

# Preventing violence at scale: How practitioners are using evidence to adapt and scale CBT programs

- [Africa](#)
- [North America](#)
- [Latin America and the Caribbean](#)
- [Crime, Violence, and Conflict](#)

Posted on:  
14 August 2023  
Authors:  
[Aimee Barnes](#)



A NEPI employee speaks with a respondent to determine their eligibility for the STYL program near Monrovia, Liberia. Photo: Aimee Barnes

In May, J-PAL convened a panel of experts at [PeaceCon 2023](#) to discuss learnings from adapting and scaling four different CBT-inspired programs in the United States, Liberia, South Africa, and Mexico. Christopher Jaffe, Klubosumo Johnson Borh, Lauren Roode, and Helke Enkerlin Madero share their insights below.

# A psychosocial strategy for crime and violence prevention

A growing number of crime and violence prevention programs are drawing on psychosocial techniques to help shift people’s behaviors and attitudes, offering a potentially low-cost alternative to more traditional security sector strategies. In particular, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been increasingly applied in diverse contexts to reduce antisocial and violent behavior and to help people exposed to violence process their experiences. CBT is a psychotherapeutic practice that shifts participants' thoughts and behaviors; it has most commonly been used to address mood and anxiety disorders, addiction, unhealthy communication patterns, and even unwanted habits like forgetting to take a medication.

Despite [increasing evidence](#) on the efficacy of CBT-based approaches in reducing criminal and violent behaviors, open questions remain as to whether and how these programs can replicate and scale successfully in new contexts—questions relevant to many peacebuilding and conflict prevention interventions.

## CBT programs across diverse contexts

At the PeaceCon panel, four experts shared their experiences from helping shape the Becoming a Man (BAM) program in Chicago, the Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia (STYL) program in Monrovia, Shukuma in the Western Cape of South Africa, and a pilot project with police in Mexico City.

The programs generally included interactive group and activity-based therapy sessions rooted in CBT principles. Sessions focused on behavior change techniques to help participants identify and change harmful thought patterns, regulate their emotions and behaviors, plan ahead and set goals, and address cognitive biases as a means for improving decision making.

As in many CBT-based interventions, the featured programs were relatively low-cost compared to traditional crime and violence prevention programs. They used simple, standardized curricula usually delivered by informally trained facilitators and complemented by prerecorded video lessons in the case of Mexico City. These attributes could make replicating these approaches in new contexts more feasible.

Table 1 . Overview of featured CBT programs

<b>Location</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Target Population</b>	<b>Key Program Details and Findings</b>
Chicago, USA	BAM <sup>1</sup>	7th-10th grade male students at risk of school dropout in high-crime neighborhoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Weekly hour-long group therapy sessions during school hours for 1-2 school years, with the aim of improving long-term life outcomes for youth</li><li>- Researchers found that participants were less likely to be arrested during the program, more likely to graduate, and more likely to make considered decisions.<sup>2</sup></li></ul>

Monrovia, Liberia	STYL	Young men at the highest risk of engaging in crime and violence (25 years old on average)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Group therapy sessions lasting four hours each, held three times per week for eight weeks, and one-on-one counseling</li> <li>- Some participants received a US\$200 unconditional cash transfer</li> <li>- Researchers found <a href="#">large and persistent impacts</a> on participants' criminal and violent behavior, which continued to be observed ten years after the program was originally implemented. Receiving therapy also improved some measures of self-control and mental health.</li> </ul>
Western Cape, South Africa	Shukuma	8th and 9th grade students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Series of 10-15 small-group CBT-inspired sessions during class; designed to address youth violence by helping students develop socioemotional skills</li> <li>- By the end of 2022, 46 schools had <a href="#">piloted the program</a>, reaching around 2500 students</li> <li>- Ongoing pilot program consisting of eight two-hour group sessions with video lessons and facilitated discussions.</li> </ul>
Mexico City, Mexico	CBT for Mexico City's Police	Police officers in Mexico City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aims to address the higher prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety among police. By improving how police officers manage their emotions and make decisions, the program may also help address police misconduct and excessive use of force against citizens.</li> </ul>

## **Our panelists bring expertise from across their organizations**

## **Lessons on designing, adapting, and scaling CBT-inspired programs**

The following insights were shared during the panel discussion.

**How has research and evidence helped shape the design of the CBT programs you have worked on?**

**What practical lessons have you learned from adapting and implementing CBT programs in new contexts, including on how to draw out generalizable lessons from research when bringing an intervention to a new environment?**

**Where do you think there are open implementation and path-to-scale questions for adapting CBT-based approaches and other similar interventions to new contexts?**

## **Addressing practical challenges**

Adapting and scaling CBT-based programs can present implementers with many practical challenges, ranging from how to determine the optimal implementation conditions to understanding if the underlying mechanisms behind impact in one setting exist in another. To help address these challenges, the panel of expert practitioners highlighted the following considerations based on their hands-on experience with four different CBT-inspired programs in distinct settings:

- **Evidence can help practitioners inform and adapt their program design to increase effectiveness** (e.g. adding a cash transfer to the final STYL model). However, when deciding to adapt or scale a program to a new context, practitioners must consider if existing evidence is relevant and [generalizable](#) to the new setting, target population, and outcomes they have in mind. Long-term research partnerships and implementation science can help maintain fidelity to an intended program design.
- **Cultural adaptation is key to successfully adapting or scaling a model from one context to another.** This helps ensure a program will be relevant and accessible in a new context, or even with a new population in the same location (e.g. adapting a program designed for at-risk men to be relevant for women).
- **[Scaling and adaptation plans](#) must also address practical barriers to successfully implementing a program in a new setting,** including ensuring there is sufficient administrative capacity to deliver a program as designed. This would also include factoring in the feasibility of complementary services (e.g. one-on-one counseling to interested participants after a program ends) that may help sustain program impacts. Practitioners should consider multiple possible path-to-scale models and think about how their programming and necessary partnerships would change under each option.
- **Implementers should carefully consider the level of training, formal education, and clinical expertise that should be required of facilitators of CBT-inspired programs.** At minimum, facilitators must be prepared to adequately respond to the complex emotions and experiences participants may share with them to ensure the program does no harm. However, requiring facilitators to be highly trained clinicians may not be necessary for a program to be effective, and may not be feasible at scale, especially in resource-constrained contexts.

[1] The details in the table describe BAM as implemented when the program was evaluated in 2009–2010 and 2013–2015. BAM now includes 7th-12th graders and runs for two school years.

[2] Heller, Sara B, Anuj K. Shah, Jonathan Guryan, Jens Ludwig, Sendhil Mullainathan, Harold A. Pollack. 2017. “Thinking, Fast and Slow? Some Field Experiments to Reduce Crime and Dropout in Chicago”, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 132(1):1–54, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjw033>

[3] The report synthesizes knowledge across disciplines on what young people need to learn to grow up successfully and how programs like BAM could support that process.