Urban violence

As more people crowd together into cities, urban violence has become a defining feature of daily life in some developing countries. In Latin America, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa, the bloodshed reaches a scale as bad as, or worse than, that of many wars. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) reports that in a recent five-year period, approximately 60 per cent of urban dwellers in developing countries have been victims of crime. That number rises to 70 per cent in parts of Latin America and Africa. Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, once the pride of East Africa and home to the headquarters of United Nations (UN) agencies, has been dubbed ‘Nairobbery’. Many of South Africa’s cities are characterized by a new form of apartheid, with the rich isolated behind electric fences and the poor penned into slums where law and order is markedly absent.

Over the past 20 years, the increasingly rapid pace of urbanization in developing countries has resulted in a dramatic increase in urban violence. The transition from an agriculture-based economy to a primarily industrial one involves mass migration from the countryside to the city. Most migrants gravitate to slums or squatter settlements, home to some 1 billion people today. These areas are generally large and sprawling, making it difficult to supply their residents with the most basic of needs.

For some, migration brings real improvement as skilled workers enjoy higher wage levels in the cities and this promotes education and supports broader development. For many others, however, this transition results in extreme poverty, insecurity and increased vulnerability. As they crowd into shanty towns and slums, sometimes in appalling conditions with little or no access to clean water and sanitation, they clash with older populations and other migrants for scarce jobs, housing and basic services. The police are very often too overstretched or intimidated to maintain law and order and these ungoverned areas provide a fertile breeding ground for criminal networks trafficking in drugs, guns and people.

This chapter presents an overview of the causes and costs of urban violence and analyses how extreme inequality and political instability are fuelling the increase in violence in cities in the developing world, before reviewing some of the strategies currently being applied to tackle the problems caused by urban violence.

The causes

There are many definitions of violence. The Crisis States Research Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science recently adapted a three-fold categorization of political, economic and social violence to provide a particularly useful classification in urban contexts.
Economic violence is driven by material gain and includes street crime, drug-related violence and kidnapping. This type of violence is common where urban inequality and poverty combine to produce unequal access to economic opportunity. In some cases, societal transformation and development policies such as structural adjustment have exacerbated poverty and inequality and contributed to increased crime and violence. It is also closely associated with the existence of an informal economy where the poor find ways to earn a living providing informal services and trade. In Latin American cities, ‘social cleansing’ campaigns by the authorities to remove poor people and street vendors from the cities and to segregate them in designated areas have resulted in increased levels of violence and crime. At household level, social violence increases as a result of failure to meet family expectations, while economic violence increases as desperation and frustration drive some people to commit robbery and other crimes.

Social violence is mainly an interpersonal phenomenon, driven by the desire to get or maintain social power and control, between individuals and within and between families and communities. Gangs are a common manifestation of social violence, formed in response to social and economic exclusion where young people find a sense of belonging and status. Social cleansing, spatial segregation of urban areas and extrajudicial killings by police are also categorized as social violence. For example, in Nairobi, where 60 per cent of the population lives on 5 per cent of the city’s land, corruption is rife and youth gangs wreak terror with guns smuggled in from Somalia and Uganda. The privileged classes live in walled-off houses with ‘safe havens’, complete with radio alarm panic buttons, where they can hide during robberies. The poor rely on vigilante groups to protect them.

Political violence is driven by a desire to gain or maintain political power, often by elite groups. It is closely associated with lack of reform within the police and judiciary or the de facto abandonment of urban areas to criminal networks and drug gangs. A ‘criminalization of governance’ occurs when these gangs impose their own rules in poor neighbourhoods, often providing security and dispensing justice but institutionalizing violence. In May 2010, Jamaica’s government declared a state of emergency in parts of Kingston, the capital city, after shooting and firebomb attacks on police stations by suspected supporters of an alleged drug lord. Seventy-three people were killed as thousands of soldiers and police laid siege to a district of the capital that officials say serves as a ‘garrison community’ for the alleged drug gang. Attempts to arrest the suspect were violently repelled by his supporters. Hundreds of residents blocked the roads into the neighbourhood carrying placards proclaiming their support for the alleged gang leader, who they said provided security and other essential services for their community.

