GMAP
Institute for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention

the auschwitz institute for the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities

Reconceptualizing Atrocity Prevention

Kerry Whigham and Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira

Executive Summary

As atrocity prevention has grown as a field of study and practice, so too has the understanding of prevention, like atrocities themselves, as a process that should begin long before atrocities occur and continue long after acts of physical destruction come to an end. For the last ten years, this broad understanding of prevention has been most clearly articulated by a model conceptualized by social psychologist James Waller, who describes prevention as needing to occur upstream, midstream, and downstream of atrocity violence. While this model has been crucial in expanding the time horizon of prevention practice, it also has some weaknesses, in that it reinforces a notion that atrocity violence is unidirectional and that certain tools only work at certain moments of this process. This policy brief proposes a new framework that we argue is more descriptive of the complex and nuanced nature of atrocity processes. Rather than focusing on prevention as occurring at specific moments of those processes, it emphasizes the intent of the preventive approaches that stakeholders can enact, describing those approaches as some combination of proactive, responsive, and/or redressive. This new model provides jargon-free language that can be clearly understood even by those not working in the field of prevention. It also empowers policymakers to understand that their policies can contribute to prevention in multiple ways, no matter the stage in the atrocity process.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Holocaust and the other crimes of the Nazi regime, the world came together to establish an international system of human rights protections in the hopes of curtailing such violence from ever recurring. Nevertheless, this system failed to prevent large-scale human rights abuses again and again, from the political repression of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc to racialized segregation in South Africa and the American South to atrocities in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge and dictatorships and disappearances in Latin America. The double shock of genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and the atrocities that took place under the guise of war in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995 finally pushed the international system to reckon with its failures. With the unanimous adoption of the Responsibility to Protect as an international norm and obligation in 2005, it seemed, for a moment at least, that the tide was finally turning toward a world that truly prevents such crimes from occurring.

Sadly, however, we have not yet succeeded at fulfilling this internationally agreed-upon mandate to protect people from large-scale harm. Atrocity crimes—including genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes—have resulted in the deaths of millions of individuals since the start of the 21st century. These atrocities have also involved sexualized violence, psychological harms, and displacement, among many other forms of violence, and they are continuing to occur with alarming frequency.

In response to an ever-increasing atrocity risk environment, policymakers, practitioners, and scholars have set their sights on strengthening atrocity prevention efforts. This brief proposes a conceptual model for guiding such efforts. Building upon foundational work that recognizes atrocity prevention as a process, we suggest that atrocity prevention approaches can broadly be classified into three non-mutually exclusive categories: proactive, responsive, and redressive. In what follows, we first address existing theoretical frameworks regarding atrocity prevention, including why we maintain these frameworks should be updated. We then detail the three categories of prevention approaches we propose and provide examples of each type of prevention effort.

Existing Atrocity Prevention Model

For decades, a tension has existed among practitioners, scholars, and policymakers regarding what exactly atrocity prevention entails. For some, atrocity prevention efforts are those undertaken prior to atrocities unfolding. In this viewpoint, prevention comprises actions taken to stop atrocities from occurring. For instance, in *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*, political scientist Scott Straus argues, "Prevention refers to actions that decrease the likelihood of atrocities before those atrocities occur. The objective is to take action that eliminates or reduces the intensity of the causes of genocide and other forms of mass atrocity."[1]

For others, particularly those working in government, atrocity prevention is often approached as synonymous with intervention in the midst of ongoing crises. This limited scope of prevention

[1] Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington, DC: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016), 112.

is frequently the result of the strained resources and capacity of governmental offices tasked with an atrocity prevention portfolio. When a ministry only has a certain amount of time and funding to dedicate to atrocity prevention work, it frequently makes the decision to dedicate those resources to the cases that are most clearly experiencing atrocities, rather than those that exhibit risk for such violence, even though such risk has yet to fully manifest.

