

PEACE IN OUR CITIES REPORT



Photo by Camara Lucida-Oscar Garcés

Innovations in Urban Violence Reduction: Symposium and Strategy Retreat

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Part I: Introduction

[Peace in Our Cities](#) (PiOC) is a unique global urban network of 23 cities and 40 community-based and international partners that are working together to halve urban violence by 2030. The network creates concrete, participatory, and evidence-based platform exchanges to reduce and prevent the most severe violence in member cities while also building a global movement of urban violence reduction advocates.

The network is managed by three independent institutions: the Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies at New York University's Center on International Cooperation; the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego; and the Stanley Center for Peace and Security, collectively referred to as the PiOC Secretariat.

The PiOC network approach to attaining its mission is based on three lines of action:

- ❖ *Amplify* policymaker awareness of the genuine scope and scale of urban violence and opportunities available to help cities address it.
- ❖ *Advance* evidence-informed, balanced, policy solutions and peacebuilding approaches to reduce the most severe forms of violence in urban contexts.
- ❖ *Accompany* city leaders, community partners, and civil society through peer exchanges and information access to realize ambitious targets for violence reduction.

The PiOC network hosted a symposium and network-member-only strategy retreat on innovations in urban violence reduction and prevention throughout the week of June 19–23, 2023, in Medellín and Palmira, Colombia. The host cities were chosen because of their successful track record of reducing violence and their whole-of-society approach for peacebuilding. Palmira has also been a member of the PiOC network since 2019, and was recently recognized for its efforts by receiving the prestigious United Cities Local Governments (UCLG) Peace Prize.

The symposium and member-only retreat drew on the examples of Medellín, Palmira, and other participating members to identify (1) how concerted efforts have contributed to reductions in violence and (2) which lessons may be applicable across different contexts. The sessions built on existing and ongoing efforts aiming to reduce violence in order to amplify knowledge and resources supporting the ambitious target of halving urban violence by 2030. The meetings in Colombia were PiOC's first urban violence symposium and a second strategy retreat, following the [inaugural meeting](#) hosted in Amman, Jordan, in 2020.

During five days, the gathering featured panel discussions, breakout sessions, and site visits emphasizing how balanced, focused, interrelated, and legitimate strategies have contributed to violence reduction in communities. The convening was designed to bridge theory and practice, foster relations within communities and across borders, and capture lessons learned for city-serving networks and cities. With nearly 60 participants, two host cities, and three official meeting languages, the convening provided considerable opportunities for peer-to-peer exchanges and relationship building to strengthen the work of the PiOC network moving forward.

This report includes:

1. Key takeaways for continued action.
2. Summary of proceedings.
3. Forward-looking reflections.

Part II: Key Takeaways

This section provides a succinct overview of the main takeaways from the symposium and the strategy retreat, dividing takeaways into policy highlights, lessons for the PiOC network, and notable applied learning and relationship-building moments. These three divisions are interconnected and should thus be understood as a coordinated framework for continued action to deepen violence reduction efforts.

Policy highlights

- ❖ **On advancing sound approaches to violence reduction efforts:** *interrelated, focused, legitimate, and balanced* approaches to violence reduction were reaffirmed as [guiding principles](#) for action across PiOC membership, in line with PiOC's approach to operationalize the [Resolution to Reduce Urban Violence](#).
- ❖ **On coordinating efforts across urban ecosystems:** Attaining ambitious reduction goals requires coordinated actors within ecosystems, broad community buy-in, and sustained engagement, as demonstrated by the successful reduction examples presented by PiOC members. These coordinated efforts can take different shapes and names (e.g., comprehensive strategies for violence reduction, pacts for peace), but the key lies in concerted, unifying efforts backed by the political leadership.
- ❖ **On learning from peers:** PiOC members demonstrated profound interest in continued learning from peers' policy experiences in order to adapt lessons to their local context.
- ❖ **On understanding incentives:** To design effective violence reduction interventions, understanding the incentives of active groups causing harm is a fundamental part of a sound diagnosis.
- ❖ **On engagement with the private sector:** Many PiOC members highlighted how partnerships with the private sector have energized violence reduction efforts and empowered committed actors to innovate and change the landscape of "what's possible."