Organized crime
Organized crime, international drug trafficking, trade in lethal weapons and urban street gangs are acute manifestations of urban violence which usually comprise overlapping dimensions of political, economic and social violence.
**Drug production and trafficking**

South America produces about 900 tonnes of cocaine a year, mostly for sale to the United States and Europe. Drug trafficking organizations have openly challenged governments in a number of countries including Colombia, Mexico and Jamaica through conflict and intimidation and the use of advanced military tactics and military-grade weapons. Violence is mostly associated with the transit, rather than the consumption, of illicit drugs – to the US through Central America and the Caribbean and to Europe through West Africa. Mexico’s drug cartels reportedly command more than 100,000 foot soldiers, putting them on a par with the Mexican armed forces which command 130,000 troops. The cartels are said to earn up to US$ 40 billion from the drug trade, a figure which exceeds the gross domestic product (GDP) of many low-income countries. The US Department of State recently reported that entire regions of Guatemala are now essentially under the control of drug trafficking organizations, the most visible of which is the Mexican group known as the Zetas.

When governments react with force the violence can spiral out of control. One United States travel advisory warned US citizens about the levels of violence in Mexico, describing the shoot-outs between Mexican security forces and the drug cartel gunmen as similar to “small-unit combat”. Indeed, the global intelligence company Strategic Forecasting, Inc., or STRATFOR, reports that Mexico’s armed forces have now been deployed in nearly every state in the country. Increasingly they are charged with maintaining general public safety.

**Firearms**

Firearms increase the lethality of violence. According to the Small Arms Survey, civilians own about 650 million firearms worldwide (three-quarters of the known total) and gun violence kills at least 200,000 people each year in countries at peace.

The illegal trade in small arms is believed to be worth at least US$ 1 billion per year. Many small arms remain in urban areas following a conflict, while others trickle over borders from countries currently or formerly at war. South Africa gets guns from Mozambique and Angola, and Nairobi receives weapons from Somalia and Uganda. In Brazil, where more than 100 people die from firearm violence every day, gangs have been seen with arms either pilfered or sold from military arsenals. In the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, youths carry assault rifles, machine guns and submachine guns.

The ‘guns for ganja’ trade – where undocumented handguns from Haiti are exchanged for marijuana from Jamaica – is seen as a major factor contributing to the record levels of murder and violent crime in Jamaica. According to the US State Department’s 2010 *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, around 70 per cent of the illegal firearms entering Jamaica originate in the United States. Mexico is another major recipient of guns from the US. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives estimates that Mexican drug trafficking organizations acquire thousands of weapons each year in Arizona, California and Texas and smuggle them across the border to Mexico.
Urban street gangs
Urban street gangs are made up mostly of marginalized young men between the ages of 15 and 24, a sector of society that commits a disproportionately large share of violent acts. Some of the reasons people join gangs include finding a sense of belonging, reacting to repressive treatment, resisting the status quo, climbing out of poverty and achieving social status. (See Box 4.2.)

The appeal of American gang culture has spread into Latin America and the Caribbean, often with members who brought it back to their countries of origin after being arrested in the United States and deported. Between 2000 and 2004, around 20,000 youths associated with gangs in the Los Angeles slums were deported to Central American countries many had never even visited. Their families had fled to the United States in the 1980s to escape civil war and children born into or brought up in the slums drifted into gangs and criminality and fell foul of the crackdown that followed the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The notorious Mara Salvatrucha gang, for example, started in the Los Angeles region and is now entrenched in Central America, sending youth homicide rates soaring.

Nairobi’s gang names are inspired by conflict and political movements, such as Taliban and Boys of Baghdad. Sometimes they work as mercenaries for political leaders. The streets of Lagos, Nigeria, are plagued by the Area Boys, tens of thousands of loosely organized delinquent youths who harass, threaten, bribe and extort money from passers-by. What started as a small band of hoodlums in the 1980s has grown with the influx of unemployed migrants to the city, in an oil-rich country where up to 70 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line.

The costs
It is difficult to measure the exact costs of urban violence, both tangible and intangible, but they are substantial, affecting the economic, political and social development of cities and nations. A study in El Salvador, for example, put the total national cost of violence at 11.5 per cent of GDP.

Lives lost and ruined
One simple calculation is homicide rates, which are highest in Latin America, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa. Drug-producing countries have a homicide level 35 per cent higher than the average rate for the rest of the world. In Mexico, violent confrontations between drug cartels have killed some 23,000 people since late 2006. In Rio de Janeiro, the homicide rate has tripled since the 1970s. In São Paulo, it has quadrupled. In some cities of Latin America, the homicide rate is as high as 120 per 100,000 people. In Jamaica last year, the murder rate reached 1,672 – one of the highest rates per capita in the world. A worsening economic climate has been blamed for a significant increase in other violent crimes including theft, robbery and rape.
**Economic development**

In economic terms, large numbers of dead, injured and imprisoned people mean a loss of work productivity and income, a lower GDP, higher hospital and healthcare costs, increased expenditures for policing, justice and prisons, and more. And while urban violence is rooted in underdevelopment and inequality, there is a vicious circle by which urban violence undermines development and further weakens state institutions.

