violence problem there, which has led to the development of extensive research, innovative approaches, and practical knowledge on prevention and intervention strategies. Although many of these measures are specific to the US context and may not be directly transferable to the Western Balkans, the commonalities in addressing firearm misuse and armed violence make these approaches useful in informing evidence-based policymaking and developing targeted solutions in the region.

ARMED VIOLENCE AS A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE

In addressing the effects of armed violence, it is imperative to recognize it not only as a public safety concern, but fundamentally as a human rights issue. This perspective aligns with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948 ([General Assembly resolution 217 A](#)). The most fundamental human right affected by armed violence is the *right to life*. Globally, a considerable number of lives are lost to firearm-related incidents annually. This not only represents a direct violation of the right to life but also undermines the safety and security of communities worldwide. Research consistently shows that countries with more firearms in circulation and lenient firearms regulations have significantly higher rates of firearm-related deaths (Grinshteyn & Hemenway, 2019).

Additionally, the *right to health* is critically undermined by armed violence through immediate physical injuries - frequently resulting to disability – as well as long-term psychological effects. The healthcare costs associated with armed violence are substantial, encompassing often emergency treatment, long-term rehabilitation, and mental health services. Moreover, the fear of armed violence can deter individuals from accessing health services or participating in outdoor activities, thus indirectly impacting their overall health and well-being (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2022).

Armed violence also severely impacts the *right to education*. Incidents of armed violence in or near educational settings significantly disrupt the learning environment, instilling fear and anxiety among students and educators (Cox, 2021). This can lead to decreased school attendance, early school

leaving, and lower academic performance. Studies demonstrate notable psychological impacts on students, including symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which directly affect their learning capabilities and educational outcomes (Rheingold & Williams, 2015).

Armed violence perpetuates a culture of fear and insecurity, impacting individuals' *rights to security and freedom from fear*. This pervasive fear can alter daily behaviors and restrict the ability to participate freely in societal activities, ranging from economic engagement to community involvement (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2022). The psychological toll of living in high-violence areas can have generational impacts, affecting community cohesion and social stability (Sharkey, 2018).

Framing armed violence as a human rights issue provides a compelling framework for action, emphasizing the need for policy solutions that are not only effective but just, such as implementing and enforcing robust arms control laws that align with the protection of human rights; supporting community initiatives that address the root causes of armed violence, including poverty, inequality, social exclusion, and the availability of firearms; encouraging global cooperation in the regulation of arms trade and share practices on effective armed violence prevention strategies; and using data to inform policy decisions so that interventions are continuously evaluated and resources are appropriately allocated.

3

THE MANY FORMS OF ARMED VIOLENCE

Armed violence costs communities in both human and economic terms, but it is important to acknowledge that its manifestation extends far beyond the confines of criminal activity, such that the “many forms” of armed violence present unique challenges that require specifically tailored solutions (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019), as follows:

Community Armed Violence

Community armed violence lacks a singular cause, but research primarily attributes the decision to resort to armed violence to environmental factors or lifestyle circumstances such as gang/organized crime association, drug-related activities, prior exposure to violence, and neighborhood instability (Decker, et al., 2022; Mattson et al., 2020; Sanchez et al., 2020). In certain contexts, urban youth - particularly young men - feeling unsafe owing to community violence, can opt to acquire firearms for self-protection (Hemenway et al., 2011; Wilcox et al., 2006). Their likelihood of victimization is driven by both personal experiences and perceived threats (Hauser & Kleck, 2013). Factors such as school disengagement and limited job opportunities -which can contribute to a sense of despair- or troubled family environment, further push individuals towards possessing firearms (Watts et al., 2019). Socioeconomic distress within communities, marked by indicators like low educational attainment

and poverty, alongside disadvantaged socioeconomic status, can in certain settings significantly predict youth involvement in armed violence (Carter et al., 2013, 2017; Tracy et al., 2019).

In the Western Balkans, perceived insecurity drives demand for firearms, but confidence in their protective value remains low. Research on factors fuelling demand for firearms (SEESAC, 2025) indicates that while approximately one-third of respondents across the Western Balkans cite personal safety as the primary reason for owning firearms, half believe that having a firearm at home does not enhance their overall sense of security. Only one in five think firearms would genuinely improve household safety, indicating that although insecurity fuels interest in firearm ownership, it does not necessarily translate into a belief in their effectiveness for protection. According to the same research, gender stands out as the most significant and consistent determinant of attitudes towards firearm possession and use. Generationally, younger individuals, especially men aged 18-30 (15.3%) tend to hold more positive attitudes toward gun ownership than their older counterparts. There is a direct correlation showing that those who have experienced the use of a firearm – either directed at them, used, or witnessed - are more likely to say they would own a firearm and feel safer having firearms at home. Thus, any experience with a firearm correlates with the opinion that they would need one themselves. The readiness to acquire a firearm also correlates with the period when armed violence happens. Respondents with more recent violent experience responded more frequently that they would own a firearm than those who experienced violence further in the past. Cultural norms, traditional practices, and complex legislation further influence attitudes toward firearm ownership.

Research globally shows armed violence clusters geographically (Weisburd, 2015) and among small, specific groups engaged in serious criminal activities (Braga & Kennedy, 2020). For instance, studies in over 20 US cities reveal that less than one percent of the population associated with gangs or criminal groups, accounts for more than half of all shootings and homicides (Lurie, 2019).

Drug markets and armed violence are also connected. An estimated 28% of firearms seizures in Europe are linked to drug trafficking, with this figure reaching up to 44% in certain European Union member states (De Schutter & Duquet, 2023). The UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs has underscored the importance of addressing the nexus between illegal drug and firearms trafficking. In the Resolution [65/2](#), it urged states to implement measures to prevent and combat these links, including strengthening border control, enhancing information sharing, and fostering international operational cooperation. The “Balkan route” has been consistently identified among the transit paths for both firearms and drugs entering the EU, including “conflict legacy weapons” from past conflicts, such as those in the former Yugoslavia and the Albanian civil unrests (De Schutter & Duquet, 2023). Often, firearms and drugs are trafficked by the same criminal networks or at least along established drug trafficking routes.

Armed Violence in the Context of Domestic Violence

From 2019 to 2023, more people in the Western Balkans were killed with firearms in the context of domestic violence than in any other type of incident. Further, as documented by SEESAC (SEESAC, 2025a), 68.4% of women killed with firearms in the region were victims of domestic violence,

compared to 10.9% men. Women were at particular risk of intimate partner violence, with 50.7% of all the women killed with firearms and 0.6% of all the men.

Similarly, over half of women murdered globally are victims of their intimate partners or family members and a significant proportion are killed with firearms (Truong et al., 2023). Risk factors include a history of abuse and coercive control, jealousy, and severe mental illness (Liem & Koenraadt, 2018). A review across 18 countries identified also relationship problems, recent or pending separation, mental health issues, and financial problems as frequent risk factors, with many perpetrators subsequently dying by suicide with a firearm after murdering their intimate partners (Karlsson et al., 2019).

