

Ending Cycles of Violence: The Kroc IPJ Framework

Kroc IPJ Mission Statement:

Together with partners, we develop and champion evidence-based, justice-centered solutions to ending cycles of violence.

Introduction

Every organization dedicated to social change has theories about how the world works, models that inform their initiatives and the work they do. The Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ) is no different. The goal of this paper is to articulate our theories of violence prevention in order to examine and assess them over time. Such testing of core theories is crucial if the Kroc IPJ is to successfully develop and champion evidence-based, justice-centered solutions to ending cycles of violence.

This paper is a companion piece to the Kroc IPJ's [Learning With](#) paper. There, we discuss how we work, namely co-creating research with our networks of partners both locally and globally. In this paper, we discuss the approaches to violence reduction on which we focus our research efforts. Combined, the two papers provide insight into both the process and the substance of Kroc IPJ's work.

Violence and Cycles of Violence

Defining Violence: The Kroc IPJ's work draws on multiple conceptualizations of violence and no single definition can encompass the full scope of the Institute's initiatives.¹ Different Kroc IPJ initiatives fall in different places on the continuum of violence discussed by Vittorio Bufacchi, which ranges from a *Minimalist Conception of Violence* on one end to a *Comprehensive Conception of Violence* on the other.² Bufacchi describes

A Note on Methodology: *The framework in this paper is informed by the current state of the research and learning on violence and by the collective expertise of the Institute's staff and partners. We provide citations when we quote or draw directly from a source and to highlight other useful resources. However, this paper should not be considered a piece of academic research, but rather an exposition of the ways the Kroc IPJ understands its own work within the context of the broader fields of peacebuilding and violence prevention.*

minimalist conceptions of violence as ones, “that emphasize the notion of physical force deliberately used to cause suffering or injury.” He draws from John Galtung’s concept of structural violence to define the comprehensive conception as violence “where there may not be any person who directly harms another person. In structural violence the violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances.”³

A useful definition from [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) lies between Bufacchi’s two poles. It reads, “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.” This definition is a useful starting point for the Kroc IPJ because it includes both interpersonal violence and collective violence and both direct harm and longer-term

deprivation. The majority of the Institute’s initiatives focus on forms of violence included within this definition. While some Kroc IPJ programs do focus on types of violence more in line with Galtung’s concept of structural violence, which he saw as largely synonymous with social injustice, this work is normally done in contexts that are also marked by significant direct, physical violence. It is rare for the Institute to work on social injustice in contexts that are largely free of physical violence.

Cycles of Violence: The institute focuses in particular in communities experiencing interpersonal or collective cycles of violence. We borrow the term “cycles of

violence” from John Paul Lederach and define it as dynamics that create ongoing, self-sustaining violence. Cycles of violence will likely not end on their own without some form of intervention.⁴

Cycles of violence can be caused by two or more sides in a conflict engaged in tit-for-tat violence or by the impact that violence has on societies over time. Violence begets violence not just in the form of a conflict between groups, but as the result of its broader impact on individuals and communities. This is particularly the case where violence has become chronic and embedded into the systems and structures of society. As L. Rowell Huesmann writes, “Introducing violence into a community increases the risk of greater violence throughout the community.”⁵ The Kroc IPJ works on both disrupting cycles of violence between the various parties in a conflict and on transforming the systems and structures in society that perpetuate longer-term cycles of violence.

“How do we transcend the cycles of violence that bewitch our human community while still living in them?”