Significant levels of crime and violence discourage foreign investment and impede entrepreneurs from investing in their own country. Insecurity can lead to capital flight and a brain drain. Tourists stay away. Property values plummet. Geographical segregation worsens, as small businesses and educated middle-class residents flee high-crime neighbourhoods, leaving these areas to the criminals and those too poor to leave. As a result, the situation continues to deteriorate.

**Social costs**

Urban violence damages social capital, prevents social mobility, destroys communal bonds, erodes neighbours’ trust in one another and in police or local authorities, and creates a wall between marginalized communities and the establishment. The worst affected are the most vulnerable people, who become poorer, more segregated and less equal.

Simply the fear and anxiety that persistent violence engenders can increase the costs to society. While the rich shut themselves off behind elaborate security systems, the underprivileged are forced into slum settlements or stigmatized neighbourhoods. The most vulnerable – women, the elderly, the destitute – may stop going to work, drop out of night school or keep their children at home. A nationwide survey revealed that in South Africa, fear of crime prevented about one-quarter of respondents from starting their own businesses or taking public transport. In Lagos, 70 per cent of those surveyed feared becoming victims of crime.

**Democratic freedom**

High levels of urban violence constrain the exercise of democracy by weakening institutions’ legitimacy through corruption, undermining the authority of local government and preventing political participation through fear and intimidation.

There is a loss of press freedom when gangs and criminal groups target and sometimes kill investigative journalists who report on their activities. “Scores of reporters and numerous news outlets are engaging in self-censorship for fear of retribution,” warns the Committee to Protect Journalists. Crimes are underreported and corruption is unchecked.

The militarization of law enforcement in a growing number of countries also threatens freedom. To confront the drug cartels behind so much of the urban violence, states are
increasingly calling on national armies and other military forces. In Mexico, Colombia and Jamaica, the sight of troops being deployed to conduct searches, secure neighbourhoods and hunt down suspected criminals is leading to a blurring of the distinction between civil and military responsibility. This may be necessary when criminal networks’ firepower becomes a threat to the state’s monopoly on force, but the use of the army for public security should be an exception and should never be allowed to dilute the principle of civilian control of the military.

Box 4.1 Violence and young people in urban settings

For young people, the risk of experiencing violence – as victims, perpetrators and/or observers – is highest in urban environments where more than 1 billion people under the age of 18 years live, many of them in slums.

Young people are impacted by, and inflict on themselves and others, violence across a variety of urban settings. Violence – such as being beaten, exploited, bullied, sexually abused, exposed to rage and angry blows between others, or having self-esteem constantly crushed – occurs in communities, homes, schools, institutions, workplaces and online.

Some of these settings are considered ‘private’ such as homes, institutions and workplaces; in these settings violence can stay hidden, invisible and secret behind closed doors. It is not spoken of and is denied, ignored or even accepted as an inevitable reality. As one youth put it: “I have been sexually abused four times. I really want help but I’m too scared. My friend had the same thing happen but won’t tell anyone. No one understands. I’m scared.”

In contrast, in public settings like city streets, slums and school yards, violence can often be flagrant, unconcealed and visible to the community. “It is easy to get beaten if you are a street boy. People can rape you. Men can beat a boy and rape him. There is nothing you can do but run away if you are lucky,” said a child surviving on the streets of a mega-city.

Too often the private and public forms of violence against young people are treated as though they are separate and unconnected. In reality, violence against young people in private and public settings is deeply intertwined; violence in homes and private settings spills out to all aspects of a young person’s life. A common example of this spill-over can be seen in the role of young people in urban gangs and crime networks. Although not often recognized as such, these are a visible, public culmination of violence that begins in the private sphere.

Through child abuse in the home, bullying at school or exposure to family members physically and psychologically tearing each other down, young people learn that violence can be tolerated and used effectively to control those who have less power, and it can even help gain benefits. “Witnessing violence teaches you violence and makes you hate,” explained one young person. In addition, these experiences can push young people away from their homes and leave them dependent on and vulnerable to others. A former gang member recounted that: “A lot of the young women are escaping from horrible home situations, especially with their fathers... So if the girls go out with these guys from the paramilitary it gives them a sense of rebellion, of power. These guys protect them – a guy with a gun. It is very common.”
Surrounding what happens in homes and on the streets is a set of social, economic, political and environmental factors that shapes the opportunities and choices available to the young. To escape, some young people can make harmful choices and be drawn into a world of drugs, guns and crime. Each young person caught in the cycle of violence means adults have failed in their responsibility to protect; it means a diminished potential for prosperity, safety and success for each community.

