

# Understanding Unlikely Successes in Urban Violence Reduction

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## Abstract

*The problems of violence in Latin America are often reiterated, yet understanding how and why violence declines is far less common. While urban violence takes different forms and has a range of motivations, we suggest that strengthening political and social institutions are important in violence reduction processes. The article examines this using a comparative analysis of two cities which have recently seen unusual and marked reductions in lethal violence: Bogotá in Colombia and Recife in Brazil. Drawing on primary data collection, the case studies suggest improvements in public security are linked with institutionalising progressive security policies, increasing accountability of political institutions, and social reforms encouraging civic values and commitments to non-violence. While findings are specific to these two cases, they may plausibly apply to a broader range of cities, such that commitments to improve public policy and political institutions can overcome structural risk factors that foster violence.*

**Keywords:** Violence reduction; urban violence; public security policy; institutional reform; comparative process tracing; Colombia; Brazil

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## 1. Introduction

Latin America is one of the most violent regions in the world (UNODC 2014), with the majority of violence occurring in cities. Given the developmental challenges urban violence poses (World Bank 2011), urban violence reduction is imperative when the region's cities are considered 'fragile' (Muggah and Savage 2011) and experiencing a 'humanitarian crisis' (Bernal and Navas 2013). The diversity and complexity of what is 'urban' in Latin America, however, makes this a sometimes challenging process. Latin American cities are heterogeneous places, and discourses of urban settlements as universally 'fractured' provide an unhelpful 'impasse' (Rodgers, Beall, and Kanbur 2012, 5). Moreover, cities face a range of 'violences' – from organised local or transnational criminal groups; interpersonal or domestic disputes; illegal actions of police or paramilitary groups; or politically motivated riots, protests or civil violence – each with a complex array of motivations, expressions and policy responses. Furthermore, while conceptually distinct, political, civic, economic, social and criminal violence may frequently overlap in motivation and expression ([Moser 2004](#); [Beall, Goodfellow, and Rodgers 2013](#)).

What then can we say about violence reduction in the Latin American city? Despite the region's aforementioned diversity of violence, there is utility in understanding why *in general*, some cities are more or less violent than others; and why trajectories of violence change over time. In addressing this, we examine declines in lethal forms of urban *social violence* – namely violence between individuals or small groups that lack an inherent political motivation ([Fox and Hoelscher 2012](#)). Several explanations have been put forward to account for lethal social violence in Latin American cities, often related to broad political processes like democratic transitions and social insecurity ([Arias and Goldstein 2010](#); [Fox and Hoelscher 2012](#)), economic conditions related to liberalisation and socio-economic inequality (Rudqvist and Hettne 2003), and the socio-demographic structure derived from informal urbanisation and spatial segregation ([Beall, Guha-Khasnobis, and Kanbur 2010](#)). A range of other drivers cut across these categories and focus on dynamics on a smaller scale of analysis, including small-arms availability, gang activity, the narcotics trade, alcohol and substance abuse, poor public education, large youth cohorts, and a poor criminal justice system (Briceño-León, Villaveces, and Concha-Eastman 2008; Soares and Naritomi 2010).

Our approach is based on evidence from two recent success cases: Bogotá, Colombia, and Recife, Brazil, which have markedly different trajectories of violence relative to most other Latin American cities. Despite certain contextual differences related to city size and importance, governance structure and dynamics of violence, both cases provide evidence that institutionalising accountable public security policy as part of broader social and political institutional reforms coincided with the reduction of lethal

violence.<sup>2</sup> We argue that during certain critical junctures related to the presence of novel political actors and an environment of political institutional reform, there are openings for public security policy innovation. Where these innovations receive broad-based buy-in from both key stakeholders and civil society, they can become part of a society's institutional configuration that is difficult to revert; and may thus contribute to a sustained reduction of violence beyond the presence of initial promoters. While related to earlier findings about the role of the security sector in areas such as community policing, handgun restrictions and similar urban policy interventions (Felbab-Brown 2011; [Goertzel and Kahn 2009](#)), our analysis locates this in a broader context of what we term *institutionalised policy change*. Thus we situate our analytical position at a middle ground between macro-level explanations encompassing broad social processes and micro-level accounts of specific policy measures.

The following section engages with literatures explaining violence reduction in general, and in Latin American cities. Section three highlights how institutionalised policy change is relevant to urban violence reduction. Section four discusses our empirical strategy and introduces our cases. Section five examines our case cities, highlighting how our institutional approach accounts for trajectories of lethal violence in Bogotá and Recife. Section six discusses findings and concludes.

## **2. Violence reduction in Latin America**

Theories concerning violence reduction often take macro-historical perspectives, or evaluate specific short-term interventions. Macro-perspectives identify large-scale social evolutions like civilization processes, shifts in political regimes, economic development, or changes in demographic structure to explain the decline of violence over the long term ([Eisner 2003](#); [Pinker 2011](#)). Conversely, micro-level interventions often relate to spatial and temporally bounded activities. Specific police operations (especially community and hot-spot policing), restrictions on use and availability of firearms, modifications of urban landscapes and space, community organisation, and specific social policies have been found to produce temporary reductions in violence ([MacDonald 2002](#); [Weisburd and Eck 2004](#)).

