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REDUCING URBAN VIOLENCE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Executive Summary

Urban violence is a serious development constraint in developing countries and increasingly dominates the daily lives of citizens across the globe. The accompanying increase in fear and insecurity has led to a wide-scale preoccupation with the phenomenon, but there is little agreement on the underlying causes of such endemic violence or of its costs and consequences. Equally, the capacity of various sector-specific violence reduction interventions to address this pervasive problem is often questioned.

Recently there has been growing acknowledgment that urban residents themselves may be the key to a better understanding of such violence and to identifying appropriate interventions. Participatory urban appraisals offer a practical way for local people to articulate their perceptions of the complexity of everyday violence. Complementing existing knowledge, such assessments assist in developing a more holistic framework that positions violence in terms of three interrelated components; first, the social, economic, political, and institutional categories of violent manifestations; second, the underlying causal factors, not only structural factors but also individual identity and agency; and third, the costs of violence in terms of its impacts on the assets of poor households.

This provides the necessary context for framing an integrated policy, one that reconciles the bottom-up views of local people with the top-down solutions offered by professionals. A useful matrix distinguishes among seven predominant prevention or reduction policies, ranging from well-known interventions such as criminal justice and public health, through conflict transformation and human rights--more commonly associated with conflict reduction--to newer more innovative urban solutions such as citizen security, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED), and the community-driven social capital approach. As governments, the private sector, and civil society alike increasingly prioritize violence reduction, they need to take up the challenge to provide more innovative cross-sector solutions that better address the complexity of the endemic violence, fear, and insecurity that permeates the everyday lives of local populations.

This brief is informed by the findings from participatory urban appraisals of violence undertaken by the author in 1999 in eighteen poor urban communities in Colombia and Guatemala. These provide perception data from an extensive number of local women and men, girls and boys, whose daily lives are influenced by violence, insecurity, and fear. While participatory methodologies are now recognized as an important way of bringing the 'voices of the poor' to policymakers, to date they have focused on the problem of poverty. Thus this study pioneers a new violence-focused research methodology – first as a pilot project by the author in an earlier study of urban violence in Jamaica.

The Categories of Urban Violence

Urban violence is both complex and context-specific. Data from the participatory urban appraisals conducted in nine poor urban communities in Guatemala, for instance, show an average of forty-one types of violence, while in Colombia the comparable average is twenty-five, with one community in Bogotá distinguishing sixty types. The fact that Colombia was in the midst of a brutal civil war and that Guatemala had only recently emerged from twenty years of internal conflict raises important definitional issues concerning the distinction between war and conflict on the one hand and violent crime on the other. Until recently these have been considered distinct domains.

World events have undermined such distinctions. The decline in interstate armed conflict and wars, especially since the end of the cold war, and the shift toward civil wars and internal conflicts have spawned more hybrid forms of conflict, so that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between politically motivated violence and nonpolitical violence. As a result, the very concept of violence itself is contested. A common instrumental definition denotes violence as the use of physical force, causing hurt to others, in order to impose one's wishes; other definitions refer to psychological damage, material deprivation, and symbolic disadvantage. Some definitions are contingent on time-specific and place-specific perceptions and values. As violence becomes routinized or banalized, forms that were unacceptable in the past may become so, especially if they are essential to the functioning of society.

The integrated framework presented here makes a fourfold distinction among social, economic, institutional, and political violence. Each category is identified in terms of the physical act that consciously or unconsciously is used to gain or maintain power and is based on the primary motivation behind the violence. For instance, much social violence, motivated by the will to attain or keep social power and control, is gender-based and often linked to gendered power relations and constructions of masculinity. Gender-based violence includes violence toward an intimate partner inside the home as well as sexual abuse in the public arena. Social violence also includes ethnic violence, disputes among peers, and territorial or identity-based violence linked with gangs.

Economic violence is motivated by material gain manifested in street crime (mugging, robbery) and in crime linked with drugs and kidnapping. Closely related is institutional violence perpetrated by such state institutions as the police and the judiciary, by such sector ministries as health and education, and by such nonstate institutions as vigilante groups. Political violence is driven by the will to win or to hold political power and includes guerrilla warfare, paramilitary conflict, and political assassination.

