

Applying the SDGs to urban violence

A robust response must address root causes

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Aligned with its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Mexico City is pursuing a multi-faceted strategy to reduce urban violence by complementing improved coordination of policing and law enforcement with long-term strategies to reduce inequalities and expand opportunity. This shift reflects a political recognition that enforcement-only responses won't solve urban violence: the city needs to go beyond a traditional response to violence to address its root causes.

This strategy is consistent with the interconnectedness of the SDGs. Addressing urban violence successfully means looking beyond the primary target (SDG 16.1), integrating a range of considerations. These include increasing gender equality (SDG 5), since more peaceful societies are consistently more gender equal societies. Other investments include growing educational (SDG 4) and economic opportunities (SDG 8), creating safe public spaces (SDG 11), and addressing discrimination (SDG 10).

This strategy is also supported by global findings that link income inequality and insecurity, as reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in its 2019 [Global Study on Homicide](#).

The problem: Persistent violence and exclusion

Mexico City is a city of many contrasts. Home to a distinguished and fascinating culture with

a large number of museums, universities, urban parks, it was recently awarded international prizes including [World Urban Parks 2019](#), [DNA Paris Design Awards 2020](#), and [IV Latin-American Biennial of Landscape Architecture](#).

The city attracts talent and businesses, and projects a global appeal. But the 9 million residents of Mexico City have widely different life experiences depending on their location.

A geographic divide cuts the city and its social and economic cohesion roughly in half: Residents in the West side enjoy an average of 11.87 square meters per person of [green areas](#), well-maintained urban infrastructure, modern public transport, and easy access to schools and jobs, while residents in the poorer East side and periphery encounter less than 5.25 square meters per person of green areas, deteriorating infrastructure, insecure public transport, and long commutes. Patterns of insecurity and homicide incidence reflect this divide, with eastern and suburban areas bearing the bulk of it.

Addressing the root causes of violence through neighborhood investments

In December 2018, the newly elected administration of Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum introduced a comprehensive strategy to close this development gap. This strategy starts with programs that directly address street violence,

such as the "[Yes to disarmament, yes to peace](#)" program. This program recovered 5,323 arms (guns, knives, and ammunition) from the streets between January 2019 and July 2020. Improvements in police wages, work conditions, and training have improved professionalization of the police force and facilitated the roll-out of a community policing strategy.

In addition, the administration is committed to bringing government services and infrastructure to the most neglected and insecure territories of the city. A key part of this strategy is the creation of new community centers, the [PILARES](#) (a Spanish acronym for Centers for Innovation, Liberty, Arts, Educations and Skill development), which targets places with high social vulnerability indices and the highest incidence of violence.

The centers offer residents a menu of services and amenities, including free access to online education (from primary to university degrees), skills and jobs training, sports activities, art, and cultural events. PILARES also provides a one-stop-shop to City Government services. Through city employees and free internet access, residents can access key government programs such as assistance with the creation of a cooperative, applications to subsidized small business loans, job searches, assistance and support related to gender-based violence, substance abuse, psychological counseling, and filing of complaints.

This innovation was led by the City's Secretariat of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, in strong collaboration with other departments such as Culture, Economic Development, Labor, and the Digital Agency for Public Innovation. Success is also grounded in the engagement of community leaders in the decision-making process and the definition of strategic action lines for each PILARES.

Initial impact and future objectives

Of the 300 centers originally planned by 2021, 260 PILARES centers were launched in the first 2 years of government. While measures on the impact of the program on decreasing violence are not yet available, the PILARES success can already be measured with the following:

- From August 2019 to March 2020, academic services were delivered to 296,537 people (mainly youth from 15 to 29 years old); from April to July 2020, in a virtual way, to 99,090 people.
- From August 2019 to March 2020, 178,744 people participated in economic autonomy programs. From April to July 2020, 18,942 people participated online.

One of the biggest challenges has been restoring trust from the community. In most cases, PILARES repurposed abandoned structures in areas where people no longer felt safe. The initiative is committed to involving community leaders with deep knowledge of the territory and its residents: the interns and facilitators who participate in the delivery of its activities are neighbors from the community. By involving them in the design and operations of the PILARES, the program leverages their trust capital, familiarity, and ties to the community. Our key principle: If we want to transform the community, we must start at home.

By addressing the needs of people living in the most neglected areas, PILARES helps bring the government closer to the community and integrate territories across Mexico City.

Ultimately, we envision bringing back hope and opportunity so that people, especially young people, see no need to join organized crime or the local gangs. Locating quality public services, infrastructure, green areas is about restoring dignity and confidence back in communities to result in a better future, free of violence.