



## **Empowerment and Progressive Initiatives – NEPI Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia (STYL) Program NEPI TWO-PAGER**

### **Problem:**

Urban crime and violence are one of the most costly and divisive issues facing cities around the world. In most of these urban cities, violence is committed by a small number of young men. From Liberia to Chicago, research has shown it is possible to identify them, change their mindset and behavior, and integrate them into law-abiding society. Policymakers and donors seek effective ways to reduce crime and violence, particularly among young men at high risk of becoming involved in violence. Globally, youth affected by violence, either as a participant or observer, is most likely to continue violent behaviors, severely impacting countries, governments, communities, and individuals, especially youth themselves. In Liberia, 14 years of civil war left tens of thousands of street youths unemployed, at-risk, and easily mobilized into crime and violence. At-risk youth pose risks of broader social instability, through their participation in organized crime, violent protest, and communal violence.

### **Background:**

The Network for Empowerment & Progressive Initiatives – NEPI ([www.nepiliberia.org](http://www.nepiliberia.org)), is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit registered in New York in 2016 to address the issues of youth crime and violence with an evidence-based program to create safe communities for everyone. NEPI developed the Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia (STYL) program—piloted in Liberia between 2009 and 2012—provided 8 weeks of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and cash grants to high-risk young men. NEPI has worked in Liberia since 2004 as a national organization providing initiatives in peace and conflict transformation, mediation, dialogue, etc. One of NEPI’s programs, STYL, is a Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) based hardcore youth rehabilitation program that addresses crime and violence, mental health, creates employment, and reduces extreme poverty among hard-core street youth. NEPI is dedicated to reducing youth crime and violence in Liberia, the Sub-Saharan Africa region, and the world to create safe communities for everyone. NEPI is currently relaunching the STYL program in Liberia. NEPI is also collaborating with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) as a research, learning, and policy partner to provide technical assistance for the program as it scales. IPA is working with NEPI on our MEL activities to inform the scale-up with data and evidence and exploring pathways for scaling the program in Liberia and beyond.

The STYL program consists of identifying the highest-risk young men in a city and offering them an eight-week group CBT program focused on reducing automatic violent behaviors, improving planning skills and future focus, and helping men adopt a more mainstream, noncriminal social identity. This program is accompanied by an unconditional \$200 cash grant, which provides income support as the young men practice what they learn and focus on changing their lifestyles. Men meet on average in groups of twenty. On alternate days when groups do not meet, facilitators visit men at home or work to provide advice and encouragement. The sessions employ a mix of lectures, group discussions, and practice, including role-playing in class, homework that requires practicing tasks, exposure to real situations, and in-class processing of experiences of executing these tasks. Like many CBT programs, these tasks begin simply and get more difficult over time.

The results of the evaluations have led to replications and scale-ups around the world. We know of programs in Colombia, El Salvador, and Mexico that are replicating STYL’s methodology. Recently, *The Economist* covered how the city of Chicago is also replicating STYL in an article titled “Applying lessons from war-torn Africa to Chicago” (May 4, 2019). STYL is therefore at the forefront of interventions to reduce youth crime and violence. There is now a unique opportunity to bring STYL back and set it up for expansion. Klubosumo Johnson Borh, one of NEPI’s and STYL’s founders, recently became a Rainer Arnhold Fellow (a program of the Mulago Foundation). The foundation will assist NEPI in scaling STYL. This means that NEPI will be supported by a strong foundation and a capable team, allowing NEPI to professionalize, institutionalize, and scale-up its implementation. The fellowship’s purpose is to assist NEPI in developing high-impact, scalable solutions, and strategies for better and long-term results.

High levels of crime and violence continue to be one of the highest priorities of the Liberian government. Given the proven benefits of the STYL program, resuming access to the program for Liberians is a first-order priority for crime and violence reduction in Liberia.

**Solution:**

The Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia (STYL) program successfully reduced criminal, violent, and other anti-social behaviors among hard-core street youth in Liberia, and the impact was sustained over ten years. STYL is designed by NEPI to promote future orientation self-discipline and norms of non-violent, pro-social behavior. With the STYL model, we find and enroll hardcore street youth into the STYL program, provide an 8-week program with group CBT and conduct one-on-one counseling. We expose youth to a series of role models, provide practical assignments and training, improve appearance while visiting supermarkets and banks, and provide youth with a \$200 surprise cash transfer upon completion.

RCT conducted by researchers shows that STYL reduces crime and violence, drug use, carrying a weapon, fighting with each other and police, arrest, and even things as simple as losing your temper dropped by 20 to 50%. The program is cost-effective costing 530 per person, translating into a cost of \$1.50 per crime avoided. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a method for mitigating self-destructive beliefs and behaviors and promoting positive ones by helping people become aware of harmful thoughts and patterns and guiding them to think and react differently. A growing body of evidence suggests that CBT is an effective crime and violence reduction strategy. Much remains to be learned, though, on how to make STYL even more cost-effective.

**Impact:**

- **Indicators:** Reduction in crime and violence by 20 – 50%
  - Antisocial behaviors (bad behavior) - In the therapy + cash arm, antisocial behaviors declined by 0.31 standard deviations, in 1 month; 0.25 standard deviations, in 1 year; and 0.25 standard deviations in 10 years (% of beneficiaries less likely to sell drugs, to carry a weapon, less likely to fight with each other and police, percentage of arrest).
  - In the therapy-only arm, antisocial behaviors declined by 0.249 standard deviations, in 1 month; 0.074 standard deviations, in 1 year; and 0.204 standard deviations in 10 years
  - The program also had a sustained impact on mental health. Ten years later, those who received both CBT and cash reported mental health outcomes 0.21 SDs higher than those in the comparison group.
- **Delivery to Date:** Delivered intervention to 30K ex-combatants and 14K youth in Liberia since 2000. Did an RCT with IPA in 2009 – 2012 and evidence in 2015 ([memo](#), [full study](#)), conducted a follow-up survey, tracked down, and surveyed 94.8% (953 subjects) of surviving members of the sample with evidence in 2021 ([full study](#)) We want to expand the program to the most high-risk youth population in Liberia and subsequently in the Sub-Saharan African region and the world.
- The findings from the RCT have been featured in the Washington Post and on the influential podcast, Freakonomics, highlighting NEPI's success in identifying a workable and affordable solution to rehabilitating street youth. [Watch the talk](#), see the [policy note](#), read the [summary in the Washington Post](#), listen to the [NPR Planet Money](#) or [Freakonomics](#) episodes, or Chris-related [New York Times Op-Ed](#) about the program.
- Most recently as seen in [Vox: Liberia's found a stunningly effective way to reduce violent crimes - Vox](#), [Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/06/03/cbt-violence-study-prevention/>](#)