While violence in general ([Buvinic, Morrison, and Shifter 1999](#); [Frühling, Tulchin, and Golding 2003](#)) and, more recently, urban violence have been of particular interest to scholars and policy-makers in Latin America ([Auyero and Burbano de Lara 2012](#); [Koonings and Kruijt 2007](#); [UNDP 2013](#)), research on violence reduction is still incipient. Similar to the broader literature on violence reduction – and following the tradition of US criminologists and economists – micro-level policy interventions are frequently touted as reasons for violence reduction. Successful examples include alcohol restriction (de Mello, Mejía, and

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<sup>2</sup> Briceño-Leon provides concise links between the institutional context and violence in Venezuela (2012a) and Latin America (2012b).

Suárez 2013), handgun ownership controls ([Restrepo and Aguirre 2010](#)) and focused police presence in key areas ([Di Tella and Schargrofsky 2004](#)). In Brazil, several studies have traced the positive impacts of specific crime reduction policies, using qualitative historical approaches ([Denyer Willis and Mota Prado 2014](#); [Leeds 2007](#); [Ratton, Galvão, and Fernandez 2014](#)). In Mexico, community organisation has been identified as promising tool ([Vilalta 2013](#)), while zero-tolerance policing policies have been critically appraised ([Davis 2013](#)). Other recent studies focus on efforts of political coalitions and progressive public policy in achieving violence reduction in Colombian cities ([Gutiérrez Sanín et al. 2013](#)), and in explaining the recent homicide drop in São Paulo ([Goertzel and Kahn 2009](#)).

While public security policies as shown here can in some cases spur urban violence reduction, these are largely exceptions to the norm. More often, policy initiatives in the medium to long term prove to be ineffective, captured by elite or criminal interests, or unsustainable due to funding or capacity deficits. One critical reason for these failures is that policy is initiated in institutional contexts inappropriate for sustained success ([Basombrío and Dammert 2013](#); [Cano 2006](#)), and the development and consolidation of formal democratic institutions is hindered by informal, illegal arrangements involving both criminal organizations and state officials ([Arias 2013](#)). However, while micro-level policy interventions may be suited to explain short-term reduction in urban criminality, *sustained decreases* in lethal violence may be more likely in situations where policy changes complement, or are integrated into, wider reforms to political and social institutions.

### **3. Institutions and Violence Reduction**

Inherent here is a position that institutions – the formal and informal norms and guidelines that order societies ([North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009](#)) – can have a decisive impact upon violence.<sup>3</sup> Since O’Donnell suggested that states represent ‘manifold social relationships engaged on the basis of stable (if not necessarily approved) norms and expectations’ (1993, 1356), a generation of scholars have acknowledged the role political institutions play in shaping violence, particularly in urban areas ([Auyero, Lara, and Berti 2014](#); [Brinks 2003](#)). Perverse institutions of law and order can threaten human security ([Caldeira and Holston 1999](#)), and limited political institutional legitimacy can incentivise violence ([Nivette 2014](#)). Ultimately, a ‘major factor shaping urban violence is the inability of state institutions to regulate and ultimately manage the legitimate use of force’ ([Muggah 2012, 49](#)).

If weak democratic institutions encourage violence, improving political institutions may be important in violence reduction processes by regulating the acceptance or rejection of the use of

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<sup>3</sup> Here we consider the political institutions of the state such as the democratic electoral process, bureaucracy, police forces, and judicial system to be primary; but also acknowledge the role of social institutions such as community, family, the church and other institutions which may foster social cohesion.

illegitimate force in a society. Moreover, drawing on historical institutionalist perspectives we emphasise the potential importance of critical junctures, where key actors take advantage of favourable conditions that enable them to follow particular trajectories of change which are self-reinforcing. Here, ‘structural influences on political action (can be) significantly relaxed for a short time’, such that ‘the range of plausible choices open to powerful political actors expands substantially, and the consequences of their decisions for the outcome of interest are potentially much more momentous’ (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 343). Relative to violence reduction, ‘tipping point’ conditions might arise where political actors are able to enact public security policy or political institutional changes that cross certain thresholds of stakeholder buy-in, encouraging further commitment. Our study complements this literature by including a comparative perspective, and theorising how micro-level interventions – organized around the objective of increased institutional accountability – can contribute to violence reduction.

#### **4. Empirical Strategy and Case Description**

We employ a *comparative process tracing* methodology that examines processes leading to outcomes of interest in our two cases (Bennett and Checkel 2014). We use a deviant case approach to case selection, choosing two cases, Bogotá and Recife, showing extraordinary reductions in lethal violence that are unique among Latin American cities in recent decades.<sup>4</sup> Unlike many previous studies of violence reduction which focus on single cases, we add inferential leverage using a comparative approach. Bogotá was a Latin American pioneer in implementing novel institutional approaches for reducing violence, and Recife has adopted some of Bogotá’s lessons learned.<sup>5</sup> Should the suggested theory of institutionalised policy change apply similarly to Bogotá and Recife, other cases with similar scope conditions could pursue violence reduction through similar means.

