Ghana, like many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, is experiencing rapid urbanization and significant economic growth, but without sufficient planning and governance. Urbanization contributed to an unprecedented decrease in rates of poverty, but at the same time, crime and violence were on the rise. This goes against the common belief that poverty drives crime.

Given this