In many nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, urban violence has become so ubiquitous that it is now rightly considered to be a major development constraint. Not only does violence affect people’s health and well-being, but it also has a devastating impact on the social fabric and economic prospects of entire cities.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the range of researchers, policy makers and practitioners focusing on the issue of violence, fear and insecurity has expanded in the past decade beyond the traditional disciplines — criminology, social work and psychology — and today includes economists, sociologists, political scientists, transport planners, architects and community workers.

Along with this change has come a growing recognition that violence is not merely a problem of individual criminal pathology, but a complex, dynamic and multi-layered phenomenon that shapes people’s lives in multiple ways. Violence forces girls and young women to drop out of night school to avoid streets that are no longer safe after dark. It erodes the assets and livelihood sources of the poor, compromising their ability to improve their life chances. And it instills fear and insecurity into the daily lives of city residents, undermining social trust and increasing the fragmentation of the urban space and the isolation of its people.

Although accelerating rates of violence and crime are by no means an urban specific problem, they are particularly severe in many large cities of the developing world. In Latin America, cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo account for more than half the total homicides nationwide, and so do Mexico, Lima or Caracas. Indeed, the sheer scale of violence in many poor urban areas and slums is such that it has become normalized into daily life, provoking references to ‘failed cities’ and ‘cities of chaos’ to describe the loss of control by public bodies and the victimization of urban residents.

It is hard to ascertain the spread of urban violence accurately. Mortality statistics, often used as proxies, are notoriously unreliable due to under-reporting and difficulties in interpreting the data. The most commonly used indicator of violent crime, the homicide rate, disregards non-fatal violence and usually includes both intentional and unintentional deaths, such as from car accidents. National and regional differences in data collection methods, recall periods and cultural definitions of crime and violence further complicate comparisons across countries.

Despite these limitations, it is a fact that cross-country differences in homicide rates can be quite striking, ranging from 6.4 per 100,000 in Buenos Aires to 248 per 100,000 in Medellín in the year 2000. While less pronounced, there may be sharp contrasts even among cities within the same nation. In Brazil, for instance, the homicide rate in São Paulo rose by 103% between 1979 and 1998 — three times as fast as in Rio de Janeiro.

Within individual countries, urban growth is generally a stronger indicator of crime rates than city size. Intra-city variations, in turn, are often linked to neighborhood income levels. Crime related to property is typically more common in prosperous areas, while lower income districts tend to concentrate severe violence, especially in a city’s marginal periphery where the grim living conditions of the poor serve to heighten the potential for crime and conflict.

Levels of violence also vary greatly by age and gender. By and large, young men are most likely to be both the main
perpetrators and the main victims. The estimated homicide rate among men aged 15-24 in Brazil was 86.7 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1999, compared to only 6.5 for women of the same age. Even in countries with much lower levels, not only is male juvenile violence mounting but so is its intensity.

It is nonetheless useful to distinguish between structural causes and trigger risk factors when analyzing urban violence. The former largely reflect unequal power relations (whether based on class, gender, ethnicity, territory or identity), while the latter refer to situational circumstances that can exacerbate the likelihood of violence occurring. For instance, drug and alcohol use can be a trigger for gang brutality or gender-based abuse, but it is important to discern the underlying structural factors behind such violence no matter what its triggers might be.

One also has to acknowledge that no single cause determines or explains urban violence. While poverty has long been considered to be among its chief determinants, this relationship has recently been challenged as being too simplistic. Interpretations based on statistical modeling have shown that, with regard to national level data on murder rates, inequality tends to have greater influence than poverty, with income disparities characteristically being more marked in urban than rural areas. Bouts of violence have likewise been associated with the implementation of structural adjustment programs, as well as with processes of globalization and democratization.