In 2007, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement defined violence in urban settings, especially for children and youth, as a “great humanitarian challenge”. In 2010 the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) reinforced and expanded on this by launching the IFRC Global Strategy on Violence Prevention, Mitigation and Response with a particular focus on urban environments and the risk among children and youth.

The strategy builds on the diverse, grassroots experience of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in addressing violence in each corner of the globe through working with orphans, young migrants fleeing for themselves or fleeing with their families, children living on the streets or those caught in the crossfire in favelas; helping young people to finish school, learn livelihoods and hold on to their dreams in the aftermath of war or disaster that has left their cities depressed; or enabling adults or youth to reach out to young people and educate them on violence prevention.

Root causes include the availability and misuse of alcohol, drugs and weapons; gender inequalities; discrimination and exclusion; violent cultural norms; poverty and a lack of economic opportunity; weak or missing support systems; and tolerance for the misuse of power.

While adults in their families, workplaces and communities have clear responsibilities, it is only in partnership with young people themselves that violence can be prevented, mitigated and responded to – in any setting, private or public.

**Risk factors**

A study of the world’s hot spots reveals a range of reoccurring preconditions or risk factors that combine to provide fertile ground for urban crime and violence. Two sets of factors in particular are linked to higher levels of urban violence: socio-economic factors, which entrench poverty, exclusion and inequality, and political-institutional factors, which can produce a crisis of governance.

**Socio-economic factors**

*Deprivation*

Deprivation of human needs has been widely recognized as an important underlying source of social conflict. In towns and cities of developing countries, one out of every three people lives in the slums. And because slum dwellers rarely pay taxes, many municipalities decide they are not entitled to public services or security. As a result, slum dwellers find themselves ignored by the state, deprived of basic services and excluded from society. In the particular context of rapid urbanization, government failure to provide security and basic social services, such as clean water, sanitation, health and education facilities, may fuel tensions arising from the integration of rural
migrants into city life creating a volatile atmosphere and leading to violent confrontations between groups competing for scarce resources. Forcible eviction is a constant threat. Large-scale evictions by public authorities displace millions every year, sometimes for redevelopment or beautification projects, or simply to target and remove undesirable groups.

In Mumbai, India, up to 400,000 people were displaced by a slum-clearance drive in late 2004 and early 2005, while in Zimbabwe, 700,000 people were forced to vacate their homes in six weeks in May–June 2005. Most of these people ended up even more vulnerable than before. Cambodia has one of the fastest-growing rates of urbanization in Asia and, in recent years, Phnom Penh has experienced an unprecedented boom in property values. As market prices have increased, whole communities have been relocated from land they occupied or bought in the post-war period, or forced out of their homes to make way for condominiums, shopping malls and office blocks. Housing rights groups estimate that 133,000 people – 10 per cent of the city’s population – have been evicted since 1990.

Many of these conditions can also be seen in Dhaka, Bangladesh, one of the world’s fastest-growing cities. Here, the population was 400,000 in 1950, grew to around 12 million by 2007 and is projected to reach 20 million by 2020. Between one-third and one-half of its residents are poor, living in 3,000 slums and squatter settlements. Many experience physical harm or murder at the hands of *mastaans*, armed thugs who control the slums through extortion and terror. Migrant women who work long hours and walk home late at night are particularly vulnerable. In 2001, the government enacted an urban cleansing programme in the slums. Reportedly, while the police carried out mass evictions, *mastaans* raped and looted unhindered.

Inequality

A factor even more important than poverty is inequality. Countries with high levels of urban violence tend to suffer from very unequal income distribution patterns and this unequal access to economic opportunity is frequently cited as the main risk factor for urban violence. Studies have shown that income inequality – which is highest in Africa and Latin America – is much more strongly associated with violent crime than poverty. In Latin America, homicide rates are between 40 and 56 per cent higher than the rest of the world. According to data compiled by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 180 million people in the region are living in poverty, 71 million of whom are classed as indigent or ultra-poor. Figures for 2008 indicate a slowdown in poverty reduction and a reversal of the downward trend in indigence since 2002. Only Brazil, Paraguay and Peru continued to reduce the number of people living in ultra-poverty, by around 1 percentage point. Indigence increased by between 1.4 and 2.5 per cent in Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico and Panama. Costa Rica and Uruguay recorded very slight increases. In Colombia, indigence rose by 2.7 per cent between 2005 and 2008, or 0.9 per cent per year.
Although income distribution also improved compared with 1990, with an average drop of 4 per cent in the Gini index, income inequality in Latin American countries continues to be among the highest in the world. The most significant improvements were in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Panama and Uruguay, while Argentina, Costa Rica and Ecuador recorded increased levels of inequality.