Suicide by Firearm, and Mass Shootings

International research identifies substance use, financial and relationship issues, health concerns, and easy access to lethal means, namely firearms as risk factors for suicide. People with histories of violence or adverse childhood experiences also face higher risks, as do elderly individuals facing isolation and hopelessness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Steele et al., 2018).

Firearm ownership notably increases the vulnerability for suicide, not just for the owner but for all household members, with US studies—which provide the most comprehensive evidence on this issue—showing a direct correlation between household firearm ownership and youth suicide rates (Knopov et al., 2019). Unsafe firearm storage practices relatedly correlate with increased unintentional firearm deaths, particularly among children (Grossman et al., 2005).

In the US, where the most comprehensive data is available, only 4% of murderers die by suicide during their crimes, but this figure drastically increases to over a third among mass shooters, with an additional 10% provoking their own deaths by law enforcement (Eliason, 2009; Lankford, 2015; Peterson & Densley, 2021). Mass shooters often have a history of suicidal tendencies, with a third having previously attempted suicide or expressed suicidal thoughts (Peterson & Densley, 2021). Their acts are not only intended as public spectacles but also as a means to an end, aiming for posthumous notoriety through their final, lethal actions.

The rise in mass shootings globally, coincides with increases in suicides, drug overdoses, and alcohol-related deaths, all categorized as “deaths of despair” (Case & Deaton, 2020). This framing argues that mass shootings should be seen as manifestations of deep-seated emotional and psychological distress, akin to other forms of self-destructive behavior (Peterson & Densley, 2021). This perspective shifts the focus from isolated acts of violence to broader societal issues, emphasizing the importance of understanding and addressing the underlying despair driving these actions. Recent research indicates that threats of mass shootings, particularly among young people, and especially young men, often signal a cry for help rather than a quest for infamy, with many such individuals having a history of counseling and suicidal thoughts (Peterson, et al., 2021). Given this context, suicide prevention strategies—such as training, screenings, and firearms restrictions—may serve as effective deterrents against mass shootings (Peterson & Densley, 2021). This approach suggests that addressing the root causes of despair and suicidal tendencies can play a critical role in preventing such tragedies.

4

ARMED VIOLENCE INTERVENTION FRAMEWORK

To effectively address the many forms of armed violence, this report presents a structured framework for interventions, categorized into three main areas: (1) criminal-legal interventions, such as regulating firearms availability, circulation, possession, use and sales; (2) hybrid collaborative interventions that combine criminal-legal and community resources, including focused deterrence and situational crime prevention, and (3) community-based interventions like street outreach programs and hospital-based interventions. This comprehensive approach ensures tailored strategies that address the specific dynamics of various forms of armed violence.

Criminal-Legal Interventions	Hybrid, Collaborative, Interventions	Community-based Interventions
e.g., Regulating Who May Legally Own, Purchase, or Possess Firearms	e.g., Focused Deterrence, Situational Crime Prevention	e.g., Hospital-based Interventions, Street Outreach

5

CRIMINAL-LEGAL SYSTEM INTERVENTIONS FOR ARMED VIOLENCE

Legal interventions stand as critical pillars supporting a broader strategy aimed at armed violence reduction and prevention. The following section delves into several legal actions necessary to curb armed violence, highlighting their importance as part of a comprehensive approach. It is imperative to recognize that while these interventions are universally relevant, their implementation and effectiveness are deeply influenced by a given country's unique cultural, legal, and political landscapes (see Densley, 2023). Tailoring these interventions to fit local contexts is crucial for their success.

First, firearms regulation represents a crucial entry point for legal intervention. Stringent controls over the manufacture, sale, and distribution of firearms aim to stem the flow of weapons into illicit channels and prevent their acquisition by individuals likely to engage in violence. This segment will explore the mechanisms and policies that can fortify the oversight of firearms, emphasizing the need for international cooperation and robust enforcement frameworks.

Second, determining eligibility for firearm ownership is a complex process that necessitates careful consideration of various risk factors. This section will examine the policies and regulations that set the criteria for lawful firearms possession, focusing on background checks, mental health evaluations, and the exclusion of individuals with histories of violence.

Third, the sale and transfer of firearms are critical junctures at which legal interventions can prevent firearms from falling into the wrong hands. This section will outline the policies required to close legal loopholes, ensuring that all firearm exchanges occur within the ambit of legal scrutiny. For example, firearm traffickers in Europe have long exploited legal loopholes to legally acquire weapons unable to fire live ammunition (e.g., alarm weapons, deactivated acoustic expansion weapons, and small-caliber firearms, known as Flobert guns) and convert them into live-firing weapons (De Schutter & Duquet, 2023). The role of universal background checks and the importance of a transparent and accountable system for tracking firearm ownership are also highlighted.

Finally, proper use, storage, and carrying of firearms are vital for preventing accidents, suicides, and impulsive acts of violence. This section will address the legal frameworks that mandate safe storage practices, restrict carrying firearms in public spaces, and govern the types of firearms and ammunition accessible to the public. The potential impact of these regulations on reducing armed violence incidents will be discussed, alongside challenges to their implementation.

Firearms Circulation

Disrupting access to firearms, particularly within illegal markets, is a critical component of strategies aimed at reducing armed violence.

Firearm markets can be broadly categorized into *legal* and *illegal* segments. Government laws and policies, including background checks and licensing requirements, regulate legal circulation. Illegal markets, on the other hand, operate outside the boundaries of law, with firearms often trafficked across states and international borders (Koper, 2014). Firearms can transition from the legal to the illegal market through various means, such as straw purchases (where a legal buyer obtains a firearm for someone ineligible to possess one), theft, and unregulated private sales (Hureau & Braga, 2018). Deactivated firearms and imitation or replica gas or starter firearms also enter the illegal market after being reactivated or converted to live firing (see SEESAC, 2009).

One of the most straightforward strategies to prevent the diversion of firearms into the illegal market is to strengthen background checks and licensing requirements for all firearms purchases. Law enforcement agencies can also use targeted operations to identify and prosecute individuals involved in straw purchasing and trafficking firearms (Koper, 2014). Straw purchasing occurs when an individual legally acquires a firearm to sell or give it to another person, acting as a proxy for the real buyer, who cannot legally purchase a firearm because they are underage or have a criminal record or disqualifying medical or mental health condition. The transaction involves deliberate deception because the straw purchaser falsifies documents or lies about the intended use or final ownership of the firearm.

Straw purchasing is rare but not impossible in South East Europe (SEE). Legal frameworks targeting straw purchasing often focus on the falsification of information during the firearm licensing process. Laws may specifically criminalize the act of misrepresenting or providing false information about the actual buyer of the firearm or the intended use of the purchased firearm, imposing significant fines and prison sentences to deter potential straw purchasers. Provision of training for all relevant stakeholders

(law enforcement agencies, judiciary, firearm dealers) to be vigilant for signs of straw purchasing and to report suspicious transactions is crucial (Wintemute, 2010). Public awareness campaigns that clarify the seriousness of the act and its impact on community safety are equally important.