In reality, poverty and inequality frequently overlap to generate conditions in which acts of violence become more likely. Of great consequence in this regard are the spatial dangers so prevalent in city peripheries, where unsafe places such as unlit or isolated lanes, bus stops and public latrines become ripe with physical assault, rape, robbery. The presence of such places usually reflects poor infrastructure or design, and the fact that the urban poor have to commute long distances to work early in the morning or late at night only enhances their exposure to being assaulted.

Whatever its causes, it is undeniable that violence has a dramatic impact on people’s well-being. Even if perceptions of fear cannot be properly captured in statistics, they fundamentally affect the livelihood security of the poor and their ability to access resources for survival, as well as the functioning of local social institutions. The spatial, economic and social constraints imposed by street crime and endemic violence, and the uncertainty they generate, pervade people’s lives, with serious implications for the various assets and capabilities that underpin their livelihood strategies.

Violence, in fact, erodes financial assets through its drain on criminal justice services and the health care system, as well as decreased investment and rising institutional costs. It has a huge impact on victims’ human capital, through reductions in life expectancy, educational opportunities and productivity in the workplace. And by reducing social contact and trust among city dwellers, violence weakens social capital too. It isolates the poor in their segregated neighborhoods and the rich in their gated communities, perpetuating a fear of the ‘other’ and thus contributing to the social, economic and political fragmentation of urban areas.

This fragmentation has intensified with recent increases in kidnapping for ransom and vehicle robbery as against vehicle theft, which have heightened insecurity among the wealthier population in cities throughout the world. Panic stricken, the rich react by cutting themselves off from the poor, whom they see as the main culprits. Residential fortification is one of many fear-management strategies through which they try to cope with the anxiety generated by a perception of rising criminality. In some cases, the urban space is being so reconfigured that it is leading to the emergence of what has been called a ‘networked community’ of wealthy residents who are somehow disembedded from the city, their fortified residences linked to a constellation of shopping malls through a sophisticated transport network of highways and

Urban violence: Definitions and categories

Violence is usually defined as the use of physical force, which causes hurt to others in order to impose one’s wishes. It almost invariably entails the exercise of power to legitimize the use of force for specific gains. Broader definitions of the term extend beyond physical violence to include psychological harm, material deprivation as well as symbolic disadvantage.

For purposes of designing interventions to prevent or reduce its incidence, it is useful to distinguish between different types of urban violence according to its more common manifestations and perpetrators. One such typology would distinguish between political, institutional, economic and social violence.

Much social violence is linked to gender power relations, such as intimate-partner violence and child abuse inside the home as well as sexual abuse in the public arena. Social violence further includes ethnic and territorial or identity-based violence linked to gangs. Economic violence, motivated by material gain, is associated with street crime, including mugging, robbery and criminal acts linked to drugs and kidnapping. Closely related is institutional violence, perpetrated by state institutions, especially the police and judiciary, but also by officials in sector ministries such as health and education, as well as groups operating outside the state such as social cleansing vigilante groups. Finally, political violence includes guerrilla or paramilitary conflict and political assassination, often associated with a context of armed struggle or war but present during peacetime as well.

Since violence is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon, it is clear that there can be no hard boundaries between the different types described here. In reality, our four categories represent an interrelated continuum with close linkages between them.
roundabouts. It is as though parts of
the city were ‘lifted out’ so that they are
increasingly alien from the rest of the
metropolis — spatially and socially apart
from the sprawling, chaotic, impoverished
mass of its residents.

For the urban poor, the ensuing socio-
spatial exclusion and the ever-present
fear stemming from random violence are
compounded by an almost unqualified
distrust of the state’s capacity to control
or prevent criminal behavior, and the
structural problems associated with
existing police and judiciary systems. The
lack of confidence in the public security
system has led to a rapid expansion of
informal, non-state mechanisms of social
control that include revenge violence,
vigilante crime and other extra-judicial
forms of justice. These self-help
community responses may serve to
maintain social cohesion and mitigate
conflict, but at the cost of generating
perverse forms of social capital.