These increases no doubt contributed to citizens’ perception that their countries suffered from great distributive injustice. A 2009 ECLAC report found that: “The perception that income distribution is highly inequitable is associated with a distrust of political institutions and a belief that governments serve the elites more than they serve the majority.” For many people, inequality is a consequence of an elite minority retaining a disproportionate level of control and influence over income and economic opportunity. This was seen as a threat to social cohesion, particularly in the context of increasing poverty and deprivation.

Spatial segregation is also an important factor in increasing urban violence. The geographical concentration of the poor in slums, shanty towns and outlying semi-urban areas isolates them from the rest of society and from the housing, health and education services, employment opportunities and social capital they need to improve their lives. As cities expand and develop, the poor are increasingly subjected to a combination of economic decline and social cleansing programmes to remove them from the streets.
This dislocation significantly reduces their access to opportunities for informal business or self-employment, running hawker stalls, kerbside repairs or providing cheap transport. Without access to the economic and social life of the city they become trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and exclusion, which passes from generation to generation. Desperation and frustration can often boil over into conflict, crime and violence.

**Social factors**

There are social factors, too, such as a culture of machismo, where males earn status by proving their strength and masculinity. Demographics also count, since young men are most often the victims and the perpetrators of violent crime. High youth unemployment is another cause. Worldwide, young people aged 15 to 24 represent one-quarter of the working-age population, yet account for almost one-half of the global unemployed. Nearly 25 per cent of the workforce in this age group earns less than US$ 1 a day.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, drug use and trafficking have been central to a process of social decomposition producing violence within families, between gangs, between dealers and with corrupt officials. As traditional social institutions are eroded, they are replaced by perverse social capital in the form of gangs, drug mafias who ‘govern’ neighbourhoods and networks of corrupt public servants and politicians.

Street children, who may number in the tens of millions worldwide, are easy targets for membership in youth gangs. They end up on the street due to poverty, child abuse or the disintegration of the family. In general they have little education, are exposed to drugs and sex and live at risk of HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancy. They are both victims and perpetrators of crime, which they commit in order to survive. In Nairobi, where approximately 60,000 people are homeless, street children mug pedestrians and snatch purses, pick pockets, extort money and engage in prostitution. Here and in many other cities from Guatemala to India, street children are seen as a menace to society and police brutality against them is widely accepted.

**Political-institutional factors**

In cities around the world, from Managua and Lagos, to Kinshasa and Karachi, there is a generalized lack of trust in the state’s ability to prevent crime and violence. Authorities are unwilling or unable to protect the populations of rapidly expanding urban areas. Many local governments lack the financial resources to recruit additional police officers or buy basic equipment such as handcuffs or helmets. Often, underpaid police officers refuse to risk their lives by entering dangerous neighbourhoods. In some countries the vast majority of crimes are never investigated – overload, lack of resources, incompetence and corruption lead to the erosion of the investigative capacity of the criminal justice system. In some cases, criminal networks become so powerful that they even threaten the state.
Crisis of legitimacy

Many states with high levels of urban violence are characterized by their inability to provide services or security, maintain an effective presence throughout their territory or collect taxes. The social contract between the state and society is dysfunctional. When the social contract functions well, the state mobilizes sufficient public revenue and provides security and other essential services, and citizens pay taxes to finance state activity to produce these public goods. The state’s legitimacy – public confidence in the political institutions, rules and cultural and social norms that regulate the operation of government – is enhanced and stability reinforced. When the state fails to meet the citizens’ expectations, legitimacy is eroded.

States may be unwilling or unable to meet the expectations of the people. In some countries elite groups are not willing to fund social programmes and significant proportions of the national budget may go towards military or other elite sectors while health and education receive only a fraction of the allocation needed to provide basic services. When citizens commit to the social contract and consent to be governed, they expect that their basic needs will be met – this is the essence of legitimacy. If these expectations are ignored or repeatedly frustrated, legitimacy is eroded. When legitimacy is very low, citizens may be reluctant to pay taxes and may condone or engage in anti-social, violent or criminal activity. For example, tax revenues in Mexico amount to 11 per cent of GDP, in Guatemala they are equivalent to 12 per cent, in Peru 16 per cent. In Pakistan, tax revenue has fallen to 9 per cent.
Unconsolidated state formation and weak political institutions