A decade ago, social psychologist James Waller provided an important corrective to these dominant notions of prevention by framing atrocity prevention as a multi-stage process that extends beyond reactive measures when atrocities are already underway. Specifically, in *Confronting Evil: Engaging Our Responsibility to Prevent Genocide*, Waller argues that atrocity prevention entails 1) upstream prevention (e.g., predicting and preventing atrocity before it occurs), 2) midstream prevention (e.g., intervening once atrocity is underway), and 3) downstream prevention (e.g., responding and rebuilding in the aftermath).[2] This foundational framework has revolutionized conceptions of atrocity prevention by underscoring the breadth of prevention efforts, illustrating that interventions that precede and succeed atrocities can also prevent the loss of life and reduce the risk of continued or future atrocity.

Waller ties the notion of upstream, midstream, and downstream prevention to an analogy of saving bodies from a river. He suggests that if someone notices bodies floating down a stream, they might first try to save individuals one by one by pulling them out of the river (i.e., midstream prevention), until they realize that the bodies are continuing to drift down the river. At that point, they have an option to go upstream to see how people are ending up in the river in the first place (i.e., upstream prevention). When they do so, they might notice a hole in the bridge that they could repair. Finally, they could also engage in downstream prevention, which would involve the resuscitation of victims who were swept away by the river.

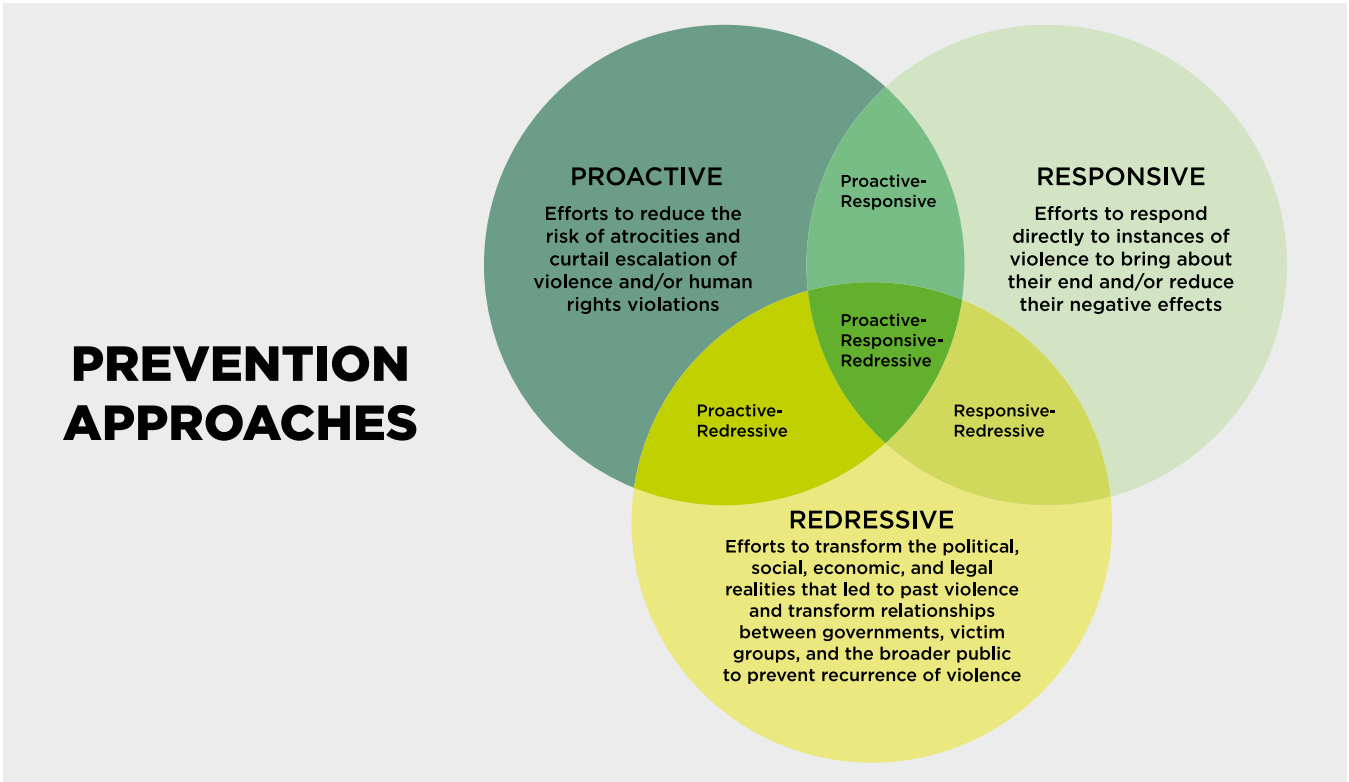
While useful, the analogy of a stream suggests that atrocities and our efforts to prevent them unfold in a linear fashion, which is not always the case. We argue that, often, atrocities more closely approximate a cycle, within which prior episodes of identity-based violence lay the groundwork for future violence. This conception is bolstered by the fact that prior atrocity is one of the strongest risk factors of future atrocity.[3] In other instances, however, such as in cases of settler colonial genocide, the stream model breaks down completely, as the violence is upstream, midstream, and

