



**The Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia (STYL):  
A new Evidence Based Program that Reduce  
Violence and Crime among Street Youth in Liberia.**



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## **The Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia (STYL): A new Evidence Based Program that Reduce Violence and Crime among Street Youth in Liberia.**

**Do poor urban youth have psychological and behavioral traits—including self-control problems, impatience, or risk attitudes—that increase poverty, or create a poverty trap? Can behavioral therapy help control these problems, leading youth to be better socialized and more productive?**

### Abstract

**STYL is an eight weeks group cognitive behavior therapy designed to promote future orientation self-discipline and norms of non-violent, pro-social behavior. Followed by unconditional cash transfer, led to significant decreases in crime, drug use, and violence for participants.**

These questions are at the core of the program called the Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia (STYL) run by the Network for Empowerment and Progressive Initiative (NEPI), an NGO dedicated to progressing youth in Liberia. STYL seeks to rehabilitate high-risk men, using 8 weeks of therapy and counseling to foster “character skills” such as self-control and a noncriminal self-image, an ambitious goal given that many of the participants are criminals or drug users and dealers. On top of this, the program provided cash grant to a portion of the participants to enable them to improve their economic lives. Ultimately the program led to a significant fall in crime, drug use and violence for its participants.

The Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia focuses on “transformation,” moving from a position as an outcast to an economically and socially integrated member of society. Secondly STYL shifts the present-oriented framework to more future-oriented goals and behavior. Integration and a “future focus” are important in changing risky behaviors, criminal activities, and violence, as well as giving youth the ability to establish a stable social and economic relationship with their community.

To be sure of the STYL’s impact, NEPI teamed up with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and researchers Christopher Blattman from Columbia University, Margaret Sheridan from Harvard Medical School, and the Julian C. Jamison from the U.S. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to test the approach on 999 at-risk urban youth in Monrovia, many of them with a criminal background, drug problem, or history as an ex-combatant in the civil war. The team randomly assigned the youth to 4 groups, one receiving the therapy only, the cash only, the therapy followed by cash, or neither.

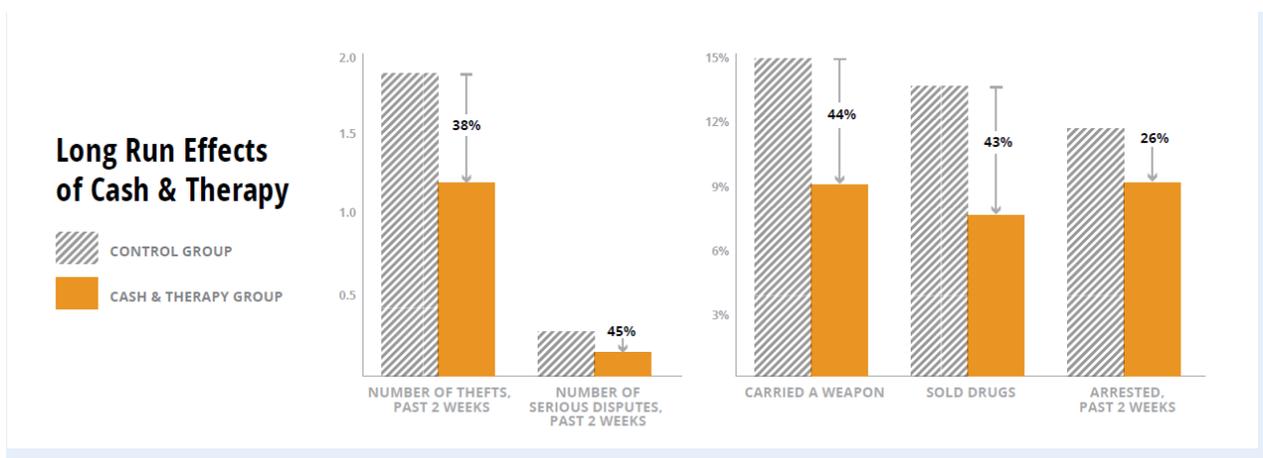
NEPI counselors trained groups of 20 youth in 3 counseling sessions per week for 8 weeks. Training sessions were conducted in youth’s neighborhoods, often in abandoned buildings and schoolrooms, the sites most comfortable for participants. Storytelling by mentors and the youth themselves plays a prominent role helping youth reflect upon their lives and build towards their futures. Stories of transformations inspire participants and give hope for lasting change.

During these sessions, counselors work to persuade the men that they want to be a part of mainstream society and show them how it is possible. Men have regular “homework assignments”

to participate in normal social behavior and realize they are accepted--visiting banks, supermarkets and mobile phone companies, and reintroducing themselves to family and community leaders' Positive experiences reinforce the new behavior and image, and setbacks are processed in the group.

Some participants in control and treatment groups also received an unconditional cash transfer of US\$200 through lottery.

The evaluation demonstrated that the STYL behavioral therapy program has the potential to reduce crime and anti-social behavior especially in combination with cash transfers. The results suggest that character skills, self-image, and values are malleable into adulthood, and the even short programs of cognitive behavioral therapy can be an effective tool for affecting impulsive, disorganized, and expressive anti-social behaviors. There are six key results.



1. Men offered the therapy reported large and sustained falls in criminal, violent, and other anti-social behaviors both in the short run a year later. For instance, after one year, drug dealing and incidents of theft were 40 percent lower in the therapy plus cash group than the control group. Aggressive acts, interpersonal disputes and carrying a weapon (usually a knife) also fell dramatically compared to the control group.
2. Men offered the program also reported being less impulsive, less oriented towards immediate rewards, greater perseverance, and goal orientation after the therapy. However, the researchers did not see any sustained effect on patience in economic decision making.
3. Changes were slightly stronger and most sustained when therapy was coupled with the cash. The qualitative data suggest that the cash bought men time to practice being productive members of society, and thus served to reinforce the change in character and values promoted by the therapy.
4. Men offered and not offered the therapy saved, invested and spent cash similarly. Whether they received the therapy or not, most of the men saved and invested the cash grant (which was equal to about three months' earnings). Little of the grant was spent on alcohol or drugs

or otherwise misused. The self-control and values fostered by the therapy seem to be specific to anti-social behaviors and social life, not economic decision-making.

5. Men did not underreport “bad” behaviors. The qualitative, community-based validation of survey responses found that the men generally did not underreport stealing, theft, or other “bad” behaviors in the survey. If anything, these behaviors were underreported by the control group.
6. The cash grant led to an initial rise in petty business and earnings, but effects on economic outcomes did not last. In the weeks and months after the grant was administered, the men lived a little better, with better housing and clothing. For the most part, however, cash had little sustained impact after one year. A year after the programs ended, the men who received cash had the same assets and earnings as men who did not. Qualitative evidence suggests that many businesses failed after a major theft, confiscation, loss, or bad deal.

## **Conclusion**

The therapy approach in STYL shows great promise by transforming urban youth into an economically and socially integrated members of society and reducing crime and violence in Monrovia. We are grateful to the team of academic scientists who have provided clear evidence of the program's impact. We call on the government, NGOs and international partners to recognize the importance of behavioral therapy and cash transfers and consider incorporating it into their youth and gender targeted programming. In the case of replication, NEPI will serve as a center of excellence to demonstrate to potential replicators how to implement the program. By forming these partnerships, we can scale and grow STYL impact without actually having to add staff, funding, or additional office space. It is our aim that STYL program components become a sustainable feature in the Liberian communities as well as a replicable model throughout various sub-Saharan African countries.

Additional information, including links to international media and academic papers can be found here <http://www.poverty-action.org/project/0166>.



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