For our case studies, primary data was collected during in-depth interviews<sup>6</sup> with key stakeholders including government officials, police officers, judicial figures, NGOs and academics in Bogotá (October 2013 – March 2014) and Recife (February – April 2013). We selected two types of key informants: first, those directly involved in administration of local-level policies in the two cities; and second, experts with long-standing experience observing the two cities. Interviewees were generally asked about the evolution of public security, relevant actors in security governance, policies and reforms elaborated in recent years, and other factors contributing to violence and its reduction. In order to

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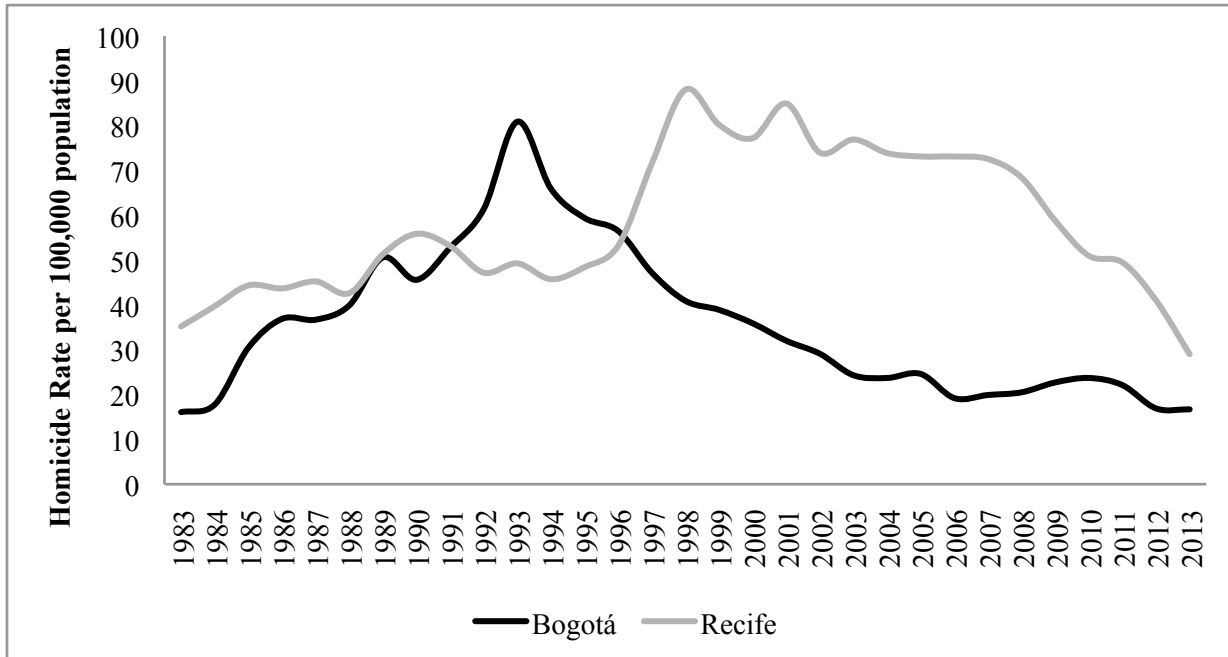
<sup>4</sup> Selecting cities where violence has declined appears to sample on the dependent variable, an important problem stressed by Geddes (1990). However, there are important reasons to consider characteristics of the dependent variable as relevant (Mahoney 2007). Further, the deviant case approach can provide opportunities for ‘inductively identifying new variables or causal mechanisms’ (George and Bennett 2005, 111), and be an initial step in theory development.

<sup>5</sup> Moreover, some of the main protagonists responsible for municipal security – Hugo Acero in Bogotá and Murilo Cavalcanti in Recife – are personal friends and have collaborated in policy design (see Cavalcanti 2013).

<sup>6</sup> In the Bogotá case, interviewees agreed to be named, while names were chosen to be redacted in the Recife case.

triangulate, contrast and historically situate interview data, secondary data from newspapers, NGO reports, public opinion surveys and official documents were collected.

Figure 1: Homicide rates in Bogotá and Recife, 1983-2013



Sources: Bogotá - National Police; Recife - SIM/DATASUS (1983-2011) & Government of Pernambuco (2012-13).

**Bogotá**

Bogotá is the capital city of Colombia with approximately eight million inhabitants in its metropolitan area. During the 1980s and early 1990s, it was one of the most dangerous cities in Colombia, with homicides peaking at over 80 per 100,000 inhabitants. However, contrary to national homicide rates that peaked in 2002, Figure 1 shows that with the exception of a few minor setbacks Bogotá has seen an unprecedented and sustained drop in lethal violence since the mid-1990s, with the homicide rate reaching a 30-year low of 16 per 100,000 in 2013 – lower than any other large city in Colombia.<sup>7</sup>

**Recife**

Recife, with a metropolitan population of 3.8 million, is the capital of Pernambuco in the North-East of Brazil. At its peak during the late 1990s and early 2000s, Recife had one of the highest homicide rates in the world at over 90 per 100,000. Yet as Figure 1 shows, lethal violence has markedly declined over the past decade, sharply contrasting with the other 8 states in Brazil’s North-East where lethal violence has