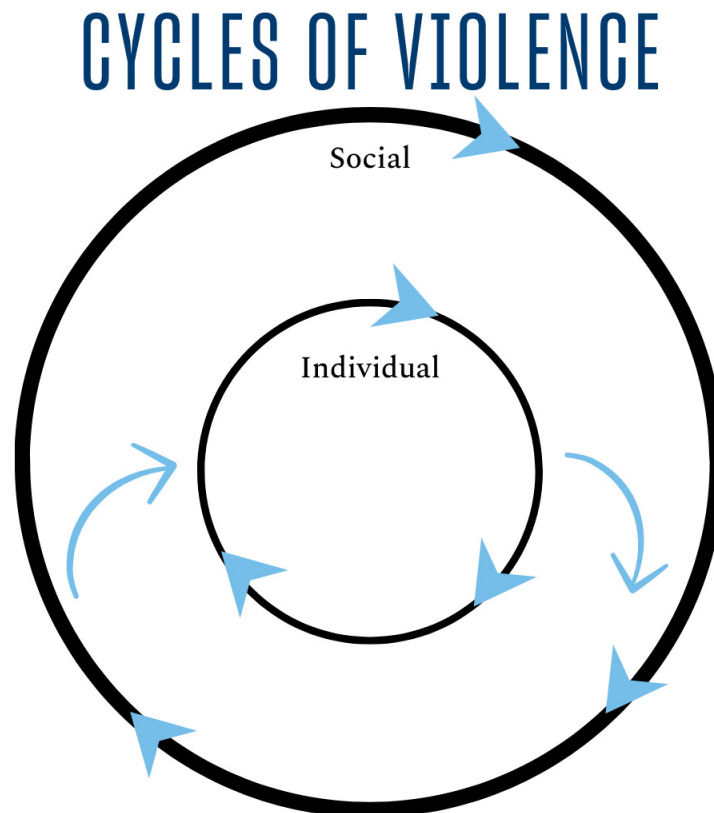
-John Paul Lederach

What Drives Cycles of Violence

There are no simple answers to what drives cycles of violence. Violence is a complex phenomenon, and the research on what can be done to prevent it is equally complex. In a piece contemplating whether developing a general theory of violence is even possible, Susanne Karstedt and Manuel Eisner ask:

What are the commonalities between an armada of warships and a rioting crowd? How can we make sense of macro-level changes over time and differences between societies, and simultaneous microlevel and situational causes of violence? ...What are the implications of distinct historical and cultural manifestations of violence like concentration camps, terrorism, or blood feuds for a general theory of violence?⁶

One crucial factor that underlies the complexity of violence is that cycles of violence exist on both an individual level and social level. By social level, we mean dynamics that exist among groups, whether smaller groups, such as neighborhoods, or much larger collectives, such as nation-states. Moreover, as illustrated in the graphic, individual and social cycles of violence interact. Cycles of violence at the social level can drive individual violence. For instance, researchers have found that homicide rates are higher in societies that have experienced war for many years.⁷ The reverse – that individual violence drives social violence – is also true. Some individuals who experienced violence and trauma as children have subsequently organized movements which have driven widespread social violence.



Because the Kroc IPJ works on cycles of violence at both the individual and social level, it is important to articulate assumptions about the drivers of violence at both levels as well as assumptions about how the levels interact.⁸

Individual Level

The experiences, beliefs, and motivations of individuals can increase the risk that they will engage in violence. In its work, the Kroc IPJ focuses on four individual level factors in particular:

1. *The Impact of Violence and Trauma:* When individuals experience violence and trauma and have not been given opportunities to manage their aftereffects in a healthy way, they are more likely to engage in violence.⁹
2. *A Desire for Self-efficacy:* Individuals living in impoverished, chaotic, or dangerous situations often experience frustration, shame, and chronic stress. Engaging in violence may be seen as one way to reclaim a sense of power and control over one's surroundings and one's future.¹⁰
3. *A Desire for Belonging:* Everyone, and young people in particular, wants to feel a sense of belonging and purpose. In communities experiencing conflict, deprivation, and/or marginalization, joining a violent group maybe be one of the few ways to feel this sense of belonging. Whether the group is a violent extremist group or a street gang, once the individual is in the group, they will likely be expected to engage in violence.
4. *A Belief that Violence is Effective:* Despite the widespread belief that violence is deviant or pathological, we know that violence can be effective in helping individuals achieve their goals. Its effectiveness varies from context to context, but if an individual believes it will be more effective than other available strategies in helping them reach their goals – goals which may be entirely legitimate – violence is more likely.¹¹

While these individual factors increase the risk of violence, their impact always depends on how they interact with social structures and systems. Systemic injustice and historic patterns of marginalization can give rise to and exacerbate these individual factors. At the same time, social institutions can be designed to help mitigate these factors. If society provides ways to manage trauma, opportunities to gain a sense of agency and belonging, and ways to achieve goals nonviolently, these individual factors may be less likely to drive violence.