At the same time, the use of technology, such as ballistic imaging and firearms tracing, helps law enforcement agencies track the history of a firearm from its manufacture through its various owners, to identify patterns of trafficking and illegal diversion. Investing in advanced technologies for marking and tracing firearms, such as microstamping and electronic tagging, could further aid law enforcement agencies in investigating and prosecuting firearm crimes more effectively and in dismantling networks involved in the illegal arms trade. This is important for tracking the movement of weapons across borders and linking recovered firearms to specific transactions, dealers, and manufacturers.

By targeting the mechanisms through which firearms are diverted to the illegal market, communities can directly reduce the availability of firearms to individuals who are prohibited from owning them. However, the vast number of firearms in circulation globally and the complexity of tracking them pose significant challenges to enforcement efforts. International standardization of import and export controls on firearms is essential to prevent the diversion of legally manufactured weapons to illicit markets, including stringent licensing requirements for arms dealers and the adoption of best practices for monitoring, securing, and managing stockpiles, especially of military arms. Enhancing information sharing and coordination among countries is also critical for tackling cross-border arms trafficking. This includes sharing data on known traffickers, coordinated border controls, and joint operations targeting illicit arms networks.

Wars and military conflicts present significant challenges to the oversight of firearms circulation. The collapse of governance structures in conflict zones often leads to the proliferation of military-grade weapons among civilian populations and non-state actors, which means the activities of private military and security companies operating in conflict zones should be strictly regulated to ensure they do not unintentionally contribute to the proliferation of military weapons. In sum, fortifying the oversight of firearm markets is a complex task that requires coordinated efforts at both the national and international levels. By implementing comprehensive mechanisms and policies and addressing the challenges posed by wars and military weapons, the international community can make significant progress in preventing armed violence and the illicit trafficking of firearms. The success of these efforts hinges on robust enforcement frameworks and the commitment to international cooperation.

Disrupting access to firearms, especially within illegal markets, is a vital but challenging component of armed violence prevention. Efforts to strengthen firearms laws often face political opposition and legal challenges, particularly in regions with strong firearm culture and advocacy for firearm rights (Winkler, 2013; Yamane, 2017). There are concerns that restrictions can push transactions further underground, complicating efforts to monitor and control illegal firearm markets. No single approach can fully address the issue, but a combination of enhanced regulations, targeted law enforcement efforts, and the use of technology can significantly impede the flow of firearms into the hands of those most likely to use them in acts of violence. Success in these endeavors requires a concerted effort from policymakers, law enforcement, and communities, underpinned by a commitment to public safety and the prevention of armed violence.

Regulating Who May Legally Own, Purchase, Or Possess Firearms

The regulation of firearm ownership, purchase, and possession is considered as well established in the Western Balkans region; however, it remains a critical facet of efforts to prevent armed violence and ensure public safety.

Across various jurisdictions, a range of policies have been implemented to ensure proper control of firearms or restrict access to firearms by individuals who may pose a risk to themselves or others. These policies typically include provisions related to safe storage, child access, minimum age requirements, mental health considerations, domestic violence history, the surrender of firearms by prohibited possessors, and the implementation of extreme risk protection orders (ERPOs). These key regulatory areas are summarized below:

Safe Storage: The safe storage of firearms is a critical component in the prevention of armed violence, accidents, and suicides. Evidence from numerous studies underscores the significance of implementing secure storage practices as a means to reduce the risk of unintentional injuries and deaths, particularly among children and adolescents, as well as to prevent firearms from falling into the hands of prohibited persons or persons with violent intent (Smart et al., 2023). Interventions ensuring the use of weapon safes and locked storage or keeping firearms locked and unloaded, with ammunition stored separately, protect against unauthorized access within the home, deter theft, and even provide crucial time for intervention and support in the case of impulsive suicide attempts (Anestis, 2018). In the United States, over 80% of school mass shooters got their firearms from home or with the help of adults because they were too young to buy them themselves (Peterson & Densley, 2021). Efforts to promote safe storage practices have included legislation mandating the use of weapons safes or locks and public health campaigns aimed at educating firearm owners about the importance of secure storage.

Child-Access Prevention Provisions: Child-access prevention legal provisions are designed to prevent children from accessing firearms, thereby reducing the risk of accidental shootings and intentional shootings by minors. These provisions impose criminal liability on adults who negligently store firearms where children can access them. The strictness of child-access prevention laws varies, with some requiring firearms to be stored locked and unloaded, and others triggered by an underage person's actual access to a firearm.

Minimum Age Requirements: Most jurisdictions establish a minimum age for the legal purchase and possession of firearms, with common thresholds being 18 for rifles and shotguns and 21 or older for handguns. These age requirements are designed to prevent access to firearms by younger individuals, who are statistically more likely to be involved in violent incidents and may lack the maturity to handle firearms safely. The EU Firearms Directive regulates that only individuals who are at least 18 years old may acquire and possess firearms, except in cases where those under 18 do so for hunting or target shooting with parental permission or supervision, and an adult is responsible for proper storage.

Prohibitions Associated with Mental Illness: Laws often restrict firearm access for individuals with certain mental health conditions, particularly if they have been adjudicated as a danger to themselves or others, or have been involuntarily committed to a mental institution. The criteria and processes for these prohibitions vary, but they generally aim to balance public safety concerns with the rights and privacy of individuals with mental illness (Gostin & Record, 2011).

Prohibitions Associated with Domestic Violence: Recognizing the elevated risk of firearm-related violence in situations of domestic abuse, many jurisdictions prohibit individuals convicted of domestic violence offenses or subject to protective orders from owning or possessing firearms. These provisions are aimed at protecting victims of domestic violence from potential harm.

Surrender of Firearms by Prohibited Possessors: Depending on the jurisdiction, laws may mandate the seizure or confiscation of firearms from individuals who become prohibited from owning firearms due to criminal convictions, domestic violence restraining orders, or other disqualifying conditions, or may require such individuals to surrender their firearms to law enforcement. Compliance mechanisms and enforcement of these surrender requirements can vary, impacting their effectiveness.

Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs): In certain jurisdictions, ERPOs, also known as “red flag” laws, allow family members, law enforcement, and in some cases, other concerned parties to petition a court to temporarily remove firearms from individuals deemed to be at significant risk of harming themselves or others (Zeoli et al., 2022). ERPOs are designed as a preventive measure, enabling intervention before warning signs escalate into violence. Evidence for the effect of ERPOs in US on total and firearm suicides and on total and firearm homicides is generally positive (Gius, 2020; Kivisto & Phalen, 2018; Swanson et al., 2017, 2019).

The policies regulating who may legally own, purchase, or possess firearms play a pivotal role in efforts to reduce armed violence. By setting minimum age requirements, addressing the intersection of firearms and mental illness, preventing access by individuals with a history of domestic violence, enforcing the seizure/confiscation, and implementing ERPOs, these regulations aim to limit firearm access by individuals at higher risk of involvement in violence. Effective implementation and enforcement of these policies are crucial for their success, requiring coordination among law enforcement, the judicial system, and community stakeholders, including health systems, to protect public safety while respecting individual rights.