[2] James Waller, Confronting Evil: Engaging Our Responsibility to Prevent Genocide (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

downstream all at once. Moreover, viewing prevention as occurring at one of three stages implies that each tool of the prevention toolkit is designed to be used in one specific stage. In reality, atrocity prevention tools should not be constrained to certain time periods, and various tools can be simultaneously implemented. Atrocities are not linear, and so our efforts to respond to and prevent them should not follow a linear logic. Rather, preventive efforts can and should be flexible, adaptive, and creative in order to respond to the very specific realities of any given atrocity process, as appropriate.

Additionally, our work with policymakers has illustrated that the terms upstream, midstream, and downstream prevention are often viewed as jargon. People who are unfamiliar with atrocity prevention—such as politicians or even journalists—do not understand their meaning without further explanation. The three terms are also idiomatic in the English language, which makes them difficult to translate into other languages. More simplified terms can accordingly help bridge the divide between academic knowledge regarding atrocity prevention and more applied pursuits.

As such, here, we propose that atrocity prevention approaches can be broadly classified as proactive approaches, responsive approaches, and/or redressive approaches. Framing these interventions as *approaches* to prevention rather than *stages of* prevention helps to focus the prevention community on the intent of the prevention measure rather than the stage in the atrocity process in which it is employed. Furthermore, it opens the door for prevention tools that engage multiple approaches simultaneously, recognizing that intervention in the midst of crisis can at once pave the way for societal rebuilding and resilience after the violence ends and address the underlying risks that led to violence in the first place.



[3] Barbara Harff, "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955," The American Political Science Review 97, no. 1 (2003): 57–73; Charles Anderton and Jurgen Brauer, eds., Economic Aspects of Genocides, Other Mass Atrocities, and Their Prevention (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Benjamin E. Goldsmith and Charles Butcher, "Genocide Forecasting: Past Accuracy and New Forecasts to 2020," Journal of Genocide Research 20, no. 1 (2017): 90–107.

Proactive Approaches

Proactive approaches entail efforts to reduce the risk of atrocities and curtail escalation of violence and/or human rights violations. This approach can involve, for instance, attempts at predicting violence prior to its onset in an effort to alert policymakers to imminent risk, then taking actions to curtail that risk through policy measures. Indeed, a robust body of research has identified the risk factors of atrocities. Broadly, these pertain to prior atrocity and human rights abuses, political upheaval, threats to those in power, social factors and fragmentation, governance, economic and environmental conditions, and international factors. Using data tied to each of these types of risk factors, researchers can predict—typically with high levels of certainty—where atrocities are most likely to occur worldwide.[4] Some researchers have also examined triggers and other factors that escalate violence, often emphasizing changes in power dynamics.