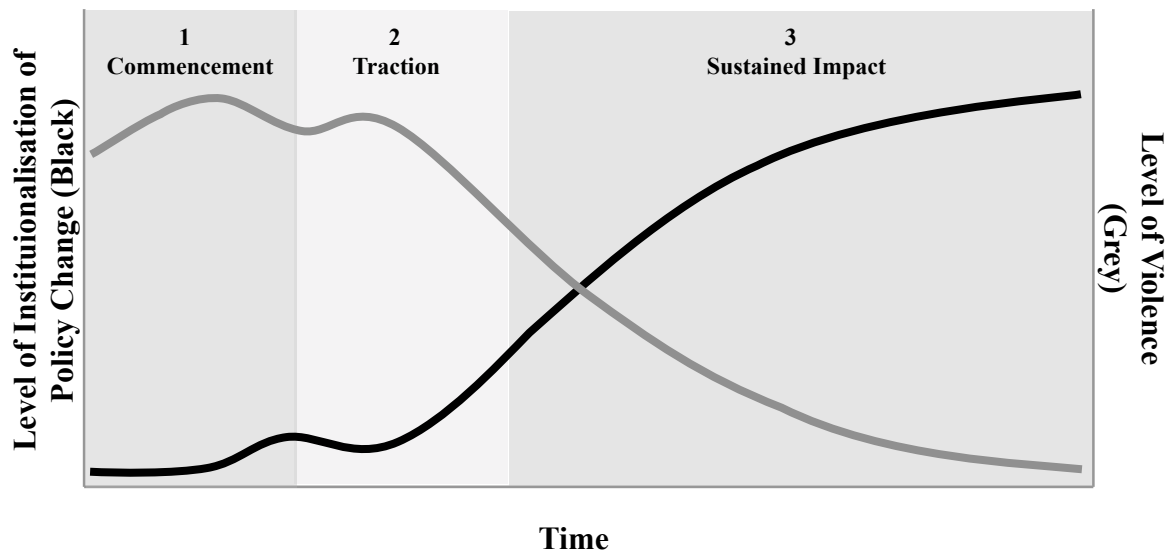
<sup>7</sup> Other major cities in Colombia experienced a decline in violence only recently (Medellín) or have continuously high homicide rates (Cali).

doubled and tripled (Waiselfisz 2011). While homicides in Recife were once triple the national average, in December 2013 they stood at fewer than 30 per 100,000, representing a 60% decline since May 2007.

## 5. Comparative process tracing

We suggest that institutionalising public security policy and the related reform of key political institutions is important in accounting for the unexpected reductions in violence in Bogotá and Recife. While refraining from suggesting that this is the *only* causal explanation given that other factors likely played some role, we maintain that violence reduction is unlikely to have occurred to this extent without successful changes in the policy and institutional context in each city.

Figure 2: A Stylised Model of Institutionalised Policy Change and Violence Reduction



The institutionalisation of policy change in both cases is different, but can be categorised according to three phases outlined in Figure 2. Phase 1, *commencement*, represents some form of critical juncture, breaking from past practices of political indifference in the face of increasing violence, allowing for path dependent processes to take root. Phase 2, *traction*, highlights how policy shifts and political institutional reforms overcame moderate initial opposition within the state and ‘criminal resistance’, and how the alignment of interests among political coalitions and other major actors in government, police, and civil society established practices which increased institutional accountability and legitimacy. Phase 3, *sustained impact*, sees policy change become institutionalised, lasting institutional transformations and sustained violence reduction, due to more effective law enforcement, institutional accountability, and increased modalities of participation.

## **Phase 1: Commencement**

Prior to declines in violence in Bogotá and Recife, the political institutional context was fragmented, dysfunctional and uncondusive to societies with strong rule of law. However, in Bogotá during the mid-1990s and Recife during the mid-2000s interests began to shift in ways which encouraged a break with past practices.

### ***Bogotá***

The increasing levels of homicide in Bogotá in the 1980s and early 1990s corresponded to national trends driven by drug trafficking, police corruption and impunity. Reflecting an understanding of security as national issue, the Colombian president César Gaviria published his ‘National Strategy against Violence’ in 1991 (and 1993) warning against multiple forms of violence related to guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, narco-traffickers and corrupt agents of the state. While using the term citizen security, his focus remained clearly on national security issues (Nussio 2014). As a consequence, at the time the mayors of Bogotá – who are responsible for public security and oversee the Metropolitan Police – did not focus on security policy, but saw security rather as a naturally occurring result of economic and social policies, and essentially ceded responsibility to the police for its day-to-day management.

Yet starting in 1995, the policies proposed and implemented under the leadership of mayor Antanas Mockus marked an important turning point for Bogotá. A series of serendipitous dynamics in Colombian politics and intellectual life paved the way for this juncture. First, altering processes of centralised appointment, the popular election of mayors was introduced in 1988 as a means to decentralise state power (Gilbert and Dávila 2002). Second, the *Proceso 8000* corruption scandal in 1994 that linked financing from the Cali drug cartel with the presidential campaign of elected president Ernesto Samper contributed to Colombians’ general disenchantment with political elites. Third, while president of the *Universidad Nacional*, Mockus came to sudden nationwide popularity through his unconventional and self-deprecating manner of engaging with student protest. That elections coincided with the emergence of a unique new actor at a time of widespread political disenfranchisement saw Bogotá in 1995 elect Mockus, a widely recognised ‘anti-politician’.

