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A Policy Analysis of Revenge Murder Prevention

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A POLICY ANALYSIS OF REVENGE MURDER PREVENTION

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ABSTRACT

Revenge murder challenges criminal justice policy because it is often driven by grief, humiliation, group loyalty, perceived moral obligation and distrust of institutions rather than rational calculations of legal costs. Governments respond with harsher sentences, expanded police powers, and severe punishment. Although lawful punishment remains necessary for accountability, public protection and affirmation of legal norms, this article argues that severity-centred deterrence is an inadequate primary strategy. Using the criteria of effectiveness, legitimacy, equity, feasibility and sustainability, it assesses punitive deterrence and alternative approaches. Deterrence research suggests that the perceived certainty of detection is generally more influential than sentence severity. Punitive strategies may also marginalise victims, leave collective grievances unresolved, and overlook the emotional, relational and cultural forces sustaining retaliation. The article therefore proposes an integrated prevention framework combining rapid protection, credible investigation, proportionate prosecution, procedural justice, restorative accountability, trauma-informed support, community participation and regulated engagement with customary institutions. Restorative processes are presented not as substitutes for homicide prosecution, but as complementary mechanisms that enable victims to be heard, offenders to confront the consequences of harm and communities to establish enforceable commitments to non-retaliation. Sustainable prevention requires justice that is credible, participatory, accessible, legitimate, and relationship-repairing.

Keywords: *revenge murder, punitive deterrence, restorative justice, procedural justice, retaliatory violence, criminal justice policy, violence prevention*

1. INTRODUCTION

Revenge murder may be understood as an intentional killing committed in retaliation for a previous killing, injury, humiliation or other perceived wrongdoing. Unlike violence motivated primarily by material gain, revenge murder is frequently justified by its perpetrators as a response to an unresolved moral debt. The retaliatory act may be regarded as necessary to restore family honour, defend collective dignity, demonstrate strength or fulfil an obligation owed to a deceased relative. The killing therefore becomes more than an individual offence: it may be embedded in relationships among families, clans, communities or identity groups.

The theoretical foundation from which this article develops contrasts classical deterrence theory, with its emphasis on formal sanctions, with restorative justice, which concentrates on dialogue, accountability, reparation and community-based resolution. It also recognises that neither framework, considered in isolation, fully explains the complex causes of crime and conflict. This policy analysis deepens that argument by focusing specifically on the limitations of punitive deterrence as a response to revenge murder.

The conventional policy response to retaliatory killing is often straightforward: criminalise the conduct, arrest the perpetrator, prosecute the case and impose a sufficiently severe punishment to discourage both the offender and others from committing similar acts. This approach reflects the classical assumption that potential offenders compare the anticipated benefits of crime with the probable costs of punishment. When the expected cost is sufficiently high, rational individuals should refrain from offending.

This logic has an important place in criminal justice. A state that does not investigate murder, protect threatened families or hold perpetrators accountable abandons victims and creates conditions in which private vengeance can flourish. However, the existence of a legitimate punitive function does not establish that increased punishment severity is an effective prevention policy. Deterrence research consistently distinguishes between the certainty of apprehension and the severity of the eventual sentence. The probability of being caught generally has a stronger preventive influence than the prospect of an exceptionally harsh penalty, while increasingly lengthy imprisonment often produces limited additional deterrent benefit.[1]

Revenge murder further complicates deterrence because the act may not be preceded by a calm calculation of legal consequences. Retaliation can emerge from anger, traumatic grief, social pressure, fear of appearing weak or a belief that state institutions have failed to deliver justice. In these circumstances, a severe sentence may punish the person who commits the retaliatory killing without changing the environment that produced it. Another family member may inherit the grievance, the victim's relatives may regard the conviction as further evidence of institutional bias, and the original dispute may remain unresolved.

The central argument of this article is therefore not that punishment should be abolished. Rather, punitive deterrence becomes ineffective when punishment severity is treated as the principal mechanism for preventing revenge murder. A more credible policy must combine the lawful authority of the state with processes that address victim needs, institutional legitimacy, trauma, collective responsibility, social relationships and community-based mechanisms of restraint.

1 *National Institute of Justice, "Five Things about Deterrence" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016), https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/five-things-about-deterrence.*

2. POLICY PROBLEM AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

2.1 REVENGE MURDER AS A POLICY PROBLEM

Revenge murder has at least five characteristics that distinguish it from offences that may be addressed primarily through punishment of an individual offender. These characteristics demonstrate that revenge murder is not merely a discrete criminal act but part of a wider social process through which grievances, obligations, and violent responsibility are transmitted between individuals and groups. A policy response focused exclusively on arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment may therefore punish a particular perpetrator without addressing the conditions that produced the retaliatory act or preventing further violence.