Regulating Firearm Possessions and Transfers

Policies regulating acquiring and possession of firearm and their transfers are central to efforts aimed at preventing armed violence by ensuring that firearms are sold and transferred responsibly and legally. While already standard practice in the Western Balkans region, these policies can significantly impact the ability of individuals to obtain firearms and are designed to prevent access by those who may pose a threat to public safety. These key policy areas, which range from background checks to bans on specific types of weapons, are discussed below:

Background Checks: Background checks are a cornerstone of firearm regulation, required for issuing a permission/license to acquire firearms in many jurisdictions. These checks screen potential buyers against databases to identify any criminal history, domestic violence history, mental health adjudications, or other factors that would disqualify them from owning a firearm.

Licensing and Permitting Requirements: SEE jurisdictions require individuals to obtain a license or permit before purchasing or possessing a firearm, which include as relevant, background checks, fingerprinting, and requirements for safety training. Licensing and permitting serve as a primary vetting mechanism, ensuring that individuals who obtain firearms have been thoroughly evaluated.

Firearm Safety Training Requirements: Mandatory safety training for firearm purchasers ensures that firearm owners are knowledgeable about safe handling, storage, and use of firearms. This can include instruction on the legal responsibilities of firearm ownership and the importance of securing firearms away from unauthorized users, especially children.

Lost or Stolen Firearm Reporting Requirements: Requiring firearms owners to report lost or stolen firearms to law enforcement helps prevent these weapons from circulating in the illegal market and being used in criminal activities. It also aids in the investigation of firearm trafficking networks.

Firearm Sales Reporting, Recording, and Registration Requirements: Regulations that require the reporting and recording of firearm sales, and such as for an instance case in SEE, the registration of firearms, help law enforcement track the movement of firearms and investigate crimes. These measures can also deter illegal sales and transfers.

Bans on the Sale of Assault Weapons and High-Capacity Magazines: While bans on military-style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines may not be directly relevant in the context of the Western Balkans, where such weapons are already prohibited, it is worth noting that in other contexts these measures aim to limit the availability of firearms capable of causing mass casualties in a short period. Evidence from the United States suggests that bans on high-capacity magazines may have contributed to a reduction in mass shootings and associated fatalities (Klarevas et al., 2019; Koper, 2020).

Bans on Low-Quality Handguns: Also known in United States as “Saturday night special” bans, these policies prohibit the sale of handguns that fail to meet certain safety and quality standards. The intent is to reduce the availability of inexpensive, easily concealable firearms that are disproportionately used in crimes (Webster, et al., 2002).

The regulation of firearm possession, sales and transfers encompasses a broad range of policies designed to ensure that firearms are obtained and used responsibly. By instituting background checks, licensing and permitting systems, safety training requirements, and specific bans on high lethal weapons, these policies aim to reduce the risk of armed violence while respecting the rights of individuals to lawfully own firearms for self-defense, hunting, and sport shooting. The effectiveness of these policies in preventing armed violence often depends on their comprehensive implementation and enforcement, highlighting the importance of a coordinated approach that involves law enforcement, policymakers, and the community.

In exploring the above legal actions, it is paramount to acknowledge that no single intervention can suffice in isolation. The synergy between legal reforms, community initiatives, and enforcement strategies outlined below forms the bedrock of an effective armed violence reduction strategy. Equally important is the adaptation of these interventions to respect and reflect the distinct characteristics of each region and country. By navigating the complex interplay of cultural, legal, and political factors, legal interventions that are not only effective but also sustainable and respectful of individual rights and freedoms can be crafted.

6

HYBRID, COLLABORATIVE, INTERVENTIONS FOR ARMED VIOLENCE

Hybrid, collaborative solutions to armed violence represent a promising frontier in violence prevention, blending the strengths of criminal justice interventions with community-driven approaches. Two notable strategies within this paradigm are the *focused deterrence* and *situational crime prevention*. **Focused deterrence** involves identifying and directly engaging with high-risk individuals and groups, offering a combination of incentives to desist from violence and swift consequences for continued criminal behavior. This strategy has been successfully applied in various contexts to reduce gang-related shootings and chronic violence. **Situational crime prevention**, on the other hand, focuses on altering the physical and social environment to reduce the opportunities for firearm-related violence. By implementing measures such as secure firearm storage and enhanced surveillance, communities can deter potential offenders and reduce the likelihood of incidents. These approaches are not only effective in everyday community armed violence but also hold potential to prevent mass shootings and suicides by addressing situational factors that contribute to these tragic events. The synergy between focused deterrence and situational crime prevention illustrates the power of hybrid solutions in creating safer, more resilient communities.

Focused Deterrence

Focused deterrence strategies, also known as “pulling levers” policing, represent a targeted approach to crime prevention and reduction (Braga & Kennedy, 2020). This strategy involves identifying specific individuals or groups of interest who are disproportionately responsible for serious violence in communities and directly engaging with them through a combination of law enforcement, community mobilization, and social service actions. The theory of change behind focused deterrence is based on the premise that a small number of individuals are involved in a significant portion of violent crimes, and by concentrating resources on these individuals, significant reductions in violence can be achieved (Kennedy, 2024).

Focused deterrence is rooted in deterrence theory, which suggests that crime can be prevented when the costs of committing a crime outweigh the benefits (Becker, 1968). Solving firearm-related crimes is not merely about bringing perpetrators to justice; it is a crucial component of a broader strategy to prevent future armed violence. When murders go unsolved, for instance, it not only emboldens perpetrators but also signals a breakdown in law enforcement efficacy, potentially leading to more violence. Leovy’s (2015) examination of homicide cases in Los Angeles, for example, reveals a pattern where the failure to adequately solve murders in communities already suffering from high rates of violence perpetuates a cycle of retaliatory violence and mistrust in law enforcement. To fix this problem, Leovy says more funding and resources are needed to build capacities in relevant police units, including training, personnel, and forensic technology. Police can also better utilize data analytics to identify patterns and predict areas of potential homicide escalation, directing resources more strategically, and building the trust and cooperation with local communities that are essential for effective investigations.

Focused deterrence amplifies these concepts by directly communicating the consequences of continued criminal behavior to high-risk individuals, while also offering support and alternatives to those willing to change. The approach is characterized by a clear message of the consequences of violence, combined with an offer of help for those who want to exit a life of crime.

Focused deterrence strategies typically involve several key steps:

- 1. Problem Analysis:** Law enforcement agencies collaborate with community-based organizations to identify the individuals and groups most responsible for violence in the community.
- 2. Direct Communication:** These individuals are then directly engaged through “call-in” meetings or direct interventions, where they are presented with clear evidence of their criminal involvement and given a message of the potential legal consequences they face, coupled with an offer of support services.
- 3. Leverage of Legal Tools:** A range of legal tools is prepared to swiftly respond to any further violence by the targeted individuals or groups, ensuring that the consequences are both certain, swift, and severe. For example, harsher criminal penalties or enhanced probation conditions, such as stricter supervision and mandatory participation in support programs,

are used to monitor compliance. In some cases, racketeering or “joint enterprise” laws are used to punish entire groups for the actions of individuals, while civil injunctions and nuisance abatement laws are used to restrict offenders’ freedoms of movement and association or shut down locations associated with criminal activity.