Lessons for the PiOC network moving forward

- ❖ **On current violence priorities:** Network members identified addressing gender-based violence, improving community-police relations, and limiting detrimental exogenous influences in cities (for example, crises caused by national events) as topics for increased attention. Members also highlighted the importance of addressing violence through interrelated approaches, since different forms of violence are interconnected and can create vicious cycles.
- ❖ **On areas for technical support:** Network members also raised other areas where they require technical support, including alternatives to *mano dura* (heavy-handed) policies; mental health support, training on data collection, indicators monitoring, and political communications; urban planning considerations; and the implications of climate change and migration flows.
- ❖ **On research:** Network members expressed particular interest in documenting successful violence reduction interventions from other members, unpacking the *how* behind the design and implementation, and identifying lessons learned from specific contexts, such as links between cities hosting mass international sporting events and violence reduction.
- ❖ **On convenings:** Network members identified city-to-city exchanges and regional convenings as areas for priority investment. They also expressed a desire to continue receiving direct, tailored, technical support and engaging in multilateral forums, together with the PiOC Secretariat.
- ❖ **On direct, tailored connections:** In line with the continuity of actions identified under convenings, members expressed interest in enhanced peer-to-peer connections and bilateral support from technical experts and expert organizations.
- ❖ **On direct funding:** Network members affirmed the success of the [Peace Incentive Fund 1.0](#) and expressed particular interest in a second iteration. Strengthening connections with private sector actors and seeking funds for impact evaluations were also reiterated as areas of continued interest.
- ❖ **On network engagement:** Members expressed their intent to increase ownership of the network to maintain momentum. Members also identified their interest in including additional voices, such as law enforcement, formerly incarcerated individuals, and more academic institutions.

Notable applied learning and relationship-building moments

- ❖ *Facilitating peer exchanges among network members, including 19 city leaders and 16 organizational partners, and 20 urban violence experts from around the world.*
- ❖ *Learning about the city of [Medellin's resilience strategy](#) from local leaders in the neighborhoods of Comuna 13 and Moravia.*
- ❖ *Meeting with violence interrupters and appreciating the city of Palmira's PAZOS strategy in action, which was awarded the [2022 UCLG Peace Prize](#).*
- ❖ *Receiving expressions of interest from the cities of Bogota, Colombia, and Montego Bay, Jamaica, to join the PiOC network, as well as formally welcoming the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime.*
- ❖ *Launching our [PiOC Twitter](#) (follow us @PiOC_Network!)*
- ❖ *Publishing a food-for-thought paper highlighting innovative approaches to reduce violence from PiOC members and partners, available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).*

Part III: Symposium Recap

Medellín Symposium: Monday, June 19–Wednesday, June 21

From June 19–21, the PiOC network partnered with the Colombian-based Corporación Oficina de Resiliencia de Medellín (Medellín Resiliente) and [Public Value](#) at EAFIT University to host a symposium among PiOC member members and other violence prevention experts on effective and innovative approaches for reducing urban violence. The goals of these sessions were to:

1. Unpack how intentional, concerted planning and coordination, based on balanced, evidence-informed, and rights-centered approaches can contribute to urban violence reduction.
2. Identify how partnerships and sustained efforts can lead to significant reductions in violence, consolidate social cohesion, and build and promote a culture of peace.
3. Garner lessons learned from PiOC members and investigate how these may be applicable across contexts.

The symposium opened with learnings from EAFIT regarding the story of Medellín, exploring how the city went from roughly 400 violent deaths per 100,000 people in 1991 to fewer than 15 per 100,000 people in 2022, implementing a holistic approach to human safety and building a culture of peaceful coexistence. To address such high levels of violence, EAFIT experts explained that Medellín’s transformation began in the early 2000s, when the city government recognized that reducing violence required addressing the root causes of crime and social conflict. The ensuing policies were designed to promote social equity, provide opportunities for the city’s most vulnerable populations—also the most affected by violence—and reduce the likelihood of recruitment into criminal activities. The policy approach was based on four interrelated pillars: (1) social investment, (2) urban development, (3) citizen participation, and (4) improvement of local government capacities in security issues.