Proactive atrocity prevention approaches, then, aim to reduce the risk of atrocity. This can involve forecasting efforts, but it can also involve efforts to mitigate risk before atrocities unfold. In this way, any policy response that seeks to reduce any of the risk factors of atrocity is an example of proactive prevention. For instance, given that exclusionary ideologies are risk factors of genocide, efforts to combat such ideologies with inclusive ideologies may help reduce risk. Proactive prevention approaches can also take place in the midst of atrocities or after atrocity violence has ended through the implementation of policies that engage with the root causes of conflict or marginalization. In these cases, the policies are proactive in the sense that they are working to curtail the recurrence of atrocity violence in the future.

Given that no society in the world is completely without risk for atrocities, proactive prevention approaches can be guided by a sincere evaluation of the groups of people within a society who are most marginalized, followed by actions taken to decrease that marginalization. And such an evaluation can occur at any stage of an atrocity process. Looking at it this way, policies can be proactively preventive even when they are not conceived or perceived as atrocity prevention. Taking actions to make a society more equitable, more democratic, and more likely to respect and protect the rights of all people within its borders is doing the work of proactive prevention. Because much research has also found that democratic societies are comparatively less likely to experience atrocities, any measure that strengthens democratic institutions and the rule of law is proactively preventive, as well.

[4] Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira, Trey Billing, and Eric W. Schoon, "Leveraging a Multi-Method Approach to Improve Mass Atrocity Forecasting," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 18, no. 1 (2024): 54–83.

Responsive Approaches

Responsive approaches involve efforts to respond directly to an instance or ongoing instances of violence to bring about their end and/or reduce their negative effects. This can involve trying to slow, stop, or limit the escalation of atrocity violence, including any efforts to mitigate harm. Responsive approaches are varied and can involve tools that are diplomatic, economic, investigatory/documentary, legal, or military. Some tools take a more coercive stance (e.g., economic sanctions), while others take a more cooperative one (e.g., trade incentives), and still others integrate cooperative and coercive elements (e.g., providing assistance to non-state groups or engaging with victim communities).

Though summarizing the entire range of responsive approaches is outside of the purview of this brief, a few examples are illustrative. For instance, naming and shaming in news media or nongovernmental organization reports has been tied to a reduction in mass killings.[5] Economic interventions, such as targeted sanctions, may also work to reduce the level of violence during atrocities, though research on economic sanctions is still inconclusive.[6] Peacekeeping force presence is one of many other examples of responsive prevention.

To date, many of the tools for intervening in ongoing crises, or "midstream prevention," focus on the tools of foreign policy, as there is an understandable presumption that situations that have reached the level of a mass atrocity will not exhibit enough will at the domestic level to prevent from within. While this may be true in many cases, it also may obscure options from those looking to respond to ongoing crises domestically. Given both that governments are not monolithic and that there may be sectors within each society outside of the government willing to engage on prevention (e.g. the corporate sector, religious and traditional leaders, civil society organizations, etc.), focusing on midstream prevention as purely an affair of international outreach has prevented the development of a more holistic array of tools to respond to atrocity violence. Refocusing our attention on a responsive approach to prevention may help us move beyond a tool-centric model of response—one that asks whether the hammer or the wrench is the right tool for the moment—to a context-centric model—one that looks at the specific problem that needs to be fixed and the environment in which that problem exists to develop a complex of responsive actions, including the development of new tools that are specific to the task at hand.

Importantly, however, responsive approaches to prevention do not need to wait until atrocity crimes are already occurring. Because atrocities are processes, rather than events, they do not happen overnight. Rather, large-scale human rights violations are always preceded by smaller-scale human rights violations.[7] Responsive approaches to prevention can and should respond to these earlier violations of human rights so that they do not escalate to the point of all-out atrocities.

