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City Violence and the Poor

Induced by growing perceptions of violence, fear and insecurity are reshaping the urban space of many large cities in the developing world.

As the rich retreat to fortified enclaves, the poor become increasingly isolated in their segregated neighborhoods — fearful of random violence, vulnerable to the erosion of key livelihood assets, and often fending for themselves owing to the state's failure to protect them.

Violence and crime are hugely detrimental to well-being, and demand urgent and innovative approaches to curb them.

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.

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.

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 dis-embedded from the city, their fortified residences linked to a constellation of shopping malls through a sophisticated transport network of highways and

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 'transferals' from property crimes) as a percentage of, for instance, GDP. Such measurements can help to assess the impact of crime on both individuals 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.

Increasingly, policies seeking to improve living conditions in urban areas will need to tackle the thorny issue of violence.

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.

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