While explaining the city’s past and present strategy, researchers from EAFIT emphasized that despite impressive progress, challenges and policy dilemmas remained. One area identified in need of continued, coordinated action is the role of the government in understanding and reacting to incentives from local criminal organizations, a finding informed by their [latest study](#) on state capacity and ongoing gang violence in Medellín.



This latest study unearthed several policy dilemmas, including, but not limited to, recognizing that in some instances, organized criminal groups can provide an order that some citizens prefer to disorganized, fractured violence; confronting questions about whether making peace with criminal groups might be the right policy decision, even if not often palatable; and addressing immediate challenges such as the lack of reliable data on crime and violent outcomes and increasing state legitimacy.

After EAFIT introduced participants to the history of violence and ongoing challenges in Medellín, experts from Medellín Resiliente shared their strategy for creating a more peaceful city. They emphasized that while not everyone in the city agreed on the story related to past violence, they could agree on the future they wanted. With this strategy in mind, they focused on how they could build a kinder, collective vision that highlighted the need to have an inclusive, just, well-educated, innovative, and business-attractive city. Evidence-based spatial analysis allowed them to better understand the ecosystems of crime and violence, both social and economic, and how they could implement targeted interventions that moved from overly securitized approaches to a human-security-focused approach. They also drew on examples from other cities, including Barcelona, Spain, on how to improve social mobility in the city. After hearing more about the specific interventions across the city, the first session closed with remarks from the local peace negotiator, working to bring the Colombian president's Total Peace (Paz Total) initiative to life. This discussion focused on the challenges and opportunities related to generating commitments from local actors, brokering agreements with the heads of criminal organizations, and integrating citizen participation throughout the ongoing urban peace processes.

- ❖ *“Ultimately, we are all gathered [in the network] around the greater cause of saving lives, reducing harm, and improving the wellbeing, safety and prosperity of urban communities across the world.”*
- ❖ *“Every day when there is violence in our cities, we love the most important part of our cities: the people. People are the future of our cities.”*
- ❖ *“The best response to insecurity and violence is the fight for peace. Every citizen has the right for peace.”*





The first day of discussions closed with site visits led by Medellín Resiliente. Using Medellín’s world-renowned metro system, participants traveled to [Comuna 13](#), a neighborhood known for its transformation from a community with high levels of violence to a territory of peace. The participants witnessed the Metrocable that connects those living in the informal settlements along steep hills to the central metro system, and the outdoor, electric escalators that save residents from climbing the equivalent of 28 stories from the city below. Participants also learned about programs carried out through the local library, Houses of Justice, Center for Local Economic Development, and Peace University, connecting residents to valuable public services and education opportunities. The site visits exemplified how the city and organizations have worked together to implement multisectoral approaches that have significantly reduced violence and built a vibrant community with a sense of identity beyond its violent past.

On the second day, participants returned to EAFIT University to draw connections between violence reduction efforts across PiOC member cities. City representatives and civil society leaders from Palmira and Cali, situated next to each other in Colombia’s Valle del Cauca region, expanded on the [PAZOS](#) strategy and [Abriendo Caminos](#) interventions, respectively. They spoke in detail about how they seized a national crisis to garner support for focused violence prevention initiatives. The representatives also discussed how they have shared lessons from each other’s efforts to attain historic reductions in homicides, particularly through respective city expert exchanges. They also shared how ecosystems of local alliances have been the key in moving the prevention and reduction efforts forward; these include alliances with other public agencies in the city and across cities, the public sector, religious actors, individuals with lived experience, and civil society. These alliances work best under an intentional strategy with wide buy-in that maximizes each partner’s comparative advantages.

