Reducing Armed Violence

THE PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

Armed violence has been called an epidemic. The widespread impacts of armed violence are costly and far-reaching. The gravity of the situation has prompted numerous efforts to identify the factors that contribute to the prevalence of violence in communities. At the same time, greater attention has been given to preventive efforts.

This chapter examines how a public health approach can contribute to better understanding the scope and scale of armed violence, identifying factors that contribute to violence, and designing interventions targeted at these factors. The chapter also provides an assessment of the approach and ways in which practitioners can improve their capacity to prevent armed violence. The main conclusions include:

- Public health provides the backbone for a robust, evidence-based approach to understanding the complex, multi-causal phenomenon of armed violence and designing multifaceted and multi-level interventions to reduce the prevalence and negative impact of violent events.
- Understanding and preventing armed violence require better information about violent incidents. At present, current methods of obtaining data about armed violence are insufficient.
- Context matters. The prevention of armed violence depends on a general understanding of armed violence combined with a local knowledge of the community in which the violence takes place in order to tailor interventions to community dynamics.
- Public health is not an alternative to criminal justice, education, poverty reduction, or any other programme targeting violence. Instead, it offers a framework for the coordination of efforts based on evidence, analysis, and action.

Residents gather around the body of a person killed during a shootout between police and gang members at the Complexo de Alemao slum in Rio de Janeiro, June 2007. © Ricardo Moraes/AP Photo

Children and adults from nearly two dozen organizations take part in a march against violence in June 2001 in South Central Los Angeles.
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Violence is a social phenomenon that can be prevented.

The public health approach broadens the view of armed violence from an individual, criminal experience to a social phenomenon. In so doing, it provides a complementary approach to that of the more narrowly focused criminal justice perspective, which concentrates on criminality and incarceration and represents a primarily reactive response to violence. Indeed, the public health approach emphasizes prevention over response, and the community over the individual. Importantly, it recognizes violence as a social phenomenon that can be prevented and underlines the need for targeted preventive strategies.

In a nutshell, the public health approach involves a four-step process:

- identifying the risk factors that contribute to violence,
- assessing the identified risk,
- designing interventions to target risk factors, and
- evaluating the effectiveness of these interventions for future programming.

Using this approach, public health has made a number of contributions to understanding violence.

Despite the progress made and the utility demonstrated by the approach, it has not been widely adopted. This is the result of a number of challenges facing public health practitioners. Foremost among these obstacles is the fact that evaluations of interventions, a key element of the approach, have not been conducted in a systematic fashion. Instead, many programmes continue to be implemented without supporting evidence or evaluations of their impact. This provides little persuasive evidence to convince politicians that a heavy investment in the approach is warranted.

Evaluations of programmes are essential, but often forgotten.

Violence is a community problem, not an individual or government problem. Community context matters for designing effective interventions, but community participation and support of interventions determines whether these interventions succeed. Ignoring community input, de-emphasizing community participation, and taking a top-down, law enforcement-heavy approach are likely to reduce the effectiveness of interventions. While there is an understanding of the need for preventive efforts, much work remains to be done if interventions are to succeed in reducing armed violence. ◼