First, revenge murder is retrospective[2]. The perpetrator presents the killing as a response to an earlier injury, death, humiliation or injustice rather than as an unrelated initiation of violence. Retaliation is commonly justified through reference to a previous offence that the perpetrator believes has not been adequately acknowledged, compensated or punished. This backwards-looking orientation gives revenge murder a claimed moral rationale. The offender may view the act not as ordinary criminal violence, but as the correction of an unresolved wrong. Even where this justification has no legal validity, it can remain socially and psychologically powerful, particularly when formal justice institutions are perceived as ineffective, inaccessible, corrupt, or biased.

Second, revenge murder is relational[3]. It develops within an ongoing relationship between the person, family or group that suffered the original harm and those held responsible for it. The act is therefore connected to a history of interaction, memory, competition, mistrust, or previous violence. Unlike offences involving strangers with no continuing social connection, revenge murder often occurs among people who live in neighbouring communities, share resources, maintain kinship links or participate in the same political and economic environment. Because the parties remain socially connected, the effects of the killing continue beyond the immediate incident. Fear, suspicion, avoidance and hostility may shape future relations and create conditions in which minor disputes are interpreted through the memory of earlier violence.

Third, revenge murder may be collective in both its attribution of responsibility and its consequences[4]. Blame is not always limited to the individual who committed the original offence. Responsibility may be extended to relatives, associates, clan members, ethnic groups, political supporters, or entire communities. A person may consequently be targeted not because of personal involvement in the initial harm, but because of an assumed connection to the offender. This transfer of responsibility undermines the criminal law principle of individual culpability and places innocent people at risk. It also broadens the conflict by transforming a dispute between particular individuals into a confrontation between families or communities.

Fourth, revenge murder may carry a degree of social approval or collective encouragement. Family members, peers or community actors may pressure an individual to retaliate, finance the act, identify a target, provide protection or celebrate the killing afterwards. In some settings, failure to avenge a relative may be interpreted as cowardice, disloyalty, weakness or acceptance of humiliation. Such expectations can be especially powerful where honour, family reputation and collective identity are closely connected. The individual perpetrator may therefore act within a social environment that rewards retaliation and condemns restraint. Punishment directed only at the person who carries out the killing may overlook the wider network of expectations and support that made the offence possible.

2 *Here, "retrospective" means that the act is justified by reference to an earlier perceived wrong.*
3 *"Relational" indicates that the violence develops within continuing ties among individuals, families, or groups.*
4 *Collective attribution extends blame beyond the individual offender to relatives, associates, or a wider community.*

Fifth, revenge murder is reproductive. Each retaliatory killing creates new victims, new grievances and new claims to vengeance. The family of the person killed in retaliation may reject the original justification and interpret the act as a fresh and unjustified murder. They may then feel morally or socially obligated to respond. In this way, revenge does not resolve the original injury but reproduces it in another family or community. The distinction between victim and offender becomes increasingly blurred as each side understands its own violence as defensive or corrective and the violence of the other side as criminal aggression. Over time, the original cause of the dispute may become less important than the accumulated history of loss, humiliation and retaliation.

These characteristics have an important implication for public policy. Securing the conviction of an individual offender remains necessary for accountability, the protection of the public and the affirmation of legal norms. However, conviction alone may not end the grievance, protect threatened relatives, challenge collective blame, or prevent the next retaliatory act. In some cases, the prosecution of one offender may even intensify perceptions of unequal justice if related offences by the opposing group remain uninvestigated or unpunished.

The policy objective must consequently extend beyond the successful prosecution of an individual case. The broader goal should be to prevent the transfer of violent responsibility across individuals, families, communities and generations. This requires measures that interrupt immediate threats, provide credible and impartial investigation, protect potential targets, acknowledge the needs and suffering of victims and address the collective narratives that legitimise retaliation. It also requires justice institutions to communicate clearly that responsibility is individual rather than hereditary or communal.

An effective response to revenge murder must therefore combine criminal accountability with preventive, relational and community-based interventions. These may include early warning mechanisms, victim and witness protection, trauma-informed support, mediation of related disputes, public communication against collective blame and carefully regulated engagement with legitimate customary or community authorities. The central policy challenge is not only to punish a completed killing, but also to prevent one act of revenge from becoming the justification for another.

2.2 METHOD AND EVALUATIVE CRITERIA

This article adopts a conceptual policy-analysis approach rather than an empirical research design or systematic literature review. It draws on scholarship on deterrence, procedural justice, restorative justice and violence prevention to assess whether punitive deterrence provides an adequate policy response to revenge murder. The analysis focuses not only on the capacity of punishment to hold individual offenders accountable, but also on its ability to prevent retaliation, address underlying grievances and interrupt continuing cycles of violence.

FIVE CRITERIA GUIDE THE ASSESSMENT:

Effectiveness: is the first criterion. It examines the extent to which the policy reduces retaliatory killings, protects people at risk and prevents recurrence.