4. Provision of Support: At the same time, a comprehensive support package is made available, including job training, education opportunities, and substance abuse treatment, to facilitate exit from criminal activities.

Several high-quality evaluations of focused deterrence strategies have shown significant reductions in violent crime in cities where these strategies have been implemented, demonstrating their potential effectiveness (Braga & Kennedy, 2020; Braga et al., 2018). By combining the threat of enforcement with the offer of support, focused deterrence acknowledges the complexity of criminal behavior and addresses both the *stick and the carrot* aspects of behavior change. These strategies also often involve significant community engagement and mobilization, enhancing the legitimacy of the approach and reinforcing social norms against violence.

However, implementing focused deterrence strategies effectively requires significant coordination and resources, including dedicated law enforcement, social services, and community participation. The success of focused deterrence is contingent on sustained effort and focus, which can be challenging to maintain over the long term (Abt, 2019). There is also a risk that these strategies might inadvertently widen the net of criminal justice involvement for some individuals, particularly if the emphasis on enforcement outweighs the support component.

In sum, focused deterrence strategies offer a promising approach to reducing violence through a combination of direct communication, enforcement, and support for individuals most at risk of engaging in or being victims of violence. By targeting the small number of individuals who are responsible for a disproportionate amount of violence, these strategies can achieve significant reductions in crime rates. However, their success depends on careful implementation, ongoing community engagement, and balancing enforcement with meaningful opportunities for change. As such, focused deterrence strategies require commitment to both the carrot and the stick, ensuring that individuals have clear choices and the support needed to make positive changes.

Situational Crime Prevention

According to the “routine activities theory,” criminal events occur when three factors converge: the presence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians (Cohen & Felson, 1979). The “Cardiff Model” is a collaborative approach to violence prevention that strategically utilizes data from healthcare and law enforcement organizations to enhance policing and community violence prevention efforts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Central to the model is the sharing of information. In healthcare settings, data on violence-related injuries, including the location, time, date, and mechanism of injury, are collected. These data are combined with law enforcement information to help identify specific public locations, such as bars, street corners, or subway stations, where violence clusters and occurs. The Cardiff Model was

developed by Dr. Jonathan Shepherd, a surgeon and professor at Cardiff University in Wales, UK, who frequently treated individuals injured through violence at his hospital's emergency department (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). His research revealed that only a small proportion of these injuries were reported to the police. Through data-sharing, his model facilitated solutions to violence, including environmental changes in violent areas (such as increased street lighting and the creation of pedestrian-friendly streets), policy changes (such as switching from glass to plastic barware in pubs and nightclubs), and the promotion of stronger community partnerships (including increased collaboration with clergy for violence prevention initiatives).

Using situational crime prevention in case of mass shootings – Experiences from the United States

Situational crime prevention strategies can be used to reduce armed violence, including mass shootings where the motivated offenders are the shooters, the suitable targets are the locations where large numbers of people gather, and the absence of capable guardians refers to the lack of security measures to prevent or respond to an attack (Schildkraut et al., 2019; Silva & Greene-Colozzi, 2021). **Increasing the presence of capable guardians** in the form of armed security or trained staff hypothetically could help prevent attacks, for example. However, research from US where such measures have been the most widely implemented shows that for suicidal shooters, armed security could serve more as an incentive to attack than as a deterrent (Peterson, Erickson, & Densley, 2021). Improving physical security measures such as installing metal detectors or bullet-resistant glass can also make potential targets less attractive to shooters and improve perceptions of safety, albeit with trade-offs to campus climate (Mowen & Freng, 2019). For example, the presence of security measures can create an atmosphere of danger and suspicion. Students may feel they are being constantly monitored, which can lead to feelings of being untrusted or criminalized. There is a related risk of racial profiling and unequal treatment, which can exacerbate existing inequalities and tensions within the school community. Such measures also disrupt the normal flow of the school day. Long lines at metal detectors, increased security checks, and the presence of security personnel can detract from the welcoming, open atmosphere that schools aim to provide, potentially affecting student attendance and engagement. The financial costs of security measures can be substantial, diverting funds from other priority areas.

Similarly, experiences from the US, indicate that when conducted in a sensitive and trauma-informed way, active shooter drills can help people feel empowered and more confident in their ability to respond to a shooting (for a review, see Schildkraut & Nickerson, 2022). A [law](#) passed in Minnesota in 2023 requires that active shooter drill protocols include a reasonable amount of time immediately following the drill for teachers to debrief with their students. An active shooter drill must also accompany a concise and age-appropriate announcement before commencing, informing students there is no immediate danger to life and safety. Likewise, schools must provide notice of a pending active shooter drill to every student's parent or legal guardian before an active shooter drill is conducted and the drill must be appropriate for students with mobility restrictions, sensory needs, developmental or physical disabilities, mental health needs, and auditory or visual limitations. By practicing different response strategies, participants can build "muscle memory" and may feel more

capable of protecting themselves and others in the event of an emergency. Drills may also improve communication and help participants be better prepared to work together to protect students, employees, and visitors in the event of an emergency (Schildkraut & Nickerson, 2022).

Another way to apply situational crime prevention to mass shootings is to **focus on the situational factors that precede an attack**. For example, shooters may conduct surveillance or reconnaissance of potential targets before an attack (Silver et al., 2018). Strategies such as **training staff to recognize and report suspicious behavior** or **implementing surveillance measures** can help identify potential shooters and prevent an attack before it occurs (Peterson & Densley, 2021). Consistent with routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), humans are creatures of habit, and mass shooters tend to target places they know (Schildkraut et al., 2019). Targeting familiar locations may be a way for shooters to exact revenge or make a statement about a perceived injustice (Fox et al., 2018). For example, a student who has experienced bullying or mistreatment at school may choose to target their school as a way of seeking revenge. Similarly, a disgruntled employee who feels wronged by their employer may choose to target their workplace as a way of making a statement. A person who has attended school or worked at a particular location for an extended period may also be more familiar with the layout of the building, the schedules of the occupants, and the security measures in place, making it easier for them to plan and successfully carry out an attack (Peterson & Densley, 2021).

Mass shooters also target certain locations for their symbolic value (Fox et al., 2018). Certain locations may hold cultural, historical, political, or personal significance to the shooter, and attacking them may be a way to express a grievance, make a political statement, or provoke a reaction from society. For example, a shooter may target a religious institution as a way of expressing their hatred or intolerance towards a particular group of people or target a government building as a way of expressing their dissent or opposition. By attacking a location with cultural or historical significance, the shooter may also receive more media attention and be remembered more prominently by the public. In some cases, this desire for fame or recognition may be a primary motivator for the shooter (Lankford & Silva, 2020), as they may feel powerless or insignificant in their personal life and seek to gain attention through a violent act.

Applications to Suicide by Firearm

In the early twentieth century, the United Kingdom heated domestic ovens with coal gas, which contained lethal levels of carbon monoxide. By the late 1950s, more than half of all suicides there—about the same proportion as firearm suicides in the United States today—involved someone putting their head in an oven, to use the common expression of the day, because it offered a quick, painless, bloodless means of death (Clarke & Mayhew, 1988).