Some of Mockus’ academic colleagues became interested in violence during the 1980s when it increased dramatically, due to heightened competition between drug-traffickers, conflict activity and increased petty delinquency. When these technocrats accompanied Mockus into city government, this interest in violence suddenly became a policy priority. Moreover, a series of choices targeting violence reduction were beginning to emerge in Colombia, with the epidemiologist mayor of Cali Rodrigo



Guerrero having pioneered several policies in his city, though with limited success. Mockus also benefited from a favourable context for policy implementation. His predecessor Jaime Castro saved the city from bankruptcy and increased its revenues with a new tax scheme; and developed the ‘Organic Statute’ that gave the city administration greater independence in policymaking from the clientelist city council (Pasotti 2010).<sup>8</sup>

The political developments on the national scene, the interest of an intellectual elite in the topic of violence, and newly gained institutional and financial autonomy for the mayor’s office to implement novel policies created a critical juncture. Here Mockus proposed a new strategy to deal with urban violence. His flagship policy called *cultura ciudadana* (citizenship culture) focused on combining institutional accountability with integrated policies to address violence. Reflecting on this juncture, the then director of the Metropolitan Police Luis Ernesto Gilibert said at his retirement that, ‘it was necessary that an unprejudiced and sensitive person would become mayor, so he would understand that it was his own responsibility to look after the social order and the security in the city’ (El Tiempo 1996b).

As depicted in Figure 1, homicides started declining since 1993, and some observers suggest homicides declined due to independent criminal dynamics rather than Mockus’ policy innovations (FIP 2013). However, while criminal dynamics might explain short-term homicide trends – such as the peak levels in 1993 – they cannot account for a sustained reduction as the one experienced in Bogotá. Our argument therefore relates less to the exact turning point in 1993, but more to the longer-term decline in violence, for which Bogotá stands alone in a country afflicted by conflict and large-scale organised crime.

### ***Recife***

In Recife, violence during the 1990s and 2000s coincided with poorly supported and conceived state security policies, the expansion of the North-East drug trade, and police brutality in the absence of civilian oversight (Hoelscher 2013). Mayors of Recife and governors of Pernambuco considered crime a national level concern, reflecting the ‘hands-off’ approach to public security of most Brazilian subnational political actors. The introduction of the *Pacto Pela Vida* (PPV) public security programme in 2007 under the governorship of Eduardo Campos, however, marked a turning point.<sup>9</sup> Campos ran in 2006 state elections on a platform of reducing violent crime, responding to calls for political action to address violence which increasingly threatened middle class interests, with civil society movements supported by increasing media attention. This coalesced with several high profile murders of wealthy *Recifenses* and the installation of an electronic billboard by a group of journalists – provocatively titled *Bodycount*

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Castro, November 2013.

<sup>9</sup> While responsibility for public security and police oversight rests with state governors in Brazil, the major impacts of PPV were in the Recife Metropolitan Area.

*Pernambuco* – that showed the number of murders in the city. Recalling this time, a member of the urban security secretariat in Recife said: ‘If you don’t have a city that is secure for everybody, you don’t have security for anybody. If life is worth nothing in the favelas, then the people that live there can do anything... People came to understand this because there were so many crimes (where wealthy people were killed during robberies)’.<sup>10</sup>

This marked a critical break from past indifference to the issue of violence. Campos responded to a civil society tired of a long history of exceptionally high levels of violent crime. The coalescence of several factors led to an opening where sizeable change could be enacted. These included Campos’ astute political vision, favourable public opinion supporting reforms, media support for a new approach, and a mandate to enact change following a solid electoral victory in 2006. This enabled the introduction of a technocratic programme – one which included a wide range of stakeholders from politics, civil society, and academia in its design – that emphasised new forms of accountability in measuring when and where violent criminality occurred; and monitoring the ways that the police and judiciary responded. This was predicated upon a new set of institutional ideals designed to modify how both the state and citizens should view the issue of violence, and policies that introduced credible incentives and punishments to reduce violence both in the short and long term ([Hoelscher 2013](#); [Macêdo 2012](#)). This coalescence of a dynamic new political actor and an invigorated civil society created a platform for new policy approaches to take root.

## **Phase 2: Traction**

Once initial openings were established, new policy approaches gained traction in different ways. In Bogotá, changes focused on the creation of a broad ‘civilising culture’ and political reforms addressing the police. In Recife, the management-led changes under PPV increased effectiveness of policing, while also enhancing centralised forms of oversight and institutional accountability.

### ***Bogotá***

Under *cultura ciudadana*, several policies were enacted to modify dysfunctional citizen behaviour and reduce violence. Several emblematic policies included voluntary disarmament, the *ley zanahoria* which restricted opening hours for night clubs, more effective judiciary services accessible to citizens, street actors used to enforce traffic rules, and a series of strategies related to policing and reform (Mockus 2001; Pasotti 2010). Yet both Mockus and Gilibert were convinced that broader reforms to the police were

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with former journalist and member of the Recife secretariat for urban security, February 2013.

needed, addressing not only the availability of technical resources but also greater training.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, over 8000 police officers received tutoring in private universities on topics including human rights and community policing (Acero 2002). The *Frentes de Seguridad Local*, launched by Gilibert, were the main community policing initiative during this time. Involving a range of citizens from all neighbourhoods of Bogotá, by 2004 almost 900,000 people participated in this initiative (Bello 2004).