The second panel focused on sharing lessons across borders, featuring a discussion between Empire Fighting Chance (UK), a Bristol-based organization, and Medellín Resiliente, explaining how they embraced peer-to-peer collaborations in order to adapt strategies into their own local contexts. These began as part of

the Brookings Institution and Rockefeller Foundation facilitated [17 Rooms](#) process and continued with the support and coordination of the PiOC network.

The morning panels closed with a discussion between representatives from the Life & Peace Institute (Kenya) and the City of Kumanovo (North Macedonia), who highlighted how they work directly with community members to understand deficits in legitimacy and build efforts that address these deficits in order to enhance the legitimacy of state institutions, particularly law enforcement. This panel underscored the importance of integrating communities into project design, decision-making mechanisms, and implementation processes, as well as the support cities received from international networks in the project design and implementation stage. The Life & Peace Institute was the recipient of a Peace Incentive Fund grant from the PiOC network, while the City of Kumanovo is also an active member of the Strong Cities Network, PiOC partner organization working on issues of hate, extremism, and polarization.



❖ *“I truly believe that by working together we can achieve more, and we can achieve legitimacy. Prevention is not the easiest or fastest solution, but it is the right one!”*

In the afternoon, participants visited the [Moravia](#) neighborhood, previously known for hosting Medellín’s garbage dump. The dump was transformed largely because of the commitment of local social leaders, such as [Cielo María Holguín Ramírez](#), to promote economic development within the neighborhood and improve social services for residents. Participants visited community-run theaters, day-care opportunities for children, parks, and community centers in the area.

During the third, and final, day of the symposium in Medellín, the emphasis was on sharing lessons in violence prevention and reduction across PiOC members. In a panel discussion, the representative from the City of Oakland, California, USA, spoke on the importance of integrating a gender lens into their work, explaining how they developed the resources and strategy to deploy a gender-based violence expert alongside their violence interrupters to every shooting in the city. The Oakland representative also highlighted



the importance of community trust and buy-in to implement and fund their efforts. The representative of the City of Godoy Cruz, Argentina, shared details about their [urban planning and citizen security work](#), and how local ordinances helped them promote different policies and public services that support violence prevention following the structure of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). From the City of Pelotas, Brazil, leaders described the city’s [Pact for Peace](#), which has over 50 projects over five areas of intervention, with a primary focus on social prevention projects. City leaders from Niterói, Brazil, also shared key elements of the [city’s Pact Against Violence](#), noting that over 18 projects have been developed in partnership with civil society, based on successful global interventions. They used this opportunity to also launch their [commemorative e-book](#) documenting the success of their efforts. Both Brazilian cities share an approach to violence prevention that centers on a whole-of-society *pacto* (or pact) that supports sustainability, legitimacy, and broad buy-in of their efforts, underscoring again the importance of concerted action. After hearing from the panelists, the PiOC network broke into two groups to discuss key themes and lessons that could be adapted across contexts.



- ❖ *“Violence against women and girls is often unseen. But that doesn’t mean it can be an after-thought for city authorities. We need to constantly be thinking about the intersections.”*
- ❖ *“Usually municipalities have less authority over the public safety domain...but the Mayors can assume responsibility for the problem and the solutions.”*

The final panel at the symposium explored the role of the international community in supporting cities, bringing together representatives from the UN Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, and from UN-Habitat, as well as experts from the Peace in Our Cities network. They focused on connecting local action and voices to global agendas. Speakers discussed how global trends around small arms and violence affect local realities in the cities, and they also reflected on how the United Nations can serve as a convener, a collector of good practices, and a provider of technical assistance. At the same time, the panel emphasized how cities can influence multilateral agendas, and the power of networks to provide platforms for reshaping how global actors understand and address violence.

To close our symposium, breakout groups discussed how PiOC could better support cities, discussing gaps and opportunities related to data collection and tracking, information sharing, funding, and narrative building. In gathering insights from members during this breakout group, the facilitators collected lessons on how city-serving networks, like PiOC, could better serve cities and thus set the technical foundation for the second part of the convening, a more detailed strategy retreat in Palmira.