Legitimacy: is the second criterion. It considers whether victims, offenders, families and affected communities perceive the justice process and the responsible institutions as fair, credible, trustworthy and authoritative.

Equity: is the third criterion. It assesses whether the policy protects victims and vulnerable groups while avoiding collective punishment, discriminatory treatment, and the transfer of responsibility to innocent relatives or community members.

Feasibility: is the fourth criterion. It asks whether the policy can be implemented effectively in contexts where courts, police services, victim-support mechanisms, and other public institutions may have limited capacity or geographical reach.

Sustainability: is the fifth criterion. It evaluates whether the intervention addresses the grievances, relationships and social pressures that sustain retaliatory violence, rather than merely suppressing the immediate threat without reducing the likelihood of future revenge.

These criteria, collectively, demonstrate why a policy may succeed in prosecuting and punishing an individual perpetrator while still failing as a broader strategy for preventing the next revenge murder.

3. THE LOGIC OF PUNITIVE DETERRENCE

Classical deterrence theory assumes that punishment prevents crime when sanctions are sufficiently certain, swift and proportionate. General deterrence is directed towards the wider population: punishing one offender communicates the consequences of similar conduct to others. Specific deterrence seeks to discourage the punished person from reoffending.

Punishment can also produce incapacitation. An imprisoned offender cannot easily attack the opposing family while securely confined. Incapacitation, however, should not be confused with deterrence. The first physically restricts an individual; the second influences future choices through the anticipated threat of punishment. The distinction matters because a policy may prevent one incarcerated person from retaliating while doing little to discourage relatives or community members who remain outside prison.[5]

5 *National Institute of Justice, "Five Things about Deterrence."*

Punitive policies usually become severity-centred when governments respond to persistent violence by creating mandatory minimum sentences, extending prison terms, reducing judicial discretion or calling for capital punishment. Such measures are politically attractive because they communicate condemnation and create the appearance of decisive action. They are also easier to announce than reforms requiring improved investigation, victim support, judicial accessibility, community engagement and long-term reconciliation.

The problem is not that severity has no relevance. Proportionate punishment affirms the value of the victim's life, restrains dangerous offenders and demonstrates that private violence cannot replace public law. The problem arises when policymakers assume that making an already severe punishment harsher will substantially change retaliatory behaviour.

Research reviews have generally found stronger associations between the certainty of punishment and reduced crime than between sentence severity and reduced crime. Evidence concerning severity is weaker, more conditional and frequently affected by methodological limitations.[6] The National Institute of Justice similarly concludes that the perceived likelihood of apprehension is a more powerful deterrent than draconian punishment and that longer prison sentences produce, at most, modest additional deterrent effects.[7]

This evidence undermines policies that increase penalties without improving the capacity to prevent attacks, investigate killings and deliver timely justice.

4. WHY PUNITIVE DETERRENCE IS INADEQUATE FOR REVENGE MURDER

4.1 THE RATIONAL-CHOICE ASSUMPTION IS INCOMPLETE

Punitive deterrence assumes that a potential offender gives sufficient consideration to arrest, conviction, and punishment before acting. Some planned revenge murders undoubtedly involve calculation. Perpetrators may select targets, acquire weapons, monitor movements and wait for an opportunity. Such planning creates a potential opening for deterrence.

Nevertheless, planning does not establish that punishment severity is the decisive consideration. A person may fully understand that murder carries a long prison sentence yet consider retaliation morally necessary. The anticipated social cost of failing to avenge a relative may be perceived as greater than the legal cost of imprisonment. A perpetrator may also believe that honour, loyalty, or spiritual obligation outweigh personal survival.

Strong emotional states further narrow the influence of rational calculation. Traumatic grief, fear, anger and humiliation can make immediate retaliation appear more meaningful than distant punishment. A policy that merely announces a harsher sentence therefore speaks to the legal consequences of revenge without addressing the moral and emotional reasons through which retaliation is justified.

6 D. S. Nagin, "Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century," ***Crime and Justice*** 42, no. 1 (2013): 199–263, https://doi.org/10.1086/670398.

7 National Institute of Justice, "Five Things about Deterrence."

4.2 SEVERITY CANNOT COMPENSATE FOR UNCERTAINTY

Punitive deterrence is especially weak where the probability of arrest is low. An extremely severe punishment has little preventive value when potential offenders believe that police cannot reach the area, witnesses will not cooperate, evidence will not be preserved or powerful actors can influence the proceedings.

Increasing sentence severity without increasing investigative certainty can even expose the weakness of the state. Each unsolved killing communicates that the formal prohibition exists mainly on paper. Communities may then conclude that they must protect themselves or pursue their own justice.