Citizens were also invited to participate in *Escuelas de Seguridad Ciudadana* (Citizen Security Schools) to receive training in security issues, with more than 37,000 community leaders participating between 1996 and 2004. This large-scale collaboration between communities and the police developed increased trust, and made the police officers directly accountable to the communities (Martin and Ceballos 2004, 395). Increased Metropolitan Police spending also covered a series of rewards, housing benefits, higher salaries and civic education programs for police officers; and countered lingering opposition to new oversight that the changes mandated. While the Metropolitan Police report both to the national government and the mayor of Bogotá, civic-police collaboration in Bogotá was unique in the Colombian context, and Bogotá was the only locality where community policing was effectively put into place (Ruiz Vásquez 2012).

An important element in the institutionalisation of violence reduction policies was the creation of a Unified Information System on Violence and Crime (SUIVD, in its Spanish acronym) in 1995 (Martin and Ceballos 2004, 219–262). The SUIVD was the result of a technocratic turn in the administration of security, directed first by Álvaro Camacho and later by Hugo Acero, the security councillors of the Mockus administration. Based on transparently tracked violence indicators provided by the SUIVD, an inter-agency committee (*Comité de Vigilancia Epidemiológica*) met weekly to discuss relevant strategies, and included both traditional and non-traditional actors in security governance. This standing committee allowed for quick responses to the dynamics of violence that affected the city, and while the leadership of the mayor was key, the holistic approach in accommodating a range of actors in the committee strengthened its institutional foundations and increased accountability.<sup>12</sup>

Although there was initial scepticism expressed in public opinion and major media outlets about the *cultura ciudadana* (El Tiempo 1996a), policies eventually created a virtuous circle which confronted collective action problems related to fear and distrust. This narrative coincides with Riaño's (2011) account of street mimes (an emblematic part of *cultura ciudadana*), that encouraged pedestrians and drivers to respect zebra crossings and to promote the respect of social norms and rules. Bogotá's former mayor Paul Bromberg, who replaced Mockus when he became a presidential candidate in 1997, remarked:

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Gilibert, February 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Acero, October 2013.

‘Before, Bogotá was only news when it was bad news. The journalists of that time only wrote about the disasters of the city. That is why Bogotá was seen as one of the worst cities in the world. With *cultura ciudadana*, Bogotá turned into good news for several years’.<sup>13</sup>

As such, community participation, transparent information, accountable police services and a holistic policy design were the foundation of sustained reductions in violence (see also Moncada 2009). In line with this, Sánchez et al. (2003) found econometric evidence supporting an association between several implemented policies – especially the norm shift provoked by the *cultura ciudadana* programmes and the public space interventions – and homicide reduction. Therefore, it was not only the police and political allies of the mayor’s office, but also citizens, civil society organisations and economic elites who started buying into a technocratically inspired policy approach that had reform of key institutions as a foundation, and which promised increasing collective returns ([Gutiérrez Sanín et al. 2013](#)).

### ***Recife***

By establishing agencies to collect and manage data on criminality and policing operations, the government of Pernambuco both increased information to address crime, and introduced important accountability mechanisms.<sup>14</sup> This was a paradigm shift in how the state addressed violence and brought police forces and the judiciary – agencies that have closely guarded their independence – under formalised oversight mechanisms. From its initiation in May 2007, regular weekly meetings reinforced new values of the programme, opening formal channels of communication between the *Policia Civil*, *Policia Militar* and judiciary, and institutionalising new forms of accountability among senior police related to achieving targets in their areas of responsibility (Macêdo 2012; Ratton, Galvão, and Fernandez 2014).

There was initial resistance from senior colonels in the PM accustomed to autonomy. Many had established networks of graft and clientelism that supported earnings and future career prospects; and ingrained attitudes supported the ‘legitimacy’ of killing ‘marginals’. Many police throughout the chain of command supplemented incomes by protecting narco-trafficking groups, or were involved in illegal paramilitary organisations, *grupos de exterminio*, responsible for extra-judicial killings. While reforms created ‘protection vacuums’ that led to short-term criminal contestation, these were addressed through new policing strategies that moved police to high-crime areas. While improving the effectiveness of criminal deterrence, these new approaches also shifted norms and behaviours within the police towards reducing the use of state violence, making senior police accountable for homicide reduction in their areas

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Bromberg, October 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with senior member of the *Secretaria de Defesa*, February 2013.

of responsibility, and for the conduct of their subordinates. Reflecting these changes, a colonel in the PM remarked:

*The culture before was: “He’s a criminal? Let him die”. Not today. Today we observe that The Pact is to save lives... (Recently) a colonel in (another North-Eastern state) told me: “The bandidos, they’re to be killed. It’s social control”. I said “it’s still going to be counted as a homicide! You could have caught him, interrogated him, arrested his gang. Instead, you just killed the guy!”<sup>15</sup>*

The working lives of police and emergency services were also improved through the restructuring of the police and bureaucracy. Police previously worked in a system that failed to provide adequate resources, equipment and salaries; was morally opaque in engagement with citizens; and lacked formal oversight mechanisms. Instead, PPV articulated cooperation between police and judiciary, rewarded conduct in line with goals of violence reduction and protection of human rights, and incentivised accountability throughout the chain of command.<sup>16</sup> Senior officers were promoted based on how successful their units were at achieving targets set in their areas of operations. Lower ranking officers received bonuses based on reaching targets including weapons and drug apprehensions, arrests, and reducing homicides. Investments were made into homicide investigation capacity and evidence cataloguing and protection.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the programme introduced community policing initiatives, which were mentioned to have instilled greater trust between police and citizens<sup>18</sup>. This had the effect of increasing the information gathered about crime in communities, and enabled police to target their operations more effectively to minimise harassing law-abiding citizens.<sup>19</sup>

