Learning how to make cities safer

In the face of rapid urbanization and growing inequality, cities around the world struggle to improve security and living conditions for their people. Understanding the drivers of urban violence is crucial to finding solutions.

At the midpoint of a five-year program of research, experts working through the Safe and Inclusive Cities initiative are shedding light on what works — and what doesn’t — to make cities safer. This brief highlights emerging lessons from their work, along with knowledge gaps and questions that merit further research.

Uncovering the drivers of urban violence

In the context of poverty and inequality, early research points to a range of factors contributing to the rise of urban violence. By gaining insights into the dynamics that fuel crime or community conflict, researchers are pointing the way to practical measures that may help to prevent or reduce the violence.

What is driving urban violence?

- **Poor access to basic services** can foster competition and fuel conflict between groups.
- **Population displacement** can increase vulnerability by severing community support networks.
- **Segregated urban planning** can leave a legacy of community tension and insecurity.
- In some high-crime areas, **criminal gangs play the dual role of perpetrator and ‘protector’**.
- **Poverty and unemployment** undermine households and may fuel domestic and community violence.
Poor access to basic services

Potential solution? Make clean water, sanitation, electricity, and other services accessible to vulnerable communities.

Research teams are warning that physical violence is directly linked to the delivery of — or lack of access to — basic services. In four cities in India, for example, researchers have found a pattern of increased violence in areas where residents go short of clean water, electricity, and public toilets, and where public spaces are not lit. Confrontations can turn violent when residents compete for limited resources or find informal ways of accessing basic services that are not being provided by the state or private firms. In extreme cases, governments have forcibly removed people who have found alternative ways to gain services and housing. Cities become even more insecure when residents are forced to rely on unofficial brokers, gangs, or corrupt officials to meet their needs.

Forced population displacement

Potential solutions? Increase land and housing tenure for the poor and help displaced communities rebuild the social fabric in their new neighbourhoods.

The urban poor in Zimbabwe live in extreme stress and anxiety because they are unable to buy or rent property, or meet government requirements to develop their land. They continually face very real threats of violence as authorities relocate illegal settlements. In Brazil, India, Sri Lanka, and other countries, efforts to combat violence or improve the physical conditions of densely populated slums have also resulted in forced population displacements. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, some favela residents are being moved up to 70 kilometres away to permit infrastructure upgrades ahead of the 2016 Summer Olympic Games. Research teams are uncovering the consequences of these policies: important support networks — families, friends, and neighbours — are severed, making people feel much more vulnerable. In India and Sri Lanka, residents are sharing the negative social, cultural, and economic effects of displacement resulting from land development. While their homes have improved, families are struggling to cope with the realities of forced changes in lifestyle: jobs and schools are no longer safe or easy to reach, and new environments are unfamiliar and menacing. Social fragmentation is such that research teams...
are now grappling with a critical challenge: how to account for the complete costs of displacement — both economic and social — in a way that lets policymakers fully weigh the costs and benefits in making their decisions.

**Segregation reinforced by urban planning**

**Potential solutions?** Include vulnerable communities in city planning decisions; invest in transport infrastructure; and regularly update city development plans to reflect population growth.

Researchers in Africa and South Asia are learning how urban planning under past colonial rule has shaped present social geographies, pressures, and axes of inequality. In the Zimbabwean capital Harare, for example, colonial authorities deliberately segregated populations along racial lines in order to strictly control movement in the city. Today, this design enforces segregation along economic lines rather than racial ones, limiting the movement of the urban poor.

In South Asia, segregation in the cities of Mumbai, Karachi, and Rawalpindi follows religious and ethnic lines. Families unable to afford to live in the city centre are pushed away to higher-density suburbs that are far from jobs and schools and where basic services are meagre or non-existent. Such unplanned developments force people into the very conditions that breed the cycles of poverty and insecurity described above.

---

**Family and community breakdown linked to unemployment**

**Potential solution?** Create opportunities for decent work and wages so that families can better nurture their children and strengthen community ties.