This definitional breakdown of violence has some limitations. In focusing primarily on physical violence it gives less weight to nonphysical forms of violence such as intimidation and other types of psychological abuse. Similarly, in emphasizing the issue of power it may not address some types of violence, such as acts of revenge or arbitrary fights such as between two drunks. Since any categorization is static, this fourfold typology is conceived as an overlapping and interrelated continuum. For those involved in violence as perpetrators or victims, the categories are not always mutually exclusive; the same act can be committed for differing reasons depending on the identity of the perpetrator and victim.

Despite such limitations, the categorization serves a number of purposes. It encourages policy-

makers to move from individual violence reduction interventions toward strategies that acknowledge the linkages among types of violence. In addition, it highlights the policy implications of the multiple identities and motivations of perpetrators. For example, ending political violence in countries dominated by guerrilla warfare may require not only a political solution to the conflict but also an economic solution to address the unemployment of ex-combatants. Further, the categorization helps explain why interventions that reduce one type of violence may not reduce another type.

The Causes of Urban Violence

In much of the development literature of the 1960s and 1970s, violence was viewed as an individual issue of criminal pathology linked to rapid urbanization and to the marginality of migrant populations. The shift from an emphasis on the individual to an emphasis on the structural causes of violence was influenced by neo-Marxist and dependency debates of the 1970s and 1980s, which led to the recognition that a complex of institutional and structural factors affects violence levels.

Evidence from Latin America challenges the popular stereotype that poverty is the main cause of violence and shows that inequality and exclusion (unequal access to employment, education, health, and physical infrastructure) intersect with poverty to precipitate violence. At the same time, in contexts of severe inequality, living conditions of the urban poor heighten the potential for conflict, crime, and violence.

Globalization and the spread of neoliberalism have also increased social polarization, with the disenfranchised again most likely to experience crime and violence. In addition, globalization has led to a worldwide criminal economy in drugs, firearms, prostitution, and extortion. In many countries emerging from political conflict and undergoing democratization, everyday violence seems to be endemic. In Latin America, the shift from authoritarian regimes to democratic governments has led to the democratization of violence itself, with the use of force no longer the preserve of armies or of guerrilla or paramilitary groups. This is reflected in the emergence of street gangs or criminal groups comprising former guerrilla, paramilitary, or military members and a burgeoning illegal drug industry, its networks established during times of conflict.

Among the approaches developed to understand the interrelated causes of violence, the most common is the ecological model. This has been used to elucidate the complex causes of, for example, child abuse, youth violence, sexual coercion, intimate-partner violence, and global violence. The model identifies violence at structural, institutional, interpersonal, and individual levels; examines the relationship between individual- and context-specific factors; and considers violence as the outcome of multiple influences. Another model of causality identifies factors underlying violence in terms of the interrelationship among structure, identity, and agency. For instance, political- and economic-related violence over disputed territory is often caused by structural historic conditions relating to the distribution of resources. This is often linked to economic violence between neighbors, when individual characteristics such as envy or greed highlight the importance of individual agency. Jealousy, infidelity, and alcohol abuse are other issues of individual agency often linked to intrafamily social violence, when factors relating to gender-based and age-based identity make spouses and children particularly vulnerable.

The Costs of Urban Violence

The costs and consequences of violent action are closely related to the factors underpinning it. At the formal level, violence can undermine the functioning of health services, security forces, judicial systems, housing, and social services. At the informal level, violence can result in homicides and suicides, alcohol and drug abuse, and mental health disorders. Economic productivity is affected through economic multiplier effects, and interpersonal relations and quality of life are affected by social multiplier effects.

Most research has focused on monetary costs, which provides a metric for analyzing the impact of crime on both individuals and society. This can be compared with the costs of other social problems and therefore is a useful tool for cost-benefit analyses of various policy options. Violence adversely affects a country's macro- and microeconomic growth and productivity. A typical civil war is estimated to reduce incomes by around 15 percent and to increase the portion of people living in absolute poverty by about 30 percent.

However, measuring the costs of violence this way neglects the insidious and intangible effects of violence on people's lives, such as fear and insecurity. The framework described here therefore complements a focus on the social monetary costs of violence and addresses violence-related impacts on the capital assets of the poor, widely identified as physical, financial, natural, human, and social.

