

Effect of civil society capacity building and civic engagement and empowerment initiatives on physical security

Civil society capacity-building and civic engagement initiatives had a moderate effect on physical security through increased public security spending and administrative capacity.

Geographical region: East Asia & Pacific

Effect size: Moderate effect ($g=0.181$)

Confidence in study findings: Low confidence (1 study; 4 ES)

Short summary

Civil society capacity-building and civic engagement initiatives in Xinjiang, China, implemented through poverty alleviation transfers, moderately influenced physical security. The intervention increased public security and administrative spending, strengthening local state capacity. However, the focus on administrative control over direct community safety meant that improvements in actual physical security were limited. Overall, the initiatives highlighted the trade-off between state capacity-building and immediate community safety. Confidence in the findings is low due to a limited number of studies.

Long summary

The intervention

The intervention involved poverty alleviation transfers targeting infrastructure projects, such as roads and irrigation systems, aimed at strengthening local administrative and security capacities in a politically unstable, economically disadvantaged region.

How the intervention is expected to work

The intervention aimed to enhance state capacity by directing funds toward infrastructure that required local government presence. Increased administrative and public security spending was expected to improve governance, ensure implementation of projects, and assert political control. While this approach strengthened state capacity, its direct effects on community safety were limited. Over time, these investments were intended to stabilize the region and support long-term development.

The evidence base

The cell includes one primary study conducted in Xinjiang (China) using a panel dataset (1994–2000) with covariate balancing propensity scores (CBPS) and two systematic reviews. The review findings were consistent, examining civic empowerment and state capacity interventions in relation to physical security.

Evidence findings

Civil society capacity-building and civic engagement initiatives increased public security spending and strengthened administrative control but had only moderate effects on physical security, prioritizing governance and state capacity over direct improvements in community safety.

The review evidence

Community mobilization and economic empowerment interventions reduced some violence risks but showed inconsistent effects on physical security, with stigma, retaliation, and structural barriers limiting long-term impact.

The impact evaluation evidence

Cheng (2021) The Chinese government's poverty alleviation campaign in Xinjiang aimed to mitigate economic disparity and strengthen state capacity in this ethnically diverse and conflict-prone region. Transfers under the "8-7 National Plan" focused on infrastructure development, such as roads and water systems, to bolster public administration and security. A panel dataset (1994–2000) combined fiscal, economic, and demographic data. The study used covariate balancing propensity scores (CBPS) to estimate the causal effects of poverty alleviation transfers on government spending and socio-economic outcomes. County-level data for all counties in Xinjiang, excluding those under the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps. Poverty-relief transfers increased per capita public security spending significantly, with fiscal assistance and work-for-relief grants accounting for 10–15% of growth. Fiscal assistance positively impacted per capita administrative spending. This evidence highlights a shift toward capacity-building expenditures over immediate welfare improvement. The study is a high and medium confidence quantitative study.

Confidence assessment

We have low confidence in the cell due to the limited number of studies in the cell.

Other outcomes in the study/cell

- Violence and atrocity prevention/Nature and scale of violence or atrocities
- Human security/Economic security

Link to review summaries

Spangaro Jo (2013)

Spangaro Jo (2021)