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Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as a Cost-Effective Tool for Sustained Violence Reduction

*10-Year Follow-Up Evaluation of the Sustainable Transformation of Youth program in Liberia*

Urban crime and violence are among the most costly and divisive issues facing cities around the world. Policymakers and donors seek effective ways to reduce crime and violence, particularly among young men at high risk of becoming involved in violence. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a method for swapping self-destructive beliefs and behaviors, and pro-moting positive ones by helping people become aware of harmful thoughts and patterns, and guiding them to think and react differently. A growing body of evidence suggests that CBT is an effective crime and violence reduction strategy.

In Liberia, an 8-week CBT program paired with cash transfers, called **the Sustainable Transformation for Youth in Liberia (STYL) program, successfully reduced criminal, violent, and other antisocial behaviors over a ten-year period.** The STYL program, developed by the local community organization Network for Empowerment & Progressive Initiative (NEPI), involved therapy led by reformed street youth and ex-combatants. The program was low-cost, with a budget of $530 US per participant for CBT, cash, and administration.

Results after ten years

*The 10-year follow-up evaluation—the first long-run randomized study of a CBT-informed program—found that the large short-term reductions in crime and violence persisted nearly ten years after the program concluded.*

- **Men offered both CBT and economic assistance reported large and sustained falls in criminal, violent, and other antisocial behavior immediately after and 10 years after** participating in the program. The positive effects were slightly smaller and less precise when therapy was delivered alone, without cash.
- **Men offered CBT and cash were much less likely to commit thefts and robberies.** In the long run, those in the therapy-only group reported 41 percent fewer crimes compared to men in the comparison group, while those who participated in STYL reported a 57 percent decrease in crimes committed. Interpolating, the **translates to roughly 324 fewer crimes per subject over 10 years—$1.50 per crime avoided,** given the low program cost.
- **Men offered CBT and cash reported being less likely to sell drugs.** Though members of the group that did not participate in the program also reported lower rates of drug selling, those that participated in STYL were 45 percent less likely to sell drugs after nearly ten years relative to the comparison group.
- **The highest-risk men seem to be driving the sustained declines in antisocial behavior.** Even though the program targeted high-risk young men, those who reported the largest declines in thefts, robberies, drug selling, and other antisocial behavior were those who reported the highest initial levels of crime and violence—implying higher than-anticipated returns to targeting the most criminal and violent young men.
- **Cash itself did not lead to sustained changes in economic performance.** While recipients invested in small businesses, most of those had failed one year after the grants, and there were no signs of improved economic performance after one or ten years—whether or not they received CBT. To the extent cash coupled with therapy improved antisocial behaviors, it is probably because it led to more sustained practice and behavior change.

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PARTNERS
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COUNTRY
Liberia

TIMELINE
2009-2021

SAMPLE
999 "at-risk" young men

TOPICS
Crime, Violence, Peace and Recovery, Psychology, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Cash Transfers

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