The cost of violence to physical and financial capital includes the drain on savings and the loss of earnings. In the Latin American example, citizens are forced to collude/comply with extortion by armed actors, both left-wing guerrilla and right-wing paramilitary groups. Taxi drivers, butchers, cattle farmers, and other business people pay hundreds and thousands of dollars a year to these extortionists in order to avoid interruption to their business.

Human capital assets refer to individual investments in education and in health and nutrition, all of which affect both people's ability to use their labor and their returns on their labor. A major direct consequence of violence is increased spending on health. Gender-based violence has especially serious consequences for the health of a woman if she is injured, made pregnant, infected with a sexually transmitted disease, or left with mental health problems. The health-related costs for children living in violent situations include low educational performance and also a future likelihood of using violence in their own relationships.

Social capital is generated by--and provides benefits through--membership in social networks, ranging from the household to the marketplace to the political system. More sophisticated analyses of the relationship between violence and social capital show that violence can erode social capital when it reduces trust and cooperation. When the governance capacity of formal institutions is eroded by violence it encourages human rights violations. Informal community-level organizations are also affected by insecurity and personal safety, which influence the nature of cohesion among members but also in terms of mobility--their ability to meet. Given that women are often most closely involved in a voluntary capacity in informal community organizations, fear of leaving home affects how these groups function.

In some contexts, rather than erode social capital, violence reconstitutes it as perverse social capital. In Colombia, for instance the participatory appraisal shows that one in four membership institutions--membership institutions such as gangs, local vigilantes, and guerrilla or paramilitary groups--generate perverse social capital.

An Integrated Policy Framework for Violence Reduction

Seven violence prevention or violence reduction strategies are identified by local people in the participatory appraisals in both Colombia and Guatemala and confirmed by the professional expertise of a range of policymakers and practitioners in this field. These comprise the following:

- Criminal justice
- Public health
- Conflict transformation
- Human rights
- Citizen security
- Environmental design
- Community organizations

Criminal justice is perhaps the most established violence reduction approach. Addressing the symptoms of violence top-down, it focuses on deterrence and control of violence through arrest, conviction, and punishment facilitated by the police, the courts, and prisons. This type of intervention is often popular among politicians seeking short-term solutions to violence. However, justice and police systems constituted by male elites tend to determine access by gender, age, and ethnicity. Gender stereotyping of criminals equally means that young men are made more susceptible to arrest and conviction. The criminal justice approach has been more successful in reducing economic violence than it has been in reducing social--particularly gender-based--violence and has rarely been used as a mechanism to reduce political or institutional violence. Nevertheless recently attempts have been made to make the criminal justice system more gender sensitive as well as more inclusive of groups traditionally excluded, such as minorities.

The public health approach focuses mainly on economic and social violence and aims to prevent violence by reducing individual risk factors that may trigger violence. Indeed, in both study countries, community members cited the importance of drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs as critical to reducing domestic violence. An example of this approach is the Program of Development, Security, and Peace established by the mayor's office in Cali, Colombia, in 1992. An examination of homicide patterns identified the main risk factors as alcohol abuse, gun ownership, and idleness. The program restricted alcohol sales and gun ownership at specific times. Municipal security councils were formed and, in collaboration with the program, succeeded in reducing homicide rates.

An example of conflict transformation is that employed in Medellín, Colombia, between 1994

and 1999; the approach involved extensive negotiation between territorially based armed gangs and the militia. Using former guerrilla and gang members as negotiators, relative calm was achieved in the short term. It is important to note the disjuncture among local, regional, and national conflict transformation: unless national violence is resolved, local and regional achievements will be in jeopardy. The conflict transformation approach is deeply rooted in armed conflict reduction, although it has been broadened to include all types of violence. The risk of this approach is that certain groups may be excluded from the negotiations.

A human rights approach to violence reduction is part of a growing shift toward a rights-based approach to development. Applied to violence reduction, a human rights approach focuses on the role of the state and the international community in protecting citizens' rights to be free from the threat of violence. Drawing on a range of international human rights conventions, this approach addresses armed conflict and political and social violence. Although initially this perspective targeted governments that violated human rights, more recently it has included all social actors that deny or abuse rights, including guerrilla and paramilitary groups. Civil institutions play a central role in the contestation of rights, especially for those populations excluded from the public policy process.