- ❖ *“PiOC has a balanced membership [between security and peacebuilding experts], and our members are comfortable with discussing all aspects: security, social cohesion, prevention, and early childhood protection. Sometimes this leads to discomfort, but it also ultimately leads to better collaboration and solutions.”*

Part IV: Palmira Members-Only Retreat

Thursday, June 22–Friday, June 23

From June 22–23, PiOC together with the Mayor’s Office hosted a members-only strategy retreat in [Palmira](#). The goals of this meeting were to:

1. Continue to consolidate insights from the preceding symposium in Medellín, considering applicability of approaches within member city contexts.
2. Identify priorities for PiOC members to inform the network’s agenda moving forward, including a strategy for enhanced peer-to-peer exchanges, global engagements, and applied research.
3. Facilitate deeper PiOC member exchanges and connections, centered on sharing lessons learned to address shared challenges.

For a decade, Palmira has ranked in the 50 most-violent cities in the world, according to [Seguridad, Justicia y Paz](#), a nongovernmental organization. However, a comprehensive strategy focused on improving the socioeconomic outlook of at-risk youth has reduced homicides rates from 98.1 per 100,000 residents in 2011 to 42.9 homicides per 100,000 residents in 2022, resulting in a historic 17-year low. Palmira and its leadership joined the PiOC network in 2019 and since have been among the most active members, leveraging the networking, advocacy, technical experience, and other available opportunities.

Through site visits and interactions with local community leaders, members had an opportunity to experience Palmira’s award-winning [PAZOS strategy](#) in action



During the visit to Palmira, participants visited the Loreto neighborhood community kitchen and enjoyed a meal prepared on-site while learning about the services provided. This was followed by a visit to the Materón Theater, an art presentation and introduction to the city’s “ecosystem of alliances,” and an exchange with the local civil society leaders from [Fundacion SIDOC](#) who work with the city to implement aspects of the PAZOS strategy. The day concluded with the visit to the Mega School of the South, which was completed in 2022 with financial support from the National Ministry of Education and the Mayor’s Office in Palmira. While there, the participants met with violence interrupters from Palmira and Cali, local businesses, and civil society leaders who work with youth on a range of programs through the PAZOS strategy. The site visits were a powerful way to humanize the violence prevention work and its impact, showing the people behind the strategy that led Palmira to achieve its lowest homicide rate in 17 years.

During the second day in Palmira, network members discussed the future strategic direction of PiOC in recognition that the core value of the network is to be driven and informed by members’ priorities and needs. Network co-facilitators reflected on the last three years of PiOC, including an overview of membership, research, and convenings. Since its launch in 2019 as a 10-month campaign supported by 11 cities



and 14 partner organizations, PiOC has evolved into a vibrant network that doubled its city and partner membership. While the network’s diversity increased, the types of benefits on offer to members expanded, and the members’ needs evolved, the core values remained the same, namely to:

- ❖ **Amplify** policymaker awareness of the genuine scope and scale of urban violence and opportunities available to help cities address it.
- ❖ **Advance** evidence-informed, balanced policy solutions and peacebuilding approaches to reduce the most severe forms of violence in urban contexts.
- ❖ **Accompany** city leaders, community partners, and civil society through peer exchanges and information access to realize ambitious targets for violence reduction.

These values have been put into practice in a variety of ways, including through facilitating access for members and partners to regional and global policy spaces; running joint global advocacy and mobilization campaigns; producing original policy-applied research; providing customized technical knowledge and expertise; connecting partners to each other and experts; and piloting innovations, including through the first-ever iteration of the Peace Incentive Fund. In its first iteration, the fund supported nine violence reduction and prevention projects in eight member cities.

Participants spent the remainder of the day in the breakout groups focusing on each of the aforementioned “three As” with a task to validate, prioritize, and add precision to the ways they would like to see these values translate into concrete activities for the network.