[5] Matthew Krain, "J'accuse! Does Naming and Shaming Perpetrators Reduce the Severity of Genocides or Politicides?," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (September 2012): 574–89.
[6] Matthew Krain, "The Effect of Economic Sanctions on the Severity of Genocides or Politicides," *Journal of Genocide Research* 19, no. 1 (2017): 88–111; Whitney K. Taylor and Hollie Nyseth Brehm, "Sanctioning Genocide: To What Effect?," Sociological Perspectives 64, no. 6 (2021): 1081–1103.
[7] Sheri P. Rosenberg, "Genocide Is a Process, Not an Event," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 7, no. 1 (2012): 16–23.

Yet, a stream model does not encourage such thinking. According to political scientist Ernesto Verdeja, atrocity prevention "is typically divided into two general areas, structural and operational." Structural prevention "focuses on the long-term prevention of harms," and equates most clearly with Waller's upstream prevention. Operational prevention, on the other hand, "concerns situations where atrocities are occurring or likely to do so."[8] In other words, operational prevention is midstream prevention. In fact, some policy documents explicitly equate structural with upstream prevention, and operational with midstream prevention.[9]

Oftentimes, scholars and practitioners draw upon these concepts for the sake of simplicity. This dichotomy, however, limits the scope of what actions can look like before atrocities unfold. Preventive actions that precede widespread atrocities may not only concern changes to the structures of a society. Rather, they can also include more reactive responses. For example, an outbreak of hate speech or a highly visible hate crime has implications for the prevention of identity-based violence, but the approach to applying a prevention lens to such an incident should not only be in addressing the structures of a society. Rather, it also requires a direct response to prevent that hate speech or hate crime from escalating into more pronounced violence. As a result, a comprehensive prevention approach would be both responsive and proactive, with elements of operational and structural prevention all at once.

Redressive Approaches

Finally, redressive approaches encapsulate efforts to transform the political, social, economic, and legal realities that led to past violence and transform relationships between governments, victim groups, and the broader public to prevent recurrence of violence. Again, research has consistently documented that prior atrocity is one of the strongest predictors of future atrocity. As such, paying attention to what happens long after an atrocity ends is a critical component of meaningful prevention strategies.

Many of these approaches fall within the broader purview of transitional justice. Transitional justice encompasses a variety of tools, each designed to help societies come to terms with violent or oppressive histories, and builds on four main pillars: truth, justice, reparations, and nonrecurrence. There are many types of transitional justice mechanisms that can also serve as redressive prevention, including but not limited to trials, truth commissions, reparations, memorialization efforts, and identifying victim remains. Beyond this, however, efforts tied to repairing harms caused by atrocities—such as programs aimed at building social cohesion—can also be classified as redressive approaches.

We label these approaches as redressive to highlight that they are directed at repairing harm done. Often, this means that the actions are aimed at victim and survivor communities, either

[8] Ernesto Verdeja, "Critical Genocide Studies and Mass Atrocity Prevention," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 13, no. 3 (2019): 113.
[9] USHMM, "A Strategic Framework for Helping Prevent Mass Atrocities," Special Report (Washington, DC: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, September 2023).

directly or indirectly. A direct example could include reparations programs that compensate victims for their losses in a way that simultaneously ameliorates socio-economic disparities between victim communities and others. Indirect examples include the reformation of institutions responsible for perpetrating harm against those communities so that it is less likely those institutions could act similarly in the future.

Because addressing a violent or harmful past was not conceptualized as prevention until relatively recently, much remains to be known about redressive prevention approaches. This includes, for instance, questions of timing. Redressive prevention is often conceived as occurring immediately after an atrocity, though a broader view would suggest that redressive prevention is not as time-bound. Coming to terms with past wrongs may well reduce risk of future atrocity, even if such processes do not occur until much, much later.