Social Level

At the social level, the Kroc IPJ seeks to address four dynamics that drive violence:

1. *Power:* Many violent conflicts are created when those in power use violence to protect or expand their power. At the same time, groups emerge that use violence to resist those with power, thus creating a cycle of violence. This can happen at a small scale, as with rival gangs in a neighborhood, or at a national or international scale, like the wars in

Ethiopia and Sudan. These dynamics are particularly dangerous when power struggles reinforce patterns of inequality, injustice, and marginalization in societies.

2. *Identities:* Violence often emerges when the identity of a group is threatened, or the group's members perceive themselves to be under threat and do not believe there are nonviolent ways to protect themselves. If violence emerges in this kind of situation, a cycle of violence can easily be created, as the initiation of violence only exacerbates the perceived threat to one's identity.¹²
3. *Narratives:* Narratives – the stories people tell about why things happen and who is responsible – are commonly used to justify violence against certain groups. Particularly when deployed by the powerful, they can drive violence against individuals or groups who are cast as a threat or as deserving of violence.¹³
4. *Political Institutions:* The interaction between political institutions - both formal government institutions and more informal political norms and practices - and violence is complex. The first question to ask, however, is whether and how political institutions are either exacerbating or mitigating the other drivers of violence. Are these institutions used to protect the interests of the powerful or do they serve as a check on that power? Do institutions serve all groups in society, or are they seen as a threat by certain groups? Are institutions leveraged to promote and legitimize narratives that justify violence or are they able to counter those types of narratives?¹⁴

These drivers of violence at both the individual and social level provide an initial roadmap for the Kroc IPJ as it seeks to understand cycles of violence and assess how it can best leverage its applied research to develop strategies to disrupt those cycles of violence.

Ending Cycles of Violence - A Commitment to Being Justice-Centered

In its work to end cycles of violence, the Kroc IPJ is committed to advancing justice-centered solutions. By justice-centered, we mean solutions that:

1. Advance, rather than undermine, human rights.
2. Are inclusive and equitable, and do not target or sacrifice certain groups to achieve a short-term reduction in violence for others.
3. Focus on allowing all individuals in society to live lives free of both violence and fear.
4. Are attuned to the interaction between historical injustices and current cycles of violence and how solutions to violence can either help address these historical injustices or exacerbate the harms they've caused.

Approaches that don't adhere to these criteria may reduce violence in the short term only because they sacrifice justice for some to create safety for others. This is both immoral and often ineffective. In many cases, these types of solutions simply drive more violence over the longer run. It is only by advancing justice-centered approaches that cycles of violence can be truly disrupted in a sustainable way for all.

Approaches to Ending Cycles of Violence: The Five P's

Based on our understandings of cycles of violence at the individual and social level, the Kroc IPJ works with our partners to understand and increase the effectiveness of five justice-centered approaches in particular. We call these the “Five P’s.” Each of these approaches disrupt one or more of the drivers of conflict at the individual and/or the social level. Below we share the work of five Kroc IPJ partners to illustrate what each of the Five P’s look like in practice.

1) *Protect Those Resisting Violence*

Meritxell Calderón-Vargas, a Kroc Border Fellows and a human rights defender in Baja California, maps hate crimes and femicide against LGBTQIA+ migrants in Tijuana, Mexico. This community is extremely vulnerable to violence. Mapping and making visible anti-LGBTQ violence is the first step in developing proactive protection strategies.

In many places, it is difficult in the short or medium-term to address the root causes of violence. In Tijuana, for instance, it is often not possible to work directly on state-sponsored violence or violence caused by Mexico’s most violent non-state armed groups, drug cartels. Even in cases like this, however, it is possible to increase security for those most vulnerable to violence and build their ability to resist violence in their communities. Meritxell’s maps of violence are used by affected communities to develop protection strategies, to resist perpetrators of violence, and to address structural drivers of violence.

The Kroc IPJ works with our partners to understand the most effective strategies to **protect those resisting violence** and create space for communities to organize to develop their own strategies to protect themselves.

2) *Provide Positive Pathways*

In many contexts, violence is committed by a very small number of individuals, often less than one percent of the population.¹⁵ In Oakland, California, for example, violence prevention program researchers found that only 400 individuals – roughly 0.1% of the city’s population – were responsible for the majority of the city’s violence.¹⁶

Research also shows that most of those who engage in violence will at some point want to leave violence behind.¹⁷ **Arturo Soriano** focuses on those who want out. Himself a former gang member, Arturo spent over 20 years in prison. Now he runs Youth Empowerment, a San Diego community-based organization and a long-time partner of the Kroc IPJ. Youth Empowerment works with youth offenders and adults to provide pathways away from violence. Helping them do this might involve job training, housing support, legal assistance, substance abuse recovery help, or counseling to overcome trauma. This support allows returned citizens to build a life for themselves and their families that is free of violence.