Among the concrete ideas discussed, the following gained the most support:

- ❖ *Creating a database of good practices in urban violence prevention and reduction from across the world.*
- ❖ *Providing capacity building for data collection and indicators design.*
- ❖ *Building a platform for increased network ownership and networking among members that would allow seamless exchange of information and stimulate collaboration (including on joint grant proposals).*
- ❖ *Expanding training opportunities for city and civil society staff.*
- ❖ *Facilitating peer-to-peer exchanges, including smaller and more thematic gatherings, as well as agile exchanges in times of crises or unpredicted need by the city.*
- ❖ *Continuing the tradition of regular virtual exchanges on a variety of pressing topics and cutting-edge research.*
- ❖ *Assisting cities with promoting their successful violence prevention and reduction strategies and contributing to the development of comprehensive strategies for those that do not have one in place already.*
- ❖ *Building more partnerships with academic institutions for knowledge collection and learning.*
- ❖ *Reinforcing the alignment of the PiOC aspirations with those of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, facilitating access to information on what international agreements national governments have signed onto and how cities can position themselves as trusted partners for their design, negotiation, and implementation.*
- ❖ *Scaling opportunities for city actors to influence national governments' policies.*
- ❖ *Contributing the resources needed to implement prevention-focused strategies.*
- ❖ *Developing a communications strategy that is unapologetic about the network ambition of 50 percent violence reduction by 2030.*
- ❖ *Supporting the transition within the city administrations to secure a long-term buy-in for successful violence reduction strategies.*
- ❖ *Reaching out to prospective members in northern Europe to learn from their models of building safe and peaceful cities and engaging with the actors in the private sector and the security sector.*
- ❖ *Creating opportunities to bring in art, music, and other cultural actors to highlight the experience of violence in cities.*
- ❖ *Investing in research on topics such as (1) climate change, migration, and violence issues, how they manifest themselves in the cities, and how they can be addressed through comprehensive interventions; (2) the role of the private sector in urban violence reduction; and (3) links between mass international sporting events and violence.*

The strategy session concluded by discussing a potential statement that Peace in Our Cities could present during the High-level Week of the UN General Assembly in September, 2023, and with reflections from Peace in Our Cities and Mayor Escobar, who said, "We can do this together, we can reduce violence by 50 percent in the next seven years, and together we prove that we are not crazy in this ambition."

Part V: Reflections by the Co-facilitators

We knew that the first in-person meeting of the PiOC network members and partners following the COVID-19 pandemic would be special. It is why we have invested significant resources, financial and human, and an extraordinary amount of time to prepare a series of week-long meetings and site visits in two cities in Colombia. Both were chosen for their significant achievements in reducing urban violence amid a difficult national context. Yet if the case of Colombia and its cities teaches us anything, it is that more-peaceful cities are possible.

As we look ahead to 2030, keeping in mind our ambitious goal of halving levels of urban violence in the next seven years, the momentum is on our side. The week-long event energized the network and provided a way forward for the secretariat to better serve members. Our members and partners exemplified that this is achievable through collaboration within the PiOC network and through their own ecosystems of urban partnerships.

Shortly after the meeting, one member offered the following reflection:

The meeting in Colombia continues to reverberate a lot in our daily life of building a safer city, either with the exchange of experiences on the spot or in the continuation of partnerships with colleagues and institutions that we know. It was a very powerful meeting and we are forever grateful!

Others have told us that the meetings in Colombia were among the most insightful in their “40 years of conference attendance,” while some members were quick to offer their city as host location for following PiOC network meetings.

These reflections and ideas, the surveys of members pre- and post-meetings in Colombia, and insights captured in the lead up to the meeting and throughout it will serve as a compass for the network co-facilitators and as the primary pillar for the Peace in Our Cities strategy.

We look forward to deepening the bonds with our members, better serving their priorities, and opening arms to new members and partners who are all committed to saving lives, reducing harm from violence, and building peaceful communities.

Finally, we would like to extend our profound gratitude to the PiOC partners, members, and friends who made the meetings in Colombia a success, in particular, the Corporación Oficina de Resiliencia de Medellín (Medellín Resiliente), Public Value at EAFIT University, and the Mayor’s Office of Palmira.

Peace in Our Cities Co-facilitators