A revenge-murder policy should consequently prioritise rapid reporting, witness protection, evidence preservation, professional investigation and predictable case management. These measures increase the credibility of lawful accountability. They are likely to produce greater preventive value than repeatedly extending prison terms. The deterrent effect of punishment depends more on a believable connection between offending and lawful consequences than on the abstract harshness of the statutory penalty.[8]

4.3 PUNITIVE JUSTICE MAY LACK PROCEDURAL LEGITIMACY

People do not evaluate justice only by asking whether an offender was punished. They also examine how authorities treated them, whether they were allowed to speak, whether decisions were explained and whether the same rules were applied to all parties.

Procedural justice[9] research connects respectful, neutral and transparent decision-making with institutional legitimacy and voluntary compliance. Tyler places perceived fairness at the centre of the relationship between legal authority and public cooperation.[10] Evidence from post-conflict settings also suggests that procedural fairness and punishment perform distinct functions: punishment alone does not automatically produce willingness to comply with state authority.[11]

This has direct implications for revenge murder. A family that receives no information about an investigation, cannot understand court procedures, or believes that witnesses were ignored may regard even a lawful judgment as incomplete. Conversely, an accused person's family may interpret an opaque or discriminatory trial as political persecution. In both cases, the criminal process can become incorporated into the grievance rather than resolving it.

Severity cannot repair a legitimacy deficit. Indeed, severe punishment delivered through an institution regarded as biased can intensify resentment and produce new narratives of victimhood.

4.4 CONVENTIONAL PROSECUTION MARGINALISES THE VICTIM'S RELATIONAL NEEDS

A criminal trial is primarily organised around the state's allegation that an accused person violated the law. This is necessary for protecting due process and preventing private punishment. Nevertheless, it can reduce victims and their relatives to witnesses whose role is largely evidentiary.

8 National Institute of Justice, "Five Things about Deterrence."

9 Procedural justice concerns whether authorities act neutrally, respectfully, transparently and allow affected people a meaningful voice.

10 T. R. Tyler, ***Why People Obey the Law*** (Princeton University Press, 2006), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400828609.

11 R. Kitagawa, "Justice as Fairness or Retribution? Citizen Reactions to Domestic Trials of Wartime Violence," ***Journal of Peace Research*** 61, no. 4 (2024): 612–26, https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221148223.

Families affected by murder may seek answers that the trial is not designed to provide. They may want to know why the person was targeted, whether the offender accepts responsibility, what happened to the victim's remains or property, whether the offender's family condemns the act and what guarantees exist against another attack.

A conviction can establish legal guilt without acknowledging these needs. When anger, humiliation and unanswered questions remain, the family may regard the sentence as punishment for the offender but not justice for the victim. The retaliatory impulse is then left untouched.

Restorative justice responds[12] to this gap by defining crime as harm to people and relationships and by involving victims, offenders, families and affected community members in identifying harms, obligations and measures to prevent recurrence.[13] Its relevance to revenge murder lies not in excusing homicide but in creating a structured process through which the moral claim underlying retaliation can be redirected towards acknowledgement, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition.

4.5 INDIVIDUAL PUNISHMENT DOES NOT RESOLVE COLLECTIVE ATTRIBUTION

Criminal law is based on individual responsibility. A person should be punished for his or her own conduct rather than for the actions of relatives or community members. Revenge systems may operate according to a different logic. Responsibility can be extended to a family, lineage, clan, or political group.

Imprisoning the person who committed the first murder does not necessarily remove the opposing family's belief that the wider group benefited from, supported or concealed the crime. Similarly, relatives of the imprisoned offender may blame the victim's family for the conviction and seek retaliation against them.

Punitive policy is poorly equipped to address these collective narratives, because the court must properly limit itself to legally relevant evidence concerning the accused. A complementary community process is therefore necessary to separate individual criminal responsibility from collective identity, secure public commitments against retaliation and communicate that relatives who did not participate in the crime are not legitimate targets.

Where state legitimacy is weak or contested, collective extralegal punishment can become socially acceptable as an alternative form of local justice.[14] Revenge-murder prevention must therefore clarify legitimate authority while dismantling norms of collective liability.

4.6 EXCESSIVE PUNISHMENT CAN CREATE SECONDARY GRIEVANCES

Punishment that is perceived as disproportionate can transform an offender into a symbolic victim. The original harm may disappear from public discussion as attention shifts towards the harshness of the state's response. Families may then mobilise around the imprisoned person and reinterpret criminal accountability as group persecution.

Long imprisonment can also affect dependants who had no role in the offence. Loss of income, family separation, and social stigma may deepen intergroup inequality. These consequences do not establish that

12 *Restorative justice seeks to repair harm through voluntary participation, acknowledgement, reparation and safeguards against recurrence.*

13 *J. Braithwaite,* ***Crime, Shame and Reintegration*** *(Cambridge University Press, 1989); United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime,* ***Handbook on Restorative Justice Programmes****, 2nd ed. (United Nations, 2020).*

14 *D. K. Cohen and D. F. Jung,* ***Lynching and Local Justice: Legitimacy and Accountability in Weak States*** *(Cambridge University Press, 2022).*

imprisonment is unjustified, but they demonstrate why punishment should remain proportionate and accompanied by measures preventing innocent relatives from absorbing blame or deprivation.

