



## Network for Empowerment & Progressive Initiatives - NEPI Sustainable Transformation for Youth in Liberia (STYL) Program

### *NEPI TWO-PAGER*

#### **Problem:**

Urban crime and violence are one of the most costly and divisive issues facing cities around the world. Countries in Latin America and Africa experienced an average of 24 and 10.9 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively – above the WHO threshold for endemic violence.<sup>1</sup> The cumulative cost of violence represents up to 10 percent of GDP in some countries.<sup>2</sup> However, this problem is not intractable: most urban violence is committed by a small number of young men in a small number of places.<sup>3</sup> From Liberia to Chicago, research has shown it is possible to identify these men, change their mindsets and behaviors, and integrate them into society to create safer communities for everyone.

#### **Background:**

The Network for Empowerment & Progressive Initiatives – NEPI ([www.nepiliberia.org](http://www.nepiliberia.org)) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit registered in New York, Michigan, and Liberia to address the issues of youth crime and violence with an evidence-based program to create safe communities. NEPI is the original organization implementing the Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia (STYL) program, a CBT-based hardcore youth rehabilitation model. It has extensive knowledge of the target neighborhoods, connections to local leaders, facilitators with lived experience who can serve as role models, and a strong reputation among community leaders and high-risk young men. Klubosumo Johnson Borh, a Social Entrepreneur and a Youth Empowerment Specialist, a 2021 Rainer Arnhold Fellow of the Mulago Foundation, and now a 2023 Youth Empowerment Fellow of The Agency Fund, is a founding member and the CEO of NEPI, and a key member of the team developing and adapting STYL over the past 10 years.

The STYL program successfully reduced criminal, violent, and other anti-social behaviors among hard-core street youth in Liberia, and the impact was sustained over ten years. NEPI designs STYL to promote future orientation, self-discipline, and non-violent, pro-social behavior norms. With the STYL model, we find and enroll hardcore street youth into the STYL program, provide an 8-week program with group CBT, and conduct one-on-one counseling. We expose youth to role models, provide practical assignments and training, improve appearance while visiting supermarkets and banks, and provide youth with a 300-surprise cash transfer upon completion.

RCT conducted by researchers shows that STYL reduces crime and violence, drug use, carrying a weapon, fighting with each other and police, arrest, and even things as simple as losing your temper dropped by 20 to 50%. The program is evidence-based and cost-effective, costing just \$530 per participant, translating into \$2.50 per avoided crime. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a method for mitigating self-destructive beliefs and behaviors and promoting 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 a

---

<sup>1</sup> “Urban Violence: A Challenge of Epidemic Proportions,” World Bank, September 6, 2016, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/09/06/urban-violence-a-challenge-of-epidemic-proportions>; “Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014,” World Health Organization, January 9, 2014, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241564793>.

<sup>2</sup> “Urban Violence: A Challenge of Epidemic Proportions,” World Bank.

<sup>3</sup> “What Works in Reducing Community Violence: A Meta-Review and Field Study for the Northern Triangle,” Democracy International, February 2016, <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/USAID-2016-What-Works-in-Reducing-Community-Violence-Final-Report.pdf>

compelling crime and violence reduction strategy. However, much remains to be learned on how to make STYL even more cost-effective.

The results of the evaluations have led to replications and scale-ups worldwide. We know of Colombia, El Salvador, and Mexico programs replicating STYL's methodology. Recently, *The Economist* covered how Chicago is also replicating STYL in an article titled "Applying lessons from war-torn Africa to Chicago" (May 4, 2019). STYL is, therefore at the forefront of interventions to reduce youth crime and violence. There is now a unique opportunity to return STYL and set it up for expansion. Klubosumo Johnson Borh, one of NEPI's and STYL's founders, recently became a Rainer Arnhold Fellow (a program of the Mulago Foundation). The foundation will assist NEPI in scaling STYL. This means that NEPI will be supported by a strong foundation and a capable team, allowing NEPI to professionalize, institutionalize, and scale-up its implementation. The fellowship aims to assist NEPI in developing high-impact, scalable solutions and strategies for better and long-term results. High levels of crime and violence continue to be one of the highest priorities of the Liberian government. Given the proven benefits of the STYL program, resuming access to the program for Liberians is a first-order priority for crime and violence reduction in Liberia.

### **Solution:**

The Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia (STYL) program successfully reduced criminal, violent, and other anti-social behaviors among hard-core street youth in Liberia, and the impact was sustained over ten years. NEPI designs STYL to promote future orientation, self-discipline, and non-violent, pro-social behavior norms. With the STYL model, we find and enroll hardcore street youth into the STYL program, provide an 8-week program with group CBT, and conduct one-on-one counseling. We expose youth to role models, provide practical assignments and training, improve appearance while visiting supermarkets and banks, and provide youth with a 300-surprise cash transfer upon completion.

RCT conducted by researchers shows that STYL reduces crime and violence, drug use, carrying a weapon, fighting with each other and police, arrest, and even things as simple as losing your temper dropped by 20 to 50%. The program is evidence-based and cost-effective. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a method for mitigating self-destructive beliefs and behaviors and promoting 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. Much remains to be learned, though, on how to make STYL even more cost-effective.

### **Impact:**

- **Indicators:** Reduction in crime and violence by 20 – 50%
  - Antisocial behaviors (bad behavior) - In the therapy + cash arm, antisocial behaviors declined 0.31 standard deviations in 1 month, 0.25 standard deviations in 1 year; and 0.25 standard deviations in 10 years (% of beneficiaries less likely to sell drugs, to carry a weapon, less likely to fight with each other and police, percentage of arrest).
  - In the therapy-only arm, antisocial behaviors declined by 0.249 standard deviations in 1 month, 0.074 standard deviations in 1 year, and 0.204 standard deviations in 10 years
  - The program also had a sustained impact on mental health. Ten years later, those who received both CBT and cash reported mental health outcomes 0.21 SDs higher than those in the comparison group.
- **Delivery to Date:** Delivered intervention to 30K ex-combatants and 14K youth in Liberia since 2000. Did an RCT with IPA in 2009 – 2012 and evidence in 2015 ([memo](#), [full study](#)), conducted a follow-up survey, tracked down, and surveyed 94.8% (953 subjects) of surviving members of the sample with evidence in 2021 ([full study](#)) We want to expand the program to the most high-risk youth

population in Liberia and subsequently in the Sub-Saharan African region and the world. The evidence earned our intervention a place in [IPA Best Bets](#).

- The findings from the RCT have been featured in the Washington Post and on the influential podcast Freakonomics, highlighting NEPI's success in identifying a workable and affordable solution to rehabilitating street youth. [Watch the talk](#), see the [policy note](#), read the [summary in the Washington Post](#), listen to the [NPR Planet Money](#) or [Freakonomics](#) episodes or Chris-related [New York Times Op-Ed](#) about the program.
- Most recently, as seen in [Vox: Liberia's found a stunningly effective way to reduce violent crimes - Vox](#), [Washington Post: https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/06/03/cbt-violence-study-prevention/](#)