This overview of operational changes in PPVs initial period between 2007 and 2009 highlights that the approach taken, while technocratic, was underpinned by a focus on designing policy changes that encouraged widespread buy-in to new norms that no longer condoned violence as acceptable. Minor initial resistance occurred where illegitimate practices among police and criminal actors were threatened, yet were overcome through strong commitments to institutionalise policy changes through credible oversight and reforms to structures and practices of policing. It was this foundation upon which further investments could be made and sustained declines in violence occurred.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview, senior colonel in *Policia Militar*, March 2013

<sup>16</sup> Interviews, delegado in *Policia Civil*, March 2013. Senior member of the Courts of Justice, March, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Interview, senior delegado in *Policia Civil*, March 2013

<sup>18</sup> Interviews, community leaders in two favelas, Recife, March 2013. Another young community leader also said about a local police captain: ‘He was there, in the community, talking to us... He came to meetings, listened, participated. He (became) closer to us. If an officer did something wrong, he asked them to come talk to us, apologize... (Did it) improve much? I don’t know. But we could at least express our rights.’

<sup>19</sup> Interview, senior delegado in *Policia Civil*, March 2013.

### **Phase 3: Sustained impact**

Following initial junctures that enabled new policy approaches, and political institutional changes that expanded early successes, the temporal nature of these transformations in the two cases has been different. As Figure 1 outlines, Bogotá has sustained a long decline in lethal violence over the past 20 years, while Recife's decline is still in early stages.

#### ***Bogotá***

Bogotá's homicide rates peaked in 1993, yet the sustained reduction was chiefly due to policies enacted by Mockus (1995-1997) and continued by his successor Enrique Peñalosa (1998-2000) and during Mockus' own second mayorship (2001-2003). Principally, policies focused on gradually strengthening political institutions which supported violence reduction. Within the mayor's office, a secretariat for citizen security was created in 1997 – and directed by Hugo Acero until 2003 – allowing for the central organisation of security policies. Further, security budgets, specifically those dedicated to the Metropolitan Police, increased continuously throughout this entire period.

During the Peñalosa administration, *cultura ciudadana* policies were complemented with public space interventions, including the construction of the Transmilenio bus system and the destruction of the criminally governed *Cartucho* neighbourhood ([Berney 2010](#)). According to Peñalosa's secretary of government, the policies in New York at the time which drew on broken windows theory were used as an example for a new conception of public space in Bogotá.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, during these years of uninterrupted year-to-year violence reduction, civil society organisations, including the Chamber of Commerce of Bogotá and the *Bogotá Como Vamos* organisation, began civic oversight of security policies by means of novel perception surveys and policy evaluation. The initial policy changes were thus strengthened by efforts of important allies in civil society interested in their continuity (see also Gutiérrez Sanín et al. 2013).

This broad-based support implied significant costs in abandoning the institutionalised path of violence reduction, as exemplified by the mayorship of Luis Eduardo Garzón who took office in 2004. A leftist mayor, Garzón identified the concept of security with a rightist ideology, and adopted alternative strategies to bring about public security, including his flagship food security policy *Bogotá sin hambre* ([Nussio and Pernet 2013](#)).<sup>21</sup> Coinciding with his lack of leadership on public security, and a reduction of formalised cooperation within the local administration, *El Tiempo* (2006) heralded 2005 as the first year in over a decade where homicide rates increased. This represented an important public declaration of

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Héctor Riveros, October 2013.

<sup>21</sup> This is the perception of several interviewees.

support for more than ten years of the city's engagement with the issue of homicide reduction, and a strong example of civic oversight. Such statements obliged Garzón to adopt a firm position on the security issue (Semana 2006), showing that homicide numbers were a critical point of leverage to compel the mayor to embrace previous approaches to addressing violence. Despite this, homicides continued to increase slightly between 2007 and 2010 due to public policies that contradicted reforms of the previous decade. A lack of interest in accountable security policy, a disastrous term under currently imprisoned former-mayor Samuel Moreno, and a confrontational relationship between the leftist city administration and Álvaro Uribe's national government all served to temporarily undercut institutional gains achieved since the mid-1990s.<sup>22</sup>

Following these setbacks during the Moreno administration, the broader dynamic of violence reduction resumed, and has continued until today, thanks to simplified accountability measures, increased returns for actors involved, and a set of 'rules' that citizens of Bogotá adopted in response to sustained interest in, and an institutionalised response to, the topic of public security.

### *Recife*

Following slow initial declines in homicide rates of around 4% in Recife in 2007 and 2008, declines during 2009 exceeded the PPV's stated goal of a 12% annual reduction. Increasing commitment within the bureaucracy, police and criminal justice system more broadly created a greater institutional awareness of the issue of addressing violent crime, with initial resisters either falling into line or demoted. Particularly important was the improved effectiveness of both the investigative and repressive state apparatus (Hoelscher, 2013); and the suppression of *grupos de exterminio*, with almost 200 arrests made and over 600 police expulsions during PPV's first year (Alston 2008). Judicial actors and police increasingly worked together to prosecute cases that previously were delayed or left unprocessed.<sup>23</sup> Greater efforts were also made to improve state-citizen relations following commencement of the *Policia Amiga* community policing initiative in 2008.