Evidence on imprisonment does not support broad claims that increasingly severe confinement reliably produces strong specific deterrence. Reviews suggest that incarceration may have a null or mildly criminogenic effect[15] in comparison with non-custodial sanctions in some contexts, while exceptionally long sentences offer limited additional deterrence.[16] In revenge-murder cases, imprisonment may incapacitate the convicted individual but cannot be assumed to rehabilitate the wider social relationship.

5. THE CONTINUING ROLE OF CRIMINAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Critiquing punitive deterrence does not mean replacing criminal justice with informal settlement. Murder is a serious public wrong. The state has obligations to protect life, investigate suspicious deaths, prosecute cases supported by evidence, and impose proportionate sentences through an independent court.

Formal accountability performs several indispensable functions. These include protecting threatened individuals by removing an immediate perpetrator from the environment, rejecting the claim that revenge is a lawful or socially acceptable form of justice, establishing an authoritative factual record, and limiting the ability of powerful families to force vulnerable parties into settlements. It also protects accused persons from arbitrary collective punishment by requiring evidence, individual responsibility and due process.

The appropriate policy distinction is therefore not between punishment and impunity. It is between punishment-centred justice and integrated accountable justice.

Punishment-centred justice assumes that conviction and imprisonment substantially complete the state's response. Integrated accountable justice recognises prosecution as one component of a wider prevention strategy. It combines formal sanctions with victim participation, community protection, trauma support, restorative obligations, and long-term monitoring.

6. AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK FOR REVENGE-MURDER PREVENTION

6.1 PILLAR ONE: IMMEDIATE PROTECTION AND INTERRUPTION

The period following a killing is often the most dangerous stage in a revenge cycle. Authorities should conduct an immediate retaliation-risk assessment identifying threatened individuals, likely perpetrators, access to weapons, previous incidents and public statements encouraging revenge.

Protective action may include temporary security deployment, safe accommodation, confidential communication channels, weapon restrictions authorised by law and direct engagement with influential family or community leaders. These interventions should not wait until a second killing has occurred.

The objective is not generalised coercion. It is the targeted interruption of a foreseeable retaliatory act.

15 *A criminogenic effect is an unintended outcome that increases, rather than reduces, the likelihood of future offending.*
16 *D. S. Nagin, F. T. Cullen, and C. L. Jonson, "Imprisonment and Reoffending," **Crime and Justice** 38, no. 1 (2009): 115–200; National Institute of Justice, "Five Things about Deterrence."*

6.2 PILLAR TWO: CERTAIN, TIMELY AND PROPORTIONATE LEGAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The second pillar retains the most defensible aspect of deterrence: credible certainty. Police and prosecutors should prioritise revenge-related homicide cases, preserve evidence promptly, communicate progress to affected families and protect witnesses against intimidation.

Timeliness is important, but it must not compromise due process. Expedited proceedings should mean reducing avoidable administrative delays, not denying the accused adequate preparation, legal representation or the opportunity to challenge evidence.

Sentencing should remain proportionate to the offence and the offender's individual responsibility. The purpose is to demonstrate that lawful consequences are predictable and legitimate rather than spectacularly harsh.

6.3 PILLAR THREE: PROCEDURAL JUSTICE AND VICTIM PARTICIPATION

Justice institutions should assign trained liaison officers to affected families. Families should receive comprehensible explanations of investigative decisions, court stages, delays, bail conditions, sentencing and appeal procedures.

Where legally permissible, victims should be given meaningful opportunities to present the impact of the crime. Authorities should also explain the limits of the process, including why criminal responsibility cannot be imposed on an entire family or group.

Respectful treatment is not merely an ethical addition to criminal justice. It is a violence-prevention strategy. People who regard authorities as neutral, respectful, and transparent are more likely to cooperate and less likely to view private retaliation as their only effective remedy.

6.4 PILLAR FOUR: RESTORATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

Restorative justice should be available as a complement to prosecution when the necessary safeguards are satisfied. It may take place after guilt has been established, before sentencing where allowed by law, during imprisonment or as part of reintegration.

Possible participants include the offender, members of the victim's family, the offender's family, community representatives, religious or traditional leaders, and trained facilitators. Participation must be voluntary. No victim should be pressured to meet an offender, forgive the offence or accept compensation.

The restorative process should address acknowledgement of the harm, acceptance of responsibility, unanswered questions, a sincere apology where appropriate, restitution or compensation where appropriate, the treatment of the victim's dependants, the return of property or remains, commitments against further retaliation, the rejection of collective responsibility, reintegration conditions, and the monitoring of any agreement.