Then, in the 1960s, the UK government began, incidentally, to replace manufactured gas with cleaner, natural gas from the North Sea, which was virtually free of carbon monoxide. By 1977, less than 0.5 percent of suicides used domestic gas, and the overall national suicide rate fell by a third (Clarke & Mayhew, 1988).

Twenty years later, the United Kingdom also changed the packaging for a popular over-the-counter painkiller to require “blister packs” for packages of sixteen pills sold in places like convenience stores, and for packages of thirty-two pills in pharmacies. Big bottles made it easy to pour out many loose pills at once and were implicated in hundreds of deliberate and accidental overdoses each year. Blister packs meant pills had to be popped out one by one, making it a long, slow process to pop out enough pills to die by suicide (Emanuel, 2013). One study found that suicide deaths from paracetamol overdoses fell by 43% over the next decade (Hawton, et al., 2013). A similar decline was found in accidental deaths from medication poisonings, and overdose-related liver transplants dropped by 61% (Hawton, et al., 2013).

These examples, and the research behind them, demonstrate that putting even the smallest obstacle between people and the means to kill themselves can prevent suicide. The natural gas and the blister packs slowed things down. Firearms, however, the most common means of suicide in countries where guns are prevalent, speed things up. They are fast and lethally efficient (resulting in death 85% of the time) and leave little room for a change of heart or a lifesaving intervention (Anestis, 2018).

Switzerland has a well-established gun culture. It boasts one of the highest rates of firearm ownership in the world—about one-third of all Swiss households owns a gun. That is because Switzerland has compulsory military service—every able-bodied Swiss man between the ages of 18 and 43 is expected to serve (Markowitz & The Trace, 2016). Each conscript is provided with a personal service rifle, which they keep at home. They have regular drills. When soldiers complete their service, they have the option to purchase their military-issued rifle from the government at a discount. Many do so because Switzerland has a strong tradition of sport shooting and hunting.

Compared with other European nations, Switzerland also has a remarkably high number of firearm-enabled suicides, about 40% of which were committed with army weapons (Thoeni, et al., 2018). This changed in 2003 when Switzerland introduced new reforms (titled “Army XXI”) and civil service became an option for people who did not want to serve in the armed forces. As a result of the reform, the number of troops halved from approximately 400,000 to 200,000. That meant far fewer people with access to firearms at home. Following these reforms, suicides by shooting similarly dropped, clustered among people between the ages of 18 and 43—the same group that would have been serving in the military previously (Reisch, et al., 2013).

In a direct challenge to the talking point that if someone is intent on suicide but does not have a firearm, they will find another way, 78% of the men who would have taken their lives with a firearm did not substitute another method of suicide, such as poison or hanging. Indeed, there were comparable reductions in suicides after the installation of safety nets and access barriers that prevent people from jumping from bridges, similarly with little or no substitution effect or displacement to other bridges (Reisch, Schuster, & Michel, 2007).

From gas ovens to pill bottles to military arms to bridges, research shows that reducing access to certain lethal means of suicide can have a dramatic effect on suicide rates. The implication is that if people cannot get their hands on the easiest tools to harm themselves, there will be fewer deaths (Anestis, 2018). Research shows that secure storage policies can help prevent firearm thefts, suicides, accidental shootings, and school shootings; the latter is because school shooters, too

young to legally purchase a weapon themselves, commonly get them from family and friends. One study found that keeping firearms locked up can reduce shootings in the home by 75% (Anestis, 2018). When asked, however, the majority of firearms owners confess that they do not safely store all their firearms locked and unloaded. In the United States, the Brady campaign's public health effort to "end family fire" has found that parents are much more likely to ask other parents whether they have guns in the house after receiving information about securing firearms. This is something everyone can do. Every parent can make sure any firearm they have in their own home is secured, and when their children visit a friend's house to play, parents can ask other parents if they have guns, and if so, if they are stored safely. And relatedly, just as we now accept that *friends do not let friends drive drunk*, a national public awareness campaign with credible messengers could instill the message that *friends do not let friends borrow their guns* (Peterson & Densley, 2021).

COMMUNITY-BASED ARMED VIOLENCE INTERVENTIONS

Beyond legal and policy measures and programs predicated on collaboration with law enforcement, community interventions play a crucial role in addressing the root causes of gun violence. Hospital-based interventions can offer immediate support and counseling to victims of armed violence and their families, potentially preventing retaliatory violence. Street outreach programs work within communities to mediate conflicts before they escalate into violence. Finally, risk education, public information, and advocacy programs can help modify attitudes toward firearms, reducing the normalization of gun violence, and preventing youth from engaging in it.

Hospital-Based Interventions

Hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIPs) represent an innovative and strategic approach to addressing the cyclical nature of violent injury and its repercussions in communities afflicted by armed violence (for a review, see Webster, et al., 2022). These interventions focus on the victim-offender overlap and pivot on the critical moment of a gunshot victim's hospitalization, leveraging the period of acute care as an opportunity for intervention to prevent future violence and re-injury. HVIPs are designed to work within medical facilities, targeting individuals who have suffered violent injuries, particularly gunshot wounds, typically in criminal circumstances.

The core premise of these programs is that the experience of being shot provides a pivotal moment for intervention—a time when victims are potentially more receptive to change, motivated by the traumatic event they have endured. HVIPs typically involve a multidisciplinary team that includes medical professionals, social workers, and “credible messengers,” sometimes, former gang members who have undergone significant personal transformation. Medical staff typically receive additional training to support the work of specialized teams who work together to provide a comprehensive range of services aimed at addressing the root causes of violence in the lives of the victims.

The operational framework of HVIPs generally follows a sequence that begins with the acute care phase (Webster, et al., 2022). During this phase, staff members establish initial contact with the victim, often within the hospital setting, to build trust and rapport. Following the immediate medical response, the intervention strategy includes an assessment of the victim’s psychosocial needs and risks for future involvement in violence. Based on this assessment, a tailored plan is developed, encompassing elements such as mental health support, educational and employment opportunities, legal assistance, and social services. The objective is to provide both immediate and long-term support that addresses the underlying issues contributing to the cycle of violence.

There are several perceived benefits of HVIPs (Webster, et al., 2022). By focusing on individuals already affected by gun violence, HVIPs directly target those most at risk of repeated involvement, either as victims or perpetrators. These programs also recognize the multifaceted nature of gun violence, offering services that address not just the physical wounds but also the psychological, economic, and social factors that contribute to the cycle of violence. There is emerging evidence that participants in HVIPs are less likely to experience repeat hospitalizations for violent injury compared to those who do not receive such interventions, indicating a potential for significant impact on reducing violence recidivism (Webster, et al., 2022).

However, HVIPs require significant resources, including dedicated staff, comprehensive services, and sustained funding, which can be challenging to maintain over time. Engaging victims at a moment of crisis requires highly skilled staff and a nuanced, trauma-informed, approach. Some individuals may be resistant to intervention, especially if they perceive it as intrusive or irrelevant to their immediate concerns. And assessing the effectiveness of HVIPs can be complex, given the wide range of outcomes that programs aim to influence. Establishing clear metrics for success beyond the reduction of re-injury rates is necessary to fully understand their impact.