From 2009, the effectiveness of PPV became evident, with initial declines in violence stemming from changes in – and greater institutionalisation of – policy rather than major increases in investment.<sup>24</sup> Subsequently, 3000 new police were hired, and significant improvements made in homicide investigation capacity, building on initial successes through renewed policy commitments and resource mobilisation. Importantly, these policies have transcended 'policies of government' and have become 'policies of the

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Riveros, October 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with senior member of the *Secretaria de Defensa*, March 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with senior member of the *Secretaria de Defensa*, February 2013.

State'.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting these institutionalised policy changes, the PPV was supported by the introduction of a multi-sectoral program *Pacto Pela Vida do Recife* in 2013. This was designed to support PPV in areas the municipality of Recife has responsibility for, including health and drug treatment; at-risk youth outreach initiatives; coordinated urban planning and upgrading; and improving public facilities in poor areas.<sup>26</sup>

Discussing this broad consolidation both within the state and across levels of government, a former president of the Chambers of Justice remarked: 'an expectation about crime control so great (has been created) that no governor who follows will have the courage to change structures (of PPV) that have been put in place by this government, and is so accepted by the population'.<sup>27</sup> While these transformations have happened rapidly, evidence suggests that successful policy changes have been founded upon deep shifts in the organization, structure, and accountability of local political institutions; and that without these changes it is unlikely violence would have declined to the extent that it has.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

Despite unique dynamics of public security in Bogotá and Recife, striking similarities in the two cases suggest that institutionalising changes in progressive public security policy can contribute to violence reduction. Both benefited from serendipitous circumstances where leaders with non-traditional policy agendas emerged and moved the issue of violence into the public consciousness, opening a critical juncture for policy change. Moreover, violence reduction has been driven by a technocratic elite relying on a data and management-led policy approach, which itself became institutionalised. In both processes, regular meetings among a large group of stakeholders in public security debates opened previously ineffective channels of communication. While the broad approach taken by the Bogotá administration contrasts with Recife's focus on policing and judicial operations, both processes gained support from a diverse range of key actors, including economic elites, police forces, civil society organisations, and citizens broadly. The institutionalisation of new public security policies has also been critical, particularly the positive police presence in marginal urban areas and increased engagement of local communities. This has reinforced the accountability of the police and civic authorities responsible for security policies, and was matched with multi-sectoral approaches to create civil cultures that eschewed violence. As a consequence, politicians who choose not to pursue approaches consistent with new expectations face high political costs. Therefore, beyond the operational restructuring and reform of the security apparatus through policy changes, this has been underpinned by a more profound shift away from the normative acceptance of violence.

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<sup>25</sup> Despite a range of political leanings, this was mentioned by nearly all interviewees.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with member of the Recife secretariat for urban security, March 2013

<sup>27</sup> Interview, former senior member of the Courts of Justice, February 2013.



Although we do not reject potential alternative explanations, we conclude that similar processes of institutionalised policy change have strongly contributed to a reduction in lethal violence in both cities. Bogotá's sustainable violence reduction sees homicide rates comparatively low for a major city in the Andean region. Recife still has to show that recent reforms are sustainable. While early declines in homicide rates have been impressive, they remain above the Brazilian average, and almost twice that of Bogotá. However, despite successfully reducing lethal violence, Bogotá's inhabitants still show an unfavourable perception of security in their city (CCB 2013), reflecting continuously high levels of petty delinquency. Given the challenges in reporting and tracking petty crime, and the seriousness of lethal violence, addressing homicides is often a simpler and more rewarding target for policy innovation.

Our comparative analysis allows for some generalisation when considering the scope conditions of the analysed cities. Specifically we point to several factors that may support violence reduction that could generalise across cases, namely: sufficient resources for designing and implementing novel policies; commitment of political leaders interested in prioritising public security; an evidence-based approach to policy evaluation; police forces acquiescent to civilian administrations; and a civil society able to internalise changes that reforms entail. Consistent with our findings, a recent UNDP appraisal notes that 'improving citizen security does not stem from a single isolated policy or action, but from a multi-sector approach and a series of policies including preventive measures, institutional reforms, sufficient public investment, changes in the relationship between the State and communities, broad and sustained political will, and the adoption of more modern and effective systems of information and intervention' (UNDP 2013, 12).

Overall, the analysis of Bogotá and Recife presents several key points. First, it highlights that while there are purported causes of violence 'escalation', these may differ from drivers of violence 'reduction'. Second, it emphasises the role of institutionalised policy change as politically led processes of policy innovation and institutional reform. Finally, it presents a simple three-phase model identifying stages of commencement, traction and sustained impact that can be used to examine processes of violence reduction in other contexts. In light of these findings, future research should address whether similar mechanisms operate in other cities by identifying and testing cases where institutional or policy change either improved or impaired public security – negative cases may be particularly instructive. Moreover, research should consider how to promote civilian oversight of police forces and the legal apparatus, and how reforms can support public policy. Finally, while institutionalising progressive public security policy appears important, this should not preclude supporting multi-sectoral approaches addressing broader political, economic and social challenges, and creating viable alternatives to violence.

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