International guidance emphasises informed and voluntary participation, basic agreement on the relevant facts, reasonable outcomes and protection of the rights of all parties.[17]

The evidence base must be interpreted carefully. A Campbell systematic review covering violent and property offences found that face-to-face restorative conferences were associated with reduced subsequent offending,

17 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, ***Handbook on Restorative Justice Programmes***.

greater victim satisfaction, lower desire for revenge and fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms among participating victims. The effects were strongest when restorative conferencing supplemented rather than replaced conventional justice. However, these findings should not be treated as direct proof of effectiveness for every revenge-murder context; specific programmes require piloting and rigorous evaluation.[18]

6.5 PILLAR FIVE: REGULATED ENGAGEMENT WITH CUSTOMARY INSTITUTIONS

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, formal courts may be geographically distant, expensive, linguistically inaccessible or distrusted. Traditional, religious and customary institutions may therefore remain the first forum through which communities seek justice.

Completely excluding these actors can create parallel processes that the state cannot monitor. Uncritically transferring homicide cases to them can also expose victims, women, young people, and marginalised families to coercion or discriminatory outcomes.

Policy should instead establish regulated coordination. Customary actors can support early warning, mediation of associated disputes, public condemnation of revenge, community witnessing, and implementation of lawful restorative agreements. Criminal guilt and punishment for murder should remain subject to state law and judicial safeguards.

The World Bank recommends developing justice institutions in harmony with existing dispute-resolution mechanisms, while addressing risks such as discrimination and human-rights abuses.[19] It also emphasises that fragile justice systems require context-sensitive reforms, expanded rural access and attention to the needs of women and marginalised groups.

6.6 PILLAR SIX: TRAUMA-INFORMED FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Unresolved trauma can sustain anger, intrusive memories, fear and a desire to make the offender experience comparable suffering. Families should therefore have access to psychological first aid, grief counselling, peer support, livelihood assistance and culturally appropriate healing processes.

Support should not be conditioned on forgiveness. Its purpose is to help affected people regain safety, dignity and agency without committing another act of violence.

Trauma services should also be available to children and young people exposed to retaliatory narratives. Prevention programmes can help them understand that loyalty to the deceased does not require killing another person.

6.7 PILLAR SEVEN: SOCIAL AND STRUCTURAL PREVENTION

Revenge murder is more likely to persist where communities experience weak institutions, insecurity, youth exclusion, unemployment and limited access to justice. Violence prevention must therefore extend beyond the criminal justice sector.

18 H. Strang, L. W. Sherman, E. Mayo-Wilson, D. Woods, and B. Ariel, "Restorative Justice Conferencing Using Face-to-Face Meetings of Offenders and Victims: Effects on Offender Recidivism and Victim Satisfaction," ***Campbell Systematic Reviews*** 9, no. 1 (2013), https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2013.12.

19 World Bank, ***Increasing Access to Justice in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings*** (World Bank, 2023).

The World Development Report on conflict and security links repeated violence with institutional weakness and emphasises citizen security, justice, employment, community-based prevention and legitimate institutions as interconnected requirements for breaking cycles of violence.[20]

Relevant measures may include community early-warning networks, youth employment, school-based peace education, regulation of weapons, responsible media reporting and community dialogues challenging the social prestige associated with revenge.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 REPLACE SEVERITY-LED POLICY WITH CERTAINTY-LED PREVENTION

Governments should review laws and criminal justice strategies that rely primarily on increased sentence severity as a means of preventing revenge murder. Greater emphasis should instead be placed on the certainty, timeliness and credibility of state intervention. Resources should be directed towards accessible reporting systems, professional criminal investigation, witness protection, effective case management and the rapid protection of individuals and families facing credible threats of retaliation. A justice system that responds promptly and reliably is more likely to discourage private vengeance than one that imposes severe punishment only after further violence has occurred.

7.2 ESTABLISH SPECIALISED REVENGE-VIOLENCE RESPONSE PROTOCOLS

Police, prosecutors, courts, local authorities, and relevant social-service providers should adopt a coordinated response protocol for killings that present a foreseeable risk of retaliation. The protocol should be activated immediately following an incident and should clearly assign responsibility for threat assessment, emergency protection, investigation, public communication, family engagement, evidence preservation, and referral to psychosocial or other support services. A coordinated approach can reduce institutional delays, close protection gaps and prevent fragmented responses that allow retaliatory threats to escalate.

7.3 CREATE VICTIM AND FAMILY LIAISON SERVICES

Every revenge-related homicide case should be assigned a designated victim and family liaison officer. The officer should provide regular, accurate and accessible information about the investigation, prosecution, protection measures and available support services. Consistent communication can reduce rumours, misinformation, fear and suspicion while demonstrating that the justice system recognises the suffering and security concerns of affected families. It can also prevent administrative silence from being interpreted as indifference, abandonment or evidence that formal institutions are incapable of delivering justice.