Despite these challenges, there are other ways hospitals and healthcare providers can be part of the solution to armed violence. For example, family doctors can screen for an individual’s firearm injury risk simply by asking patients questions, such as, “Do you have access to a firearm within or outside of your household?” and “Did you ever have a gun pulled on you?” Responses can be used to guide discussions about safe storage or the next steps for care. Overall, hospital-based interventions for gun violence embody a proactive and compassionate response to the risk of firearm injury. By integrating care and support within the acute phase of injury, moreover, these programs offer a promising avenue for breaking the cycle of violence. While challenges in implementation and sustainability exist, the potential benefits of HVIPs in terms of individual recovery and community safety are significant. Continued research and investment in these programs can help refine their approach and maximize their impact on gun violence prevention.

Street Outreach Work

Street outreach programs represent a critical component of the broader strategy to mitigate armed violence in urban environments (Kennedy, 2011). These initiatives deploy outreach workers—often individuals with firsthand experience of living in violent communities or even past involvement in gang activities—to engage directly with at-risk youth and adults on the streets (Decker, et al., 2022). The essence of these programs lies in their proactive approach to violence prevention, aiming to diffuse tensions and offer alternatives to violent behaviors before incidents escalate.

The foundation of street outreach programs rests on the credibility and relatability of the outreach workers, who leverage their backgrounds and understanding of the community dynamics to foster trust and communication. These workers engage with individuals and groups who are at high risk of involvement in armed violence, either as perpetrators or victims. The engagement strategies involve mediation to prevent retaliatory violence, providing support and resources for those seeking a way out of the cycle of violence, and connecting individuals with social services that can address underlying issues such as unemployment, substance abuse, and housing instability.

Street outreach workers, supervised by local government institutions or non-profit organizations, maintain a constant presence in their communities, often becoming well-known figures in the areas most affected by violence. They conduct their work in various settings, including streets, parks, and community centers, to identify and intervene in potentially volatile situations. Their activities can range from mediating conflicts that could lead to violence, to organizing community events aimed at promoting peace and unity. Importantly, these programs also work closely with local law enforcement, social service agencies, and community organizations to coordinate efforts and maximize impact.

Advocates for street outreach work argue that by operating within the communities most affected by armed violence, programs can have an immediate effect on reducing incidents by preventing escalation and retaliation. Outreach workers can provide tailored advice and guidance to individuals, helping them navigate away from violence through personal connections and support. These programs also help build trust between communities and local authorities by acting as intermediaries, which can enhance the effectiveness of broader violence prevention strategies.

However, the nature of outreach work involves significant risks, as outreach workers often find themselves in potentially dangerous situations without the protection that law enforcement officers might have (Hureau, et al., 2022). The intense, emotionally taxing nature of the work, combined with often limited resources, can also lead to high rates of burnout among outreach workers (Free & MacDonald, 2022). Quantifying the direct impact of street outreach programs on reducing armed violence can also be challenging, as their work is preventative and often indirect, making it difficult to establish clear causal links (Roman, 2021). In certain settings such as the U.S., street outreach typically is grant-funded and operated by local non-profit organizations, making future planning and sustainability challenging.

Perhaps the most famous example of street outreach work is the “Cure Violence” model of violence “interruption.” Originally developed in Chicago, Cure Violence represents a pioneering approach

to violence prevention that conceptualizes violence as a public health issue, akin to a contagious disease that can spread within a community (Butts, et al., 2015). This model employs “violence interrupters,” individuals often with personal histories of involvement in violence, who are trained to intervene in conflicts and prevent the escalation of violence. The Cure Violence model operates on several key principles. First, it identifies violence as a learned behavior that can be transmitted between individuals and through communities, similar to the spread of infectious diseases. Second, it suggests that strategic interventions can effectively interrupt the transmission of violent behaviors, preventing future incidents. Third, by changing community norms around violence, these interventions can lead to a sustainable reduction in violence over time.

Implementation of the Cure Violence model involves three core components:

- 1. Detection and Interruption:** Violence interrupters proactively identify potential violent conflicts through street outreach and work to defuse them before they escalate. This may involve mediating disputes, offering alternatives to retaliation, or simply providing a calming presence in tense situations.
- 2. Behavior Change:** The program seeks to engage those at highest risk of perpetrating or becoming victims of violence, offering them support and resources to change their behavior. This might include connecting individuals with job training, educational opportunities, or counseling services.
- 3. Changing Community Norms:** Cure Violence also focuses on community mobilization to change norms and attitudes around violence. This can involve public education campaigns, community events, and the engagement of local leaders to reinforce the message that violence is unacceptable.

The Cure Violence model is supported by research that indicates significant reductions in shootings and killings in communities where it has been implemented (Butts, et al., 2015). By employing individuals from within the community, the model leverages local knowledge and credibility, fostering a sense of empowerment and ownership over violence prevention efforts. Through its holistic approach, moreover, the model not only interrupts immediate threats of violence but also addresses some of the underlying social and economic factors that contribute to violent behavior.

However, the model’s effectiveness is heavily dependent on the credibility and effectiveness of the violence interrupters, whose personal backgrounds can both be an asset and a liability (Papachristos, 2011). As with many intervention programs, sustaining funding and operational capacity can be challenging, potentially limiting long-term impact. And measuring the impact of the Cure Violence model can be complex, given its indirect approach to reducing violence through behavior and norm change (Roman, 2021).

In sum, street outreach programs embody a deeply human approach to addressing the scourge of armed violence, relying on the power of personal transformation and community engagement. These initiatives offer a unique blend of conflict mediation, mentorship, and connection to critical services, aimed at preventing violence before it occurs. While the challenges are non-trivial, including the potential risk to outreach workers and difficulties in measuring success, the potential benefits in terms of lives saved and communities transformed are sound. The Cure Violence model

in particular stands out for its innovative approach to treating violence as a public health issue, capable of being prevented through strategic, community-based interventions. Its theory of change challenges conventional law enforcement strategies, offering a complementary or alternative pathway to creating safer communities. While challenges in implementation and measurement exist, the potential for the Cure Violence model to transform the way societies address violence is significant. Ongoing support, research, and adaptation are necessary to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of this approach.

Risk Education, Public Information, and Advocacy

For decades, research has consistently shown that effective interventions for violent behavior center around three key principles, validated by controlled treatment studies (Boxer, Kubik, & Marcello, 2024):

- 1. Individual cognitive-behavioral treatment:** This approach focuses on the cognitive and emotional roots of aggression and strategies to manage impulsive reactions, such as deep breathing techniques and recognizing early signs of arousal, which help youth think about their actions in more positive and constructive ways;
- 2. Family-centered treatment:** Family involvement is often essential for the successful psychosocial treatment of adolescents. This method involves improving communication between caregivers and youth, enhancing disciplinary practices, and ensuring caregivers effectively manage their children's behavior. It emphasizes clear communication, setting appropriate limits, and using suitable rewards and punishments;
- 3. Ecologically-oriented treatment:** This strategy connects youth and their families to positive community activities and supports, enhancing social capital and community accountability. It leverages community resources to foster lasting positive change, such as through relationships with positive role models and new activities like afterschool sports programs.