Countries undergoing a transition to democracy, emerging from periods of authoritarian rule or recovering from internal conflict are particularly vulnerable to high levels of urban violence. In the past, political authority may have been monopolized by a dominant ruling class or coalition of powerful groups. This culture of monopolizing power and limiting access to other groups has frequently led to political instability and populism, sometimes precipitating a crisis of legitimacy. These countries also tend to have weak political institutions with multiple and often competing centres of power. When regimes are paralysed by divisions and state–elite conflicts, critical judicial and economic reforms, which are necessary to consolidate democratic transitions, promote economic growth and develop a genuine social contract, become impossible because they threaten the vested interests of elites. Unreformed judicial systems remain politicized and corrupt and are often overwhelmed by the rise in crime and the demands of international counterterrorism and counter-narcotics campaigns. Failure to respond effectively to rising crime and violence creates a chain reaction as impunity destroys the credibility of the law enforcement system and this in turn erodes its capacity for deterrence. This inhibits economic growth and undermines state capacity to deliver basic services, contributing to a worsening of the conditions of deprivation and inequality that drive people to commit violent acts.

When the effectiveness of the law does not apply to all citizens and groups, or to all the territory of the state, the state loses its authority. Impunity also contributes to a culture of excessive force or brutality by police in poor neighbourhoods, including the practice of torture and even summary execution of crime suspects from slum or shanty town settlements. Police have been known to target entire communities rather than individual offenders, so that civilians view them as ‘enforcers’ and not protectors. These crimes often go unpunished. Data from the US State Department and Amnesty International show that in 2006, extrajudicial killings accounted for more than 50 deaths in 31 countries. In the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, military police combat drug gangs by conducting violent mass raids, turning neighbourhoods into urban battlefields. According to the UN Special Rapporteur, Brazilian police declared extrajudicial killings and summary executions to be “acts of resistance followed by death”, and recorded 1,330 of these ‘resistance killings’ in 2008.

Exclusion

Government failure to provide essential public goods leads to exclusion. For the wealthy this situation is often pre-empted by self-exclusion as they choose to hire private security forms, send their children to private schools or seek medical treatment and preventive healthcare at private hospitals. But this self-exclusion only compounds the government’s failure and contributes to the creation of a different class of citizen, an underclass with little access to basic human needs, living on the fringes of an elite society whose opulence it can only access on a satellite TV channel. Research has shown that the urban poor feel rejected by society, discriminated against and systematically denied the opportunities to improve their quality of life. This discrimination is internalized and expressed in lack of confidence in the state and its institutions
and in a sense of hopelessness for the future. Research also demonstrates that this systematic segregation of the poor entrenches and perpetuates poverty over generations. One Latin American expert refers to a “dissident conscience” which develops in marginalized urban communities and is commonly expressed through violence. When the excluded and the marginalized look around and see business owners evading tax, politicians buying votes and appointing family members and friends to public posts, or using public money for personal gain, they lose confidence in the institutions of the state and begin to question what they gain from obeying the law.

**Strategies**

The recently passed benchmark – more than half the world’s population living in urban centres – served to focus international attention on a major crisis that has not been adequately addressed until now. Thus far, solutions to the problems of urban violence have been scattershot and poorly financed, with little in-depth evaluation of what works and what doesn’t.

Asking the police and criminal justice system to fix everything may only make matters worse. A broad-based response looks at better urban planning, effective and inclusive local governance, community involvement, reform of police and judicial systems, education and jobs for youth, effective international laws against organized crime, disarmament and gun awareness, and tailored responses to the specific circumstances of each particular local context.

Meaningful citizen involvement in local governance is key to reducing urban violence. The social contract between the state and society is based on an active dialogue about the expectations that citizens have of the state, its capacity to provide services, including security, and to secure revenue from its population and territory to provide these services. In addition, because people’s needs and expectations of the state evolve over time and the state’s capacity and resources are impacted by changes in both domestic and international political and financial conditions, this dialogue needs to be continually revisited and the agreement updated. A fundamental precondition for an effective social contract, therefore, is a set of effective political institutions and processes through which the state and its citizens can engage, consult and dialogue to renegotiate and reinstitutionalize aspects of the contract.

