



## How Reducing Inequality Can Help Curb Violence and Terrorism across the Globe

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Civil unrest is a threatening reality for countless individuals across the globe. The regions prone to extreme violence have shifted through history, but today's headlines are dominated by terrorist events ranging from Syria, South Sudan, and Belgium to Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. In Latin America, the drug trade serving U.S. and European consumers surpasses terrorism as a spur to violent deaths – with El Salvador recently registering the highest homicide rate per capita in the world. Although violence south of the U.S. border is often overshadowed by spectacular terrorist events across the Atlantic, it is imperative that we take a long view, both geographically and through time, to explore shared causes and learn how to counteract them. My research contributes to this effort by focusing on Peru, where terrorism and violent responses to it have been rooted in extreme inequalities.

### The Example of Shining Path in Peru

The Shining Path, otherwise known as *Sendero Luminoso*, was a terrorist group that ravaged much of the country of Peru in the 1980s and early 1990s. Driven by Marxist ideology and led by Abimael Guzman, a professor at the *Universidad de Huamanga* in Ayacucho, *Sendero* called for overturning the social order based on inequality and exploitation by instigating chaos and bloodshed. In its infancy, *Sendero* garnered support from young university students from rural highland communities. These communities had long been exploited by upper-class *Mestizo* society who had roots to conquistadors, colonists and later *hacendados* who acquired land holdings and access to native labor. Young highlanders who lived in dire poverty were drawn to calls for toppling the power structure in which the minority held the lion's share of wealth in the country. As a result they returned to their communities and recruited followers. Public hangings of local thieves and corrupt government officials cemented local support for the movement. With time, however, it became apparent that *Sendero* failed to follow primary Andean customs and began to demand resources from rural communities. At the same time, the Peruvian military began to actively seek and take revenge on *Sendero* supporters. Entire rural communities were caught in the middle of conflicts that ultimately cost over 70,000 lives and displaced millions. After Guzmán was captured in 1992, scattered violence persisted among lingering factions, but not at levels to the decade of unrest.

Currently, I am writing a life history of a survivor of the Shining Path, Graciela. When she was a young child there were over 200 families in her community; now there are 20. The majority were killed during the era of violence and the rest fled; currently scattered throughout the country of Peru and beyond. During the time of unrest Graciela abandoned her home with the clothes on her back leaving animals, land, and life as she knew it behind. She survived on the run enduring numerous rapes and near death experiences. The trauma of her history is inscribed on her body with ongoing physical and mental health ailments. She, along with other contemporaries known as the "lost generation" of Peru, struggle to survive on a daily basis as any chance of

education was stolen from them during their youth. The one hope she carries is that her children will be able to complete their education and experience financial security and political stability.

## **Common Threads of Terrorism**

The violence-promoting factors in rural highland Peru that quickly set two-thirds of the country aflame continue to exist today, often even more exaggerated in other regions of the world. As long as exploitation and poverty persist, terrorism will play a prominent role in society. That label is insistently applied to violent rebel acts, but what do we call counter violence enacted by governments in which the final death toll far outpaces that caused by the original terrorists? Governments that feel forced to respond to terrorism in equal measure often create dire consequences for entire social groups suffering exploitation. Further seeds of discontent are sown, ripening into conditions for terrorism to reemerge. The most important conditions include:

- Economic inequality, especially where the bulk of a region's resources is controlled by a minority – amid a history of exploitation of marginalized groups.
- Disenfranchised youth whose livelihoods have been threatened or destroyed.
- Ideological factions that stress gaps between how the world should be and current everyday realities.
- Fanatical leaders who foster hope of change and provide means to exercise power to attack an enemy held responsible for oppression.

## **New Understandings Suggest Useful Reforms**

Current terrorist events should not be viewed in isolation. Obviously bombs and missile strikes have not eradicated violence. As inequality and disenfranchisement increase across the globe, social programs and active citizenship can make a difference.

Drug dealers in El Salvador who sheepishly report to journalists that they feel they have no choice but to join gangs and engage in violence, eagerly grasp alternative livelihoods when nonviolent opportunities are offered. Reaching out to youth is especially important. Two decades ago Iceland was plagued with rampant youth violence and drug use, scourges that were drastically reduced after the advent of new athletic, music, dance, and art programs for young people.

The bottom line is that social programs fueled with adequate resources can address drug addiction nationally and curb international demand. Although expanded training in science, technology, engineering and math is important, we also need to prioritize the wider needs of youth and support artistic and athletic programs and new job opportunities in all communities.

Active, engaged citizens also need to elect leaders and representatives who will hold companies responsible for the social impact of their economic activities here and abroad. Once in office, elected officials must be held accountable to draft and support policies and tax codes that are good for communities, not just corporations, and serve to decrease, not exacerbate, the unprecedented levels of inequality that feed social breakdowns and violent conflicts.