A poverty reduction program in South Africa is showing enormous potential for reducing urban violence, even though it was designed as a social safety net, not a crime prevention strategy. The Community Work Programme (CWP) provides work — and wages — to its mainly female participants, allowing them to better manage their households. Researchers are finding that this is also curbing violence, for a variety of reasons. By reducing economic stress on families, CWP wages may also be lowering the emotional stress on parents, enabling them to better nurture their children. This may be reinforced where mothers are able to live and work in the same community, so that children are better supervised. The CWP also allows local communities to agree on their own priorities for the work undertaken through the program. These have included strengthening social and economic conditions, as well as organizing violence prevention activities such as anti-crime marches and safety patrols. The ministry responsible for the CWP has endorsed the findings and is working with researchers to promote and scale up these approaches in communities beyond the research sites.

---

**Criminal gangs as perpetrators and ‘protectors’**

**Practical solutions?** Security interventions should avoid alienating urban residents caught between gangs and authorities; approaches to ‘social cohesion’ may need to be rethought in such contexts.

Social cohesion — broadly understood as the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other to survive and prosper — is fundamental for societies to progress towards development goals. However, research in Latin America suggests that organized criminal activity can undermine the fabric of social cohesion and the ability of communities to find collective responses to violence and exclusion. For example, while youth gangs in San Salvador are the main threat to those living in areas they control, they also force community members to accept their “protection” from external threats such as rival gangs. In essence, they produce a coercive form of social cohesion, whereby survival hinges on tolerating the sources of insecurity. This in turn lowers expectations that working together can help to reduce violence.

In some favelas of Rio de Janeiro where criminal gangs were deeply embedded, residents would not call for police under any circumstances, out of fear of reprisals. The introduction of Policing and Pacification Units initially reduced some forms of crime, but left residents walking a tightrope: they may suffer retribution from drug traffickers if they cooperate with police.
Looking forward: Research gaps and opportunities

While research is ongoing, Safe and Inclusive Cities partners are beginning to explore how to build on their current research as they share early findings, discuss options with policymakers and practitioners, and work with local communities to make urban areas safer and more inclusive. Leveraging their work presents an opportunity for lessons from the South to be taken up and used by cities in the North.

Teams have exposed a number of gaps in current knowledge. For example, they have identified the need for more sophisticated measures of urban violence — going beyond homicide or other crime rates — to help researchers and policymakers alike develop more nuanced solutions to the problems facing cities. This would give decision-makers the evidence they need to ensure that programs are designed to address the root causes of violence, not just its symptoms.

The varying roles of youth — particularly young men — in both perpetuating and breaking cycles of violence are only beginning to be understood. A deeper understanding of youth identities and motivations may help to generate programming that can direct them away from violent pathways.

City size is another area in need of focused research to shed light on the different challenges faced by small and medium-sized cities compared with megacities. Without such context, policies and interventions designed to reduce violence and inequality risk being ineffective, or even potentially harmful.

Partners also point to the need to integrate the perspectives of policymakers and practitioners by including them in research teams. This way, they can contribute to concrete and practical results.

Areas for further research

**Measuring insecurity:** How can we better measure safety and violence in cities? What indicators give a more meaningful picture of urban violence than homicide rates?

**Engaging youth:** How and why do young men and women become involved in violence? How can they contribute to its prevention?

**Size matters:** How are the challenges that megacities face different from those that small and medium-sized cities face? How do interventions need to be adapted to a city’s size?

**Sharing perspectives:** How can researchers, policymakers, and practitioners work together to build lasting solutions to the challenge of urban violence?

Looking for more information?

For project descriptions and research publications, visit the Safe and Inclusive Cities website: www.idrc.ca/cities.

Have more questions? Email cities@idrc.ca.

The Safe and Inclusive Cities initiative is a global research effort jointly funded by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) and Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Launched in 2012, it supports 15 multidisciplinary teams working in 40 cities across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America to build evidence on the connections between urban violence, poverty, and inequalities.

Safe and Inclusive Cities
International Development Research Centre
PO Box 8500, Ottawa, ON
Canada K1G 3H9
Phone: +1 613-236-6163
Fax: +1 613-238-7230
Email: cities@idrc.ca | www.idrc.ca/cities