Individuals are not inherently violent. Everyone deserves the chance to leave violence behind. The Kroc IPJ works with partners like Arthur to understand how our society can effectively **provide positive pathways** for those seeking to leave violence behind.

3) Pursue Connectedness

Robi Damelin is a Woman PeaceMaker Fellow through the Kroc IPJ. She is the founder of The Parents Circle–Families Forum, a joint Israeli-Palestinian organization that includes over 600 families, all of whom have lost an immediate family member to violence. The members of the Forum leverage this tragic, shared experience to work for peace in the region.

Our work with partners like Robi, and the work of researchers around the world, shows that connectedness is a powerful way to prevent violence.¹⁸ Connectedness reduces the willingness of groups to use violence against other groups to maintain power, lessens the threat groups feel to their identities from other groups, and undermines narratives that justify violence.

We need to be attuned to how people in our communities are connected to each other. Are there dense and diverse social networks that connect individuals in the community? Are there relationships that bridge different groups that are potentially in conflict with one another? If these relationships can be built and strengthened, they can be leveraged to prevent violence, even in situations as challenging as the one in which Robi works.

The Kroc IPJ works to understand how we can **pursue connectedness** in an ongoing way so societies can be resilient to threats of violence of all kinds and can effectively respond when violence emerges.

4) Push Back Against Narratives that Justify Violence

Brandon Koenig is a residential fellow in our Violence, Inequality and Power lab. He is an ethnographic researcher who embedded himself within the 2020 Donald Trump presidential campaign to better understand the narratives that drive the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, particularly what narratives are used to justify violence. One narrative, for instance, paints social justice protestors as traitors and those that fight them as protectors of the nation.

Brandon is now working with political organizers in rural Pennsylvania on strategies to promote alternative narratives. These efforts acknowledge the grievances of many of those within the MAGA movement but seek to reframe those narratives in a way that moves individuals away from violence and toward a shared struggle for justice.

Narratives are deployed by those that want to justify violence, because they are powerful shapers of our behavior. By creating stories about who is a criminal, terrorist, or traitor, they

make violence seem natural or warranted. The Kroc IPJ works to understand how narratives are leveraged to drive violence and the most effective strategies to **push back against narratives** that drive violence and promote narratives that undermine cycles of violence.

5) Promote Effective, Accountable, and Inclusive Institutions

Pelotas, Brazil participates in the global Peace in Our Cities network, which Kroc IPJ co-manages. Between 2002 and 2017, Pelotas faced a 512% increase in homicides. In many cities facing this type of spike in violence, the response would be a top-down, tough-on-crime crackdown by police and city leaders. Pelotas chose a different path. Under the leadership of Mayor **Paula Mascarenhas**, the city launched the *Pacto Pelotas pela Paz* (*Pelotas Pact for Peace*). The *Pact* fosters collaboration between communities and law enforcement, creates inclusive institutions such as the Public Security Forum where all community members can participate, and focuses the majority of resources on prevention of violence in marginalized communities, as opposed to harsher, law enforcement-centric approaches. An impact evaluation found that the *Pact* reduced homicides in Pelotas by 38% in four years.

Crucially, beyond all the specific activities undertaken as part of the *Pact*, the overarching ethos of the initiative was inclusion. Institutions that create exclusion drive violence. If individuals or groups do not believe that institutions will address their needs or they are excluded from the benefits those institutions provide, they may see violence as the most effective strategy to achieve their goals.¹⁹

In alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 16, the Kroc IPJ works to understand what strategies work best to **promote effective, accountable and inclusive institutions**. Like those that are part of the *Pact*, these institutions, undermine the dynamics that drive violence as opposed to exacerbating them.

Conclusion

Violence is too varied and multifaceted a phenomenon to be addressed with fixed strategies transplanted from context to context. Because of this, the framework described in this paper does not prescribe a pre-determined set of actions to undermine violence. Instead, the framework is a flexible tool that helps guide how the Kroc IPJ designs its programs and undertakes its research. It provides an initial map of the territory as the Institute begins work with new partners and on new initiatives.