As the government representatives closest to the people, strong local leaders can increase a state’s legitimacy. Local authorities that engage with constituents, respond to their needs and include them in decision-making can build trust in the community and encourage inter-group dialogue to ease any tensions. At the same time, community involvement in urban planning, service provision and violence-reduction strategies increases the chances that they will work. To ensure they can deliver on their commitments, municipal governments need to have enough autonomy and resources to act effectively.
In Latin America, several countries have delegated authority to the cities, with positive results. In Medellín, Colombia, the homicide rate fell from 174 to 29 per 100,000 inhabitants between 2002 and 2007, largely thanks to local government initiatives. Mayors emphasized violence prevention, worked with civil society organizations and invested in supplying informal settlements with public transport, education, housing and even libraries. In Bogotá, mayors backed police training missions, improved public transport, built libraries and put restrictions on guns and alcohol. These and other measures brought down the homicide rate from 80 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1993 to 19 per 100,000 in 2007.

Following an increase in firearm violence, Toronto, Canada, is advocating for a countrywide handgun ban.

Urban planning, design and management are important elements in safety. Criminal acts tend to occur and reoccur in specific places: dark alleys, unlit areas, isolated bus stops. The physical layout of a city, its lighting, landscape maintenance and transportation systems can create or diminish opportunities for crime. A woman who commutes from work late at night and must walk on a dark, empty road from her bus stop to her home is easy prey for potential offenders.

In 1996, UN-Habitat launched the Safer Cities Programme, after several African mayors asked the organization for help in addressing urban insecurity. This programme contributes to UN-Habitat’s main goal of sustainable urbanization by creating partnerships with local governments to prevent crime and violence through planning and management.

Community policing has spread to cities around the world and in a variety of forms. Basically, it holds that community participation is a necessary part of the security process and that the police are accountable to the people. In Mumbai, where police are often corrupt or absent, authorities have created a system of _panchayats_, neighbourhood organizations that serve as links between slum dwellers and the local police. The _panchayats_ resolve disputes at the local level, improve police accountability and empower women, since many of the volunteer representatives are female.

A form of community policing is now having an impact on the _favelas_ of Rio, too. In late 2008, Brazil’s military police moved into the Santa Marta slum, battling the drug gangs and eventually clearing them out. Then the city’s first ‘pacifier police division’ stayed on, opening permanent bases in the _favela_, while the state invested in paving the streets, painting houses and building a health centre. The project has been copied in other _favelas_, reducing violent crime by up to 85 per cent in some areas and there are plans to extend it throughout the city by the time of the 2016 Olympics. It must be noted, however, that the police alone cannot solve the pressing problems of unemployment and a lack of public services, which continue to weigh heavily upon Rio’s _favelas_.

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**CHAPTER 4**

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At the same time, many of the world’s largest cities are relatively secure, proving that urban settings are not automatic backdrops for murder and mayhem. With enough leadership, imagination and cooperation, solutions can be found to make the 21st century metropolis a safe and desirable place to live.

**Box 4.2 Red Cross Red Crescent action**

The Red Cross Red Crescent strives to prevent urban violence by improving children’s self-esteem, teaching them skills and demonstrating peaceful resolution of conflict. In Sierra Leone, where children suffered through 11 years of civil war and were often made to fight, the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society developed child advocacy and rehabilitation centres (since expanded to Liberia). The programme offers psychosocial, educational and vocational training to war-affected youth and ex-combatants, helping them to reintegrate their communities. In South Africa, a programme entitled ‘Soccer against crime’ brings young people of different backgrounds together to play the sport, to help end the kind of discrimination and violence against foreigners that devastated Gauteng province in 2008.

In Central America and the Caribbean, the Spanish Red Cross runs a violence prevention project with eight countries. It targets youth leaders at risk and involves them in a variety of social projects which differ from country to country. In Guatemala, they do theatre and singing. In Nicaragua, young people learn to make necklaces and bracelets by hand and sell them in their communities. In the Dominican Republic, youth help to clean up national parks and coastlines. “Our work is to help them become part of their communities,” Juan José Martínez Solís, violence prevention coordinator for the Spanish Red Cross, told the *World Disasters Report*.

A Canadian Red Cross programme called RespectED teaches children and youth to stop bullying, harassment, dating violence and abuse. It has been expanded to urban settings in Sri Lanka and Guyana. And in Norway, the Red Cross has a street mediation programme, where young people teach their peers how to communicate peacefully and manage conflict. A standby mediation team intervenes in ongoing conflicts, such as those between gangs.

When Michel Minnig, former head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Southern America, arrived in the region in 2004, he was struck by the gravity of the situation in Rio’s *favelas*. As he explained, “The consequences for the civilian population of this armed violence in an urban setting were similar to the ones we used to see in an armed conflict – people killed and wounded, a lack of infrastructure, a whole range of tension and abuse.” Minnig was one of the early proponents of ICRC action to help improve dignity for and respect towards the most vulnerable inhabitants of Rio’s *favelas*. And so in December 2008, the organization launched a pilot project in seven of the city’s most wretched slums.