Recent violence-related policy has moved toward more integrated approaches, reflecting a more nuanced understanding of the multiplicity of violence and the plurality of actors involved, whether as perpetrators or victims. Citizen security is one such approach, in this case linking violence reduction and protection prevention (through public health policy) with violence control (through criminal justice policy). The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), for instance, has developed an extensive lending portfolio of national- and urban-level programs to promote "peace and citizen security/coexistence" through institutional strengthening, juvenile violence prevention, community-police relations programs, and social awareness and rehabilitation programs.

Another integral approach is crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED), which recognizes that violence is often related to place and space. In the study countries, fear and insecurity associated with violence were most notable in community locations identified as dangerous (and linked with drugs and gangs). Street corners, basketball courts, parks, and riverbanks were most commonly mentioned. A map drawn by local residents in a community in Cali, Colombia, for instance, identified a high proportion of the barrio as insecure, with the police station perceived as a place feared by all people. In a community in Guatemala City, a map shows that certain gangs were linked to particular spaces. The CPTED approach concentrates on upgrading physical structures and instituting environmental renewal programs. This may include improving transportation facilities, community sanitary facilities, and street lighting and involve not only municipalities but also schools, hospitals, transportation systems, telephone companies, and public parks agencies.

Finally, community organizations play an important role in violence reduction. Local community members in all of the cities studied repeatedly affirmed that peace could only be built by generating trust and unity within communities, a trust facilitated through community organizations. Such a community-driven social capital approach focuses on building social cohesion within communities through strengthening informal and formal institutions. Based on bottom-up, participatory processes, it aims to create trust by building on the community's own identification of its needs and associated institutions.

The approaches discussed above actually overlap. Indeed, an integrated framework is increasingly

recognized as essential if policymakers are to address the nature of everyday violence as well as the social actors involved. Homies Unidos, for instance, is a nonprofit, gang violence prevention and intervention organization in San Salvador, El Salvador, run by former gang members. The program combines a public health approach to drug education and rehabilitation and a dialogue and mediation approach to conflict resolution. Both of these are integrated into a community-driven social capital approach, which emphasizes the importance of giving the gangs ownership of their project.

Policy Recommendations

The integrated framework for reducing urban violence in developing countries incorporates both the complex, endemic nature of urban violence emphasized in much of the academic literature and the empirical evidence garnered from the author's studies in Colombia and Guatemala. Neither source is exhaustive or comprehensive. The participatory urban appraisals used in Colombia and Guatemala provide insights into violence, recognize the agency and identity of social actors, stress the importance of the less visible forms of violence (such as gender-based violence), and emphasize the interrelationship among types of violence. However, such appraisals have limitations; they need to be balanced with outside perceptions and research. These combined sources provide--more than either would alone--a robust understanding of violence and inform the development of an integrated framework for intervention. This framework includes a systematic categorization of violence, a causal model of the factors underlying violence, an asset-based analysis of the costs and consequences of violence, and a matrix that categorizes the seven policy approaches to violence.

Since violence is a recent development concern, a framework such as the one outlined in this policy note provides only preliminary guidelines. Further participatory research duplicating this methodology as well as additional context-specific operational testing will strengthen the robustness of the framework. Nevertheless, it already provides an important starting point for policymakers in governments, civil society, and the private sector who seek to move toward a more holistic understanding of the complex problem of violence as well as to develop and implement more innovative cross-sector solutions. These will ensure that interventions address more comprehensively not only the phenomenon of violence itself but also the associated insecurity and fear that increasingly dominates the lives of so many citizens across the globe.



Additional Reading

Caroline Moser, "Urban Violence and Insecurity: An Introductory Roadmap," *Environment and Development* (2004).

Caroline Moser and Cathy McIlwaine, *Encounters with Violence in Latin America: Urban Poor Perceptions from Colombia and Guatemala* (2004).

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Caroline Moser and Jeremy Holland, "Urban Poverty and Violence in Jamaica," in *World Bank, Latin American and Caribbean Studies: Viewpoints* (1997).

Caroline Moser and Dennis Rodgers, "Change, Violence, and Insecurity in Nonconflict Situations," Working Paper 185, Overseas Development Institute (2004).

Caroline Moser and Aisla Winton, "Violence in the Central American Region: Towards an Integrated Framework for Violence Reduction," Working Paper 171, Overseas Development Institute (2002).