7.4 INTEGRATE RESTORATIVE OPTIONS INTO SERIOUS-CRIME PROCEDURES

Legislation, prosecutorial guidelines or judicial procedures should permit carefully regulated restorative processes to operate alongside formal criminal prosecution in appropriate cases. Participation should depend on informed and voluntary consent, adequate safety guarantees, acknowledgement of responsibility,

20 World Bank, ***World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development*** (World Bank, 2011).

professional facilitation and the absence of intimidation, coercion, or unequal bargaining power.

Restorative agreements must not privately extinguish criminal responsibility for murder. Where permitted by law, courts may consider genuine expressions of responsibility, reparation, cooperation, or efforts to prevent further violence. However, restorative settlements must not become mechanisms through which influential offenders evade accountability or financially powerful families purchase impunity. Their purpose should be to complement legal accountability by addressing harm, victim needs, damaged relationships, and the risk of renewed retaliation.

7.5 ESTABLISH SAFEGUARDS FOR CUSTOMARY AND RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION

Customary and religious leaders can play an important role in discouraging retaliation, facilitating communication, and reinforcing community commitments to non-violence. Their participation should, however, be governed by clear legal and procedural safeguards. Leaders involved in revenge-violence prevention should receive training in constitutional rights, gender equality, child protection, voluntary participation, evidence preservation, confidentiality and referral procedures.

Any agreement affecting legal rights, compensation, protection, property or personal liberty should be documented, accessible to the parties and subject to review by competent authorities. Customary participation should complement rather than replace formal justice and should never legitimise collective punishment, forced settlement, discrimination or the exclusion of victims from criminal proceedings.

7.6 ADDRESS INCITEMENT AND PREPARATION CONSISTENTLY WITH HUMAN RIGHTS

The law should provide proportionate responses to credible threats, solicitation, conspiracy, preparation, and public incitement to retaliatory violence. Early intervention may prevent a threatened act from developing into a completed killing. Enforcement must nevertheless remain evidence-based, lawful, and subject to judicial oversight.

Authorities should distinguish clearly between conduct that creates a genuine risk of violence and expressions of grief, anger, criticism, mourning or peaceful cultural identity. Preventive legislation should not be used to criminalise emotional distress, suppress legitimate speech or target particular families or communities without individualised evidence of wrongdoing.

7.7 PROTECT FAMILIES FROM COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT

Public authorities, customary leaders, religious figures and community representatives should consistently affirm that criminal responsibility for murder is individual. Relatives, associates and community members should not be treated as offenders merely because of their relationship to the accused or convicted person.

Families of alleged offenders must be protected from retaliatory attacks, forced displacement, property destruction, denial of services, exclusion from public life or other forms of collective punishment. Protection measures should also extend to individuals who publicly reject retaliation or cooperate with law-enforcement authorities, as they may face pressure or threats from within their own families or communities. Reinforcing individual responsibility is essential to preventing the expansion of a dispute across kinship and communal lines.

7.8 BUILD A REVENGE-VIOLENCE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Authorities should establish a specialised information system capable of identifying relationships between successive incidents rather than treating each killing as an isolated offence. Data collection should include the alleged motive, family or community connections, prior threats, previous incidents, protection requests, mediation efforts, weapons used, displacement patterns, investigation status, judicial outcomes and evidence of recurrence.

The system should support early warning, risk assessment, resource allocation and coordinated intervention across institutions. Appropriate safeguards must protect personal data, confidentiality, due process and the security of victims and witnesses. Information should not be used to label entire families or communities as inherently violent. Its purpose should be to identify patterns, improve prevention, evaluate policy effectiveness and interrupt cycles of retaliation before additional lives are lost.

8. IMPLEMENTATION RISKS AND SAFEGUARDS

An integrated framework is not without risks and must therefore be accompanied by strong procedural and human-rights safeguards.

Restorative justice may become coercive where victims are economically, socially or politically dependent on the offender, the offender's family or influential community actors. Facilitators must assess power imbalances carefully, ensure that participation is genuinely voluntary and suspend or terminate any process, where intimidation, manipulation or unequal bargaining power compromises safety or consent.

Compensation may also be misunderstood as placing a monetary value on human life or allowing offenders to purchase forgiveness. Reparation should therefore be framed as an acknowledgement of responsibility and a practical response to the harm suffered, rather than as a substitute for criminal accountability or the price of reconciliation.

Community participation carries its own risks. Customary practices and local decision-making structures may reproduce discrimination or exclude less powerful voices. Women, young people, displaced persons, persons with disabilities and minority groups must therefore participate meaningfully in the design, implementation and evaluation of prevention measures, rather than being included only symbolically.

Security interventions may likewise become forms of collective punishment if they are directed at entire families or communities without individualised evidence. Police

deployment, searches, weapon-control measures and restrictions on movement must be lawful, necessary, proportionate, and subject to independent oversight.