As an extension of these clinical interventions, efforts to reduce the demand for firearms are also a critical component of comprehensive strategies to prevent armed violence. These efforts focus on changing public perceptions, behaviors, and norms related to firearm ownership and use. By addressing the underlying factors that drive individuals to acquire and keep firearms, for example, these initiatives aim to reduce the overall presence of firearms in society and, consequently, the potential for gun-related violence and accidents.

First, stricter regulations on how firearms are advertised can limit the glamorization and normalization of firearms ownership. Advertising restrictions similar to those applied to tobacco products could be implemented, banning misleading advertisements that associate firearms ownership with notions of masculinity, heroism or personal security. Counter-marketing efforts, akin to anti-smoking campaigns, are an extension of this. These initiatives use various media platforms to counteract the positive imagery of firearm ownership propagated by the firearm industry. By showcasing the real-life consequences of firearm-related violence and debunking myths about firearms providing safety, counter-marketing can reshape public perceptions and reduce the appeal of firearms.

Education and awareness programs in schools, workplaces, and community centers can also contribute to reducing firearm demand. These programs aim to inform individuals about the legal responsibilities and potential consequences of firearms ownership, promoting a more cautious and informed approach to acquiring firearms. By integrating discussions about the social and psychological impacts of armed violence into educational curricula, these programs can influence future generations to adopt attitudes that are less favorable towards firearm ownership.

Box 1: Where to Start? The Violent Crime Reduction Roadmap

In response to rising community armed violence across numerous locales in the United States, the Department of Justice, in 2023, initiated the “Violent Crime Reduction Roadmap” (<https://www.ojp.gov/violent-crime-reduction-roadmap/introduction>). This comprehensive guide aids local jurisdictions in formulating and executing effective strategies to mitigate, intervene in, and respond to community armed violence. The roadmap encapsulates 10 critical actions, as identified by the Council on Criminal Justice (see also, John Jay College Research Advisory Group on Preventing and Reducing Community Violence, 2020), aimed at diminishing community armed violence, as follows:

- 1. Commit to Saving Lives:** Establish a definitive objective to halt violence and save lives within the community. Effective strategies to combat armed violence should start with well-defined objectives. Leadership should establish ambitious yet achievable goals, quantifying success in tangible reductions of homicides and non-fatal shootings.
- 2. Identify Influencers of Violence:** As discussed, studies repeatedly indicate that violence tends to be highly concentrated among a small subset of individuals, groups, and places most at risk. Before implementing interventions, leaders must conduct thorough analyses to pinpoint the key individuals and locales that are central to the propagation of violence.
- 3. Develop a Community Engagement Plan:** Sustaining coordinated anti-violence initiatives requires meticulous planning. Once objectives have been set and the critical individuals and areas identified, stakeholders (e.g., local government officials, law enforcement, schools, social services, healthcare providers, community organizations, and residents) must create detailed and executable plans. These plans should delineate commitments, concentrate resources, and strengthen collaborations to ensure the effort’s longevity. Formalizing these commitments through Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) or partnership agreements can help maintain focus and dedication, while establishing a steering committee to oversee the plan can help ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear. Regular community forums and focus groups can also facilitate resident involvement. Providing training and support to community members can enhance their capacity to participate in and sustain anti-violence initiatives.
- 4. Engage with Compassion and Responsibility:** Studies suggest that successful approaches to reducing violence involve offering services and support to those most at risk, alongside prompt and definite consequences for ongoing violent behavior. Leaders need to connect with individuals and groups identified as high-risk, employing a strategy that balances empathy and potential incentives with accountability and penalties.

5. Tackle Key Locations Strategically: Strategies focused on specific locations can interrupt patterns of violence and alter areas where crime is heavily concentrated. Authorities should focus their efforts on these hotspots of violence by implementing problem-oriented, community-engaged policing methods, along with approaches that do not involve enforcement. These could include measures to mitigate nuisances, alter traffic flows, enhance street lighting, and make targeted investments aimed at boosting social and economic conditions in such locales.

6. Centralize Violence Reduction Responsibility: It is imperative for figures both within and without government to persistently prioritize violence prevention. Communities require specialized teams, devoted to curbing violence, that possess both direct lines of communication and accountability to their leadership.

7. Adopt Trauma-Informed Approaches: Studies show that trauma from experiencing violence is extensive, affecting not only victims and perpetrators but also those providing services and treatment, law enforcement personnel, and others. It is essential for communities to offer trauma-informed services to victims and survivors of violence, and to extend these services to first responders and staff involved in community violence intervention and prevention.

8. Invest in Collaborative Partnerships: Build partnerships to share the responsibility for violence reduction efforts. Individuals engaged in violence prevention and response, including community violence intervention experts and law enforcement officials, require backing to maintain their efforts long-term. Communities should invest in developing a robust and resilient workforce dedicated to anti-violence initiatives to build and sustain their capacity.

9. Allocate Funding for Innovation: Reserve financial resources for involving new stakeholders and exploring innovative strategies.

10. Pursue Continuous Improvement: Commit to an ongoing process of improvement, guided by data, evidence, and collaborative learning.

For each action, the roadmap also details specific resources available to assist jurisdictions in curbing violence and safeguarding lives, including financial support through grants and training and technical assistance to support the adoption and assessment of specific violence reduction strategies. These actions, informed by the collective expertise of a diverse group of professionals from community organizations, law enforcement, public health, and academia, serve as a blueprint for jurisdictions committed to making their communities safer.



CONCLUSION

This report presents an in-depth examination of the multifaceted nature of armed violence and the array of strategies employed to mitigate its impact on communities. By framing the many forms of armed violence as a human-rights issue, the analysis has illuminated the complexity of the issue, which spans across legal, social, and community dimensions. Legal interventions, encompassing the regulation of firearms possession, eligibility, sales and transfers, as well as the lawful use, storage, and carrying of firearms, constitute foundational efforts in curtailing the accessibility and misuse of firearms. These legal frameworks are essential in establishing a controlled environment wherein firearms are responsibly owned and used, thereby reducing the potential for violence.

At the same time, community-based interventions represent a crucial element in the multifaceted approach to armed violence prevention. Focused deterrence strategies demonstrate the effectiveness of combining legal interventions with community resources to deter potential offenders. Routine activities and situational crime prevention approaches underscore the significance of modifying environmental factors and behaviors to reduce opportunities for violent incidents. The synthesis of legal measures and community-based strategies presents a holistic approach to combating armed violence. It underscores the necessity of a concerted effort that encompasses stringent legal regulations, active community involvement, and continuous innovation in violence prevention practices.

Hospital-based interventions and street outreach work directly address the precursors and aftermath of armed violence, providing support and alternatives to at-risk individuals. As this report highlights, the path to reducing armed violence is complex and challenging, requiring dedication, collaboration, and adaptability from all stakeholders involved. By continuing to refine and expand upon the strategies discussed, there is a hopeful prospect for significant reduction in armed violence, ultimately leading to safer and more resilient communities.

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