Overlapping Approaches

A particularly important feature of this modified framework for understanding prevention is that policy tools can be designed to exhibit multiple prevention approaches all at once. Whereas the stream model has led to the silo-ing of prevention tools and approaches to specific stages of an atrocity cycle, this new framework stresses that the same tool can be designed to be proactive, responsive, redressive, or any combination of the three. Arguably, a tool is strongest when it considers all of these approaches.

For example, envision an ethnically divided society in which a set of community leaders from one ethnic group delivers a public address that uses language that has historically been used to dehumanize another ethnic group. Their address subsequently leads to a spate of social media postings that promote and disseminate the dehumanizing language. There are many policy responses that could be developed in such a scenario, but they may vary in approach. Delivering a public statement that condemns this language and speaks out against the community leaders who used it would represent a responsive approach because it is a direct reaction to hate speech, which may incite violence. Developing a program that promotes a counternarrative that celebrates the ethnic diversity of the society is responsive, as well, but it is also proactive prevention, in that it helps to mitigate some of the underlying risks for identity-based violence that exist. Including in that program an educational policy initiative that educates the broader public about the dangerous history of the dehumanizing term and how it has led to violence in the past would introduce a redressive element to the policy. By thinking complexly about the context, then, policymakers can implement tools that are proactively, responsively, and redressively preventing identity-based violence all at once.

Conclusion

Atrocities are complex social and political phenomena that require complex solutions. As our understanding of how these processes unfold has increased, so too has our understanding of the scope of prevention. The move to think in terms of upstream, midstream, and downstream prevention has been incredibly valuable in stressing that true prevention involves engaging in scenarios long before they reach a crisis state. But an unintended consequence of the stream model has also been the silo-ing of tools into three different buckets, with each tool assigned exclusively to one stage of the atrocity process. Additionally, policymakers continue to debate how far "upstream" to look (one year, three years, twenty years, etc.), especially when resources and capacity are limited.

This new framework for prevention builds upon prior models by helping to resolve some of these tensions while also clarifying the goals of prevention work through decentering the question of time (*when* to act in order to prevent) and instead centering the question of intention (*how* to act in order to prevent). Thinking about preventive action as proactive, responsive, and/or redressive both opens the scope of tools that can be used or developed at any moment in time and provides a clearer description of how an "atrocity prevention lens" can be applied to different policy initiatives to achieve preventive ends. Ideally, it empowers policymakers to see that each policy has the potential to engage with prevention at multiple levels, thus strengthening the preventive impact of the policy. At the same time, it provides clear, jargon-free language that allows for the explanation of preventive actions to those who are not as well-versed in the literature and practice of atrocity prevention.

Dr. Kerry Whigham is Associate Professor of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention at Binghamton University, where he also serves as Co-Director of the Institute for Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention (I-GMAP). His first book, *Resonant Violence: Affect, Memory, and Activism in Post-Genocide Societies*, is published by Rutgers University Press. He has also published articles in *Genocide Studies and Prevention, Memory Studies, Public Administration Review, Public Administration and Development, and the International Journal of Transitional Justice*, and has written chapters for several edited volumes. In 2025, he served as a Fulbright Specialist with UNESCO's International Program in Holocaust and Genocide Education. In addition to his academic work, he is the Director of Research and Online Education at the Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities. More info at www.kerrywhigham.com.

Dr. Hollie Nyseth Nzitatira is a Professor of Sociology at Ohio State. She has published over 70 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters about genocide, transitional justice, and human rights. She is the co-editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Atrocity Crimes* and the Editor in Chief of the International Association of Genocide Scholars Policy Brief Initiative. Dr. Nyseth Nzitatira conducts atrocity forecasting and runs an education abroad program in Rwanda. She recently completed a book on reintegration of Rwandans who were incarcerated for committing genocide (under contract with Oxford University Press) and is the 2023 recipient of the International Association of Genocide Scholars Engaged Scholar Award.