Since then, the ICRC, the Brazilian Red Cross and other local and state actors have started to work together, conducting first-aid training for residents, ensuring access to medical care including mental health, addressing the situation of adolescent mothers and their children, working with seven schools to improve humanitarian values and space in their surroundings. Very importantly, the ICRC works with the police to integrate international
The future of urban violence

At best, however, these strategies can only hope to lessen the impact of violence in the targeted communities. This is not to deny the important progress that has been made through community-centred approaches and development initiatives. For example, the adoption of targeted social programmes that deal directly with the problem of poverty, such as the Benazir Bhutto Income Support Programme in Pakistan, Progresiva in Mexico or Bolsa Familia in Brazil and other conditional cash transfer schemes, have helped reduce income inequality in targeted communities. But these gains are threatened by global economic conditions, ageing populations and the failure to extend the benefits through reforms that improve the quality and reach of health and education services nationally. For example, while developed countries regularly spend up to 18 per cent of total government expenditure on health, Kenya spends only 6.1 per cent, Jamaica barely 4.2 per cent and Pakistan a paltry 1.3 per cent. And while important progress has been made in the number of children attending primary and secondary school education, the quality is often appalling. In Brazil where 70.4 per cent of the population is qualified as 'low education attainment' in the UN Development Programme’s 2009 Human Development Index, a quarter of the education budget is spent on free university education while primary and secondary education is neglected. In parts of Pakistan, the female literacy rate is 3 per cent.

Regardless of how sophisticated the economic models used to develop government strategies to cushion the effects of economic crisis and support income redistribution are, no amount of social spending or development programming innovations will be able to withstand the corrosive impact of corruption or to resist being derailed by elite groups if the political system does not establish equality before the law. The principle that the law of the land should apply equally to all is a cornerstone of a free society and one which is often markedly absent in countries where urban violence is rife. The discretionary application of tax codes, zoning laws, public procurement and contracting regulations, criteria for public appointments, restrictions on the exploitation of natural resources and even court rulings, benefits the few and establishes a neo-feudal hierarchy of elite groups, special interests and favoured individuals, creating one of the most powerful incentives for widespread crime and violence. International assistance

The IFRC promotes the Youth as Agents of Behavioural Change programme, which invites children to participate in role-playing games or visualization exercises and then discuss their emotions. For example, a group forms a circle and prevents others from breaking through, a game that teaches empathy for excluded immigrants. The games are an instinctive, non-cognitive way to learn compassion, active listening, critical thinking, non-judgement, mediation and a peaceful resolution of tensions. Games and exercises are adapted to meet the needs and challenges of each national context and peer education is essential. "The programme is about changing mindsets, attitudes and behaviour in a society and how youth can play a leadership role in that," said IFRC’s Katrien Beeckman, who founded the programme.
can help, but – as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee points out – international actors have not yet adequately incorporated into policies or practice a sufficiently nuanced understanding of the dynamics of state failure to establish stable political order or developed appropriately contextualized state-building strategies.

International assistance is also needed to tackle the tidal wave of urban violence driven by drug production and trafficking in Latin America. It is no coincidence that the Caribbean basin has the world’s highest murder rate. The 2008 report of the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy – chaired by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Ernesto Zedillo and César Gaviria, former presidents of, respectively, Brazil, Mexico and Colombia – stated categorically that the so-called ‘war on drugs’ was a failure, with staggering costs for the hemisphere, and called for a new paradigm to deal with the problems of narcotics. Similarly, calls for the restoration of the United States ban on the sale of assault weapons which expired in 2004 have been echoed by officials in both the US and the countries of the Caribbean basin in which tens of thousands of weapons originating in the United States are seized every year.

As this chapter illustrates, the dramatic increase in urban violence is rooted in the economic, social and political conditions in which rapid urbanization takes place and the globalization of international crime and in particular drug trafficking and the illegal trade in firearms. Without comprehensive action to tackle these conditions, address economic inequality and reform political systems characterized by weakness and instability, violence is likely to continue. Ultimately, confronting elite and special interest groups may be the single most important challenge for violence reduction.

Chapter 4 was co-written by Amy Serafin, freelance journalist, and Sean Deely, independent conflict and development analyst. Box 4.1 was contributed by Gurvinder Singh, Canadian Red Cross, and Sandra Gutiérrez, IFRC Principles and Values Department. Amy Serafin contributed Box 4.2.

Sources and further information


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