The perceived failure of the public forces
to protect the citizens has also led to the
proliferation of private security measures,
with state authorities either contracting or
condoning private firms to conduct public
policing. But the resulting privatization of
security offers solutions that focus more
on the rich than the poor, at the same
time undermining efforts to develop
adequate policing solutions.

Effective solutions must recognize that
as much as the spatial consequences of
urban crime and violence differ from one
place to another, so too do socially
constructed thresholds of tolerance and
perceptions about acceptable levels or
types of violence.

It is typical, for example, to find a strict
distinction between public and private
spaces that serves to render much of
women’s victimization invisible. The
demarcation between citizen security
and issues of intra-family violence
normally means that gang violence is
unacceptable, while that taking place
among intimate partners is tolerated.
This is so despite the fact that gendered
violence occurs in both the public and
the private spheres. It is not space per se
that matters, but rather the cultural norms
regulating gender relations that
minimize and naturalize abusive behavior
of that sort. Effective prevention thus
demands a close examination of how,
and when, a society responds — or fails
to respond — to specific manifestations
of violence in different realms.

Difficult as it is, assessing the costs of
violence is equally important for policy
making. Probably the greatest progress
has been made with regard to estimates
of direct economic costs, such as the
associated losses due to deaths and
disabilities (or ‘transfers’ from property
crimes) as a percentage of, for instance,
GDP. Such measurements can help to
assess the impact of crime on both
dividuals and society, allowing for a
comparison with the costs of other social
ills — with important policy implications
in terms of cost-benefit assessments.

But in many contexts, measurement is
constrained by the lack of access to
information on expenditures incurred by
the police, the judiciary, the penal system
and even the armed forces. And there are
many indirect costs as well, for individual
victims as well as society as a whole,
which are intangible and for which no
reliable quantitative data exist.

So the realization that quantitative
methodologies fail to reflect people’s
daily encounters with violence has
encouraged the use of qualitative
techniques in recent years. These have
proved invaluable in eliciting people’s
perceptions of fear and insecurity.
Similarly, incorporating specific
questions on these topics into broader
household surveys could help address
some of the existing measurement
problems, providing a low-cost way to
procure data that is probably more
accurate than police records.

This would certainly provide a stronger
information basis for policy initiatives
aimed at preventing or reducing urban
crime and violence, which have become
a ‘growth industry’ in the last few years.
There are now numerous policy
approaches to tackle these problems,
many of which deliberately target the
urban poor. They range from sector
specific interventions, such as using the
criminal justice system to control and
treat economic violence or the public
health approach aimed at prevention,
to more integrated strategies seeking to
prevent crime and improve citizen security
through urban renewal, as well as spatial
and environmental design.

But, to date, there has been little rigorous
evaluation of the efficacy of these
various approaches, despite a wide
recognition that there can be no magic
bullets or one-off solutions to curb or
prevent city violence. This has led to an
expectation that a diversity of strategies,
used in varying combinations in different
places, will together achieve the desired
outcome. Some approaches clearly work
better than others, and some are more
appropriate in settings where other
interventions would likely fail.

At the same time, rising concern with
political and institutional violence has
brought issues of human rights to the
forefront. There is, as a result, a
broadening consensus about the crucial
importance of consulting community
residents in designing appropriate
solutions — whether it means drawing
on young people’s perceptions about
solutions for gang warfare or promoting
partnerships between the police and
local communities.

Missing still are efforts to confront
and incorporate the issue of fear into
violence prevention and reduction
strategies. Locally grounded approaches
to rebuild trust and social capital at the
community level are equally in need of
development. Ultimately, though, these
may provide a crucial mechanism for
redressing the impact of violence on the
lives and livelihoods of the poor in cities
around the world.

Caroline O. N. Moser, “Urban violence
and insecurity: An introductory roadmap”,
Environment and Urbanization, Vol. 16 No. 2,