Finally, restorative dialogue may be initiated too early. Families experiencing acute grief, trauma, or fear should not be pressured into meetings for the administrative convenience of authorities or community leaders. Adequate preparation, trauma-informed support, informed consent and the continuing right to withdraw are essential to ensuring that restorative processes do not cause further harm.

9. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Governments should evaluate revenge-murder prevention through outcomes broader than the number of convictions secured.

Relevant indicators should include the number of retaliation threats identified and interrupted; the interval between an initial killing and protective intervention; homicide investigation and case-resolution rates; victim-family satisfaction with communication and treatment; perceptions of police and court impartiality; compliance with restorative agreements; recurrence of violence between the same families or groups; the participation of women and marginalised groups; the number of people displaced because of revenge threats; the safety of witnesses and restorative participants; and changes in community attitudes towards retaliation.

Programmes should distinguish between outputs and outcomes. Conducting a dialogue is an output. Preventing another killing, increasing trust and achieving sustained compliance are outcomes.

Because evidence specifically examining restorative interventions for revenge murder remains limited, pilot programmes should use comparison groups or carefully designed before-and-after assessments where feasible. Independent evaluation is necessary to determine which combination of legal, restorative and social measures works in particular cultural and institutional settings.

10. DISCUSSION

The critique developed in this article reveals a broader weakness in contemporary criminal justice policy. Punishment is often expected to perform functions that it cannot accomplish on its own.

A prison sentence can condemn an offence, incapacitate an offender and affirm the authority of law. It cannot automatically heal grief, answer victims' questions, correct perceptions of institutional bias, dissolve collective blame or reconcile families whose identities have become organised around reciprocal violence.

Punitive deterrence also tends to treat the prospective offender as the principal audience of policy. Revenge-murder prevention requires several audiences: the person considering retaliation, the family encouraging it, the family fearing attack, the community interpreting the original harm and the institutions, whose conduct will determine whether lawful justice is trusted.

For these reasons, policy should shift from the question, "How severely should revenge murder be punished?" to a wider set of questions:

How can the next attack be interrupted? How can the original killing be investigated credibly? How can victims participate without controlling the criminal process? How can responsibility be individualised? How can the emotional and social obligation to retaliate be transformed into an obligation to repair harm and prevent recurrence?

This shift does not weaken criminal accountability. It makes accountability more preventive. Punishment remains present but is placed within a broader architecture of legitimacy, protection, restoration, and social restraint.

11. CONCLUSION

Punitive deterrence offers only a partial response to revenge murder. Its central limitation is not that punishment lacks value, but that a policy focused mainly on severity often misunderstands the human and social forces behind retaliatory violence. Revenge murder is rarely driven by legal calculation alone. It frequently grows out of grief, traumatic loss, humiliation, collective identity, social pressure and a belief that formal institutions have failed to deliver justice.

In such circumstances, increasing an already severe sentence may have little influence on a person who believes that retaliation is a moral duty, an act of loyalty or the only available means of restoring dignity. Punishment may hold an individual offender accountable, but it does not automatically heal the bereaved, remove the pressure to avenge a relative, rebuild trust in public institutions or end hostility between affected families and communities. The offender may be imprisoned while the grievance, fear and expectation of counter-retaliation remain alive.

A more effective response must therefore combine firm, certain and proportionate legal accountability with measures that address the wider environment in which revenge develops. These measures should

include rapid protection for threatened individuals and families, credible and impartial investigation, procedural fairness, meaningful victim participation, trauma-informed support, restorative obligations and community-based guarantees against further violence. Such an approach recognises that justice must do more than punish wrongdoing after lives have already been lost. It must also reduce fear, restore confidence, acknowledge suffering and create realistic pathways away from retaliation.

Customary institutions may contribute to this process where they possess genuine social legitimacy and the capacity to influence behaviour. Their involvement can help communities acknowledge harm, negotiate compensation, challenge collective responsibility and establish public commitments to non-retaliation. However, customary engagement must never legitimise coercion, discrimination, collective punishment or the denial of individual rights. It should operate within clear constitutional and human-rights safeguards and be based on voluntary participation.

The appropriate alternative to severity-centred punitive deterrence is therefore neither leniency nor impunity. It is an integrated justice policy that protects life, enforces individual responsibility, supports victims, restores institutional legitimacy and repairs the relationships through which revenge is transmitted. Such a policy treats revenge murder not only as a completed criminal offence, but also as a warning of possible future violence.

Ultimately, the success of justice policy should not be measured solely by the length of the sentence imposed after the latest retaliatory killing. Its most meaningful test is whether grieving families feel heard, threatened communities feel protected, offenders are held fairly accountable, and the cycle of violence is prevented from claiming another life. Justice achieves its highest purpose not merely when it punishes the last killing, but when it prevents the next one.

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