The Kroc IPJ is a learning organization, and the framework laid out in this paper distills what we have learned up to now through our own work, through our partnerships and collaborations, and through the research of many others. As we continue to learn with our partners in the San Diego-Tijuana region and around the world, the framework will of course continue to evolve. As we continue to learn, our goal remains constant: to work with our partners to disrupt cycles of violence and build more peaceful societies.

Endnotes

- 1 For a good discussion of the complexities of defining violence, see: Alex Alvarez and Ronet D. Bachman, *Violence: The Enduring Problem* 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2025), 1-32.
- 2 Vittorio Bufacchi, "Two Concepts of Violence," *Political Studies Review* 3, no 2 (2005): 193-204.
- 3 John Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no 3 (1969): 167-191.
- 4 John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- 5 Manuel Eisner, "The Uses of Violence: An Examination of Some Cross-Cutting International Journal of Conflict and Violence, 3, no 1 (2009): 68.
- 6 Susanne Karstedt and Manuel Eisner, "Introduction: Is a General Theory of Violence Possible," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 3, no 1 (2009): 4.
- 7 L. Rowell Huesmann, "The contagion of violence: The extent, the processes, and the outcomes," in D.M. Patel and R.M. Taylor, eds., *Social and economic costs of violence: Workshop summary* (2012): 68.
- 8 The [Centers for Disease Control](#) has done useful analysis on the different levels of violence and how they interact.
- 9 For more on the impacts of trauma and violence, see Zuleka Henderson, "In Their Own Words: How Black Teens Define Trauma," *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, 12 (2017): 141-51; Jennifer Lynn-Whaley and Josh Sugarmann, "[The Relationship Between Community Violence and Trauma](#): How violence affects learning, health, and behavior," Violence Policy Center, 2017.
- 10 For more, see Alvarez and Bachman, 47-52.
- 11 For more on the ways that a belief (or lack thereof) in the efficacy of violence can drive violence or prevent it, see Chris Blattman, *Why We Fight: The Roots of War and the Paths to Peace* (New York: Viking, 2022).
- 12 The [Identity & Conflict Lab](#) has numerous resources on the interaction between identity, conflict, and violence.
- 13 For an in-depth discussion of the linkages between narratives and violence, see "Over Zero," "[A Refresher Guide and Narratives and Violence](#)," 2023.
- 14 Much of the work of the Kroc IPJ regarding institutions and violence is informed by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, which reads: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels." Sub-goal SDG 16.1 specifically commits UN member states to "significantly reduce all forms of violence and related deaths everywhere." For more on the relationship of SDG 16 and violence, see Rachel Locke, "[Reducing Violence to Advance Peace and Sustain Development](#)," IPI Global Observatory, 2019.
- 15 See John MacDonald and Thomas Hogan, "Concentrating on Crime," *City Journal* (September 28, 2021); Örjan Falk et al, "The 1% of the population accountable for 63% of all violent crime convictions," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 49, no 4 (2014): 559-571.

16 Mike McLively and Brittany Nieto, “A Case Study in Hope: Lessons from Oakland’s Remarkable Reduction in Gun Violence,” Giffords Law Center, Faith in Action, and the Black Brown Gun Violence Prevention Consortium, 2019, 6.

17 For instance, recent research on gangs has found that, counter to long-standing myths, most gang membership is a temporary status, often just one to two years. See Dena C. Carson and J. Michael Vecchio, “Leaving the Gang: A Review and Thoughts on Future Research,” in *The Wiley Handbook of Gangs*, eds. Scott H. Decker and David C. Pyrooz, Wiley-Blackwell, 2015..

18 For a broad review on the impact of connectedness on reducing intergroup prejudice, see Thomas F. Pettigrew et al, “Recent Advances in Intergroup Contact Theory,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35, no 3 (2011): 271-80. For research on intergroup contact and violence, see Salma Mousa, “Building Social Cohesion Between Christians and Muslims Through Soccer in Post-ISIS Iraq,” *Science* 369 (2020): 866-70..

19 For a good overview of the importance of inclusion, see Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative, “Preventing Violence Through Inclusion,” Briefing Note, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2018. For an in-depth analysis of how inclusive, local institutions can prevent violence, see Cid Martinez, *The Neighborhood Has Its Own Rules: Latinos and African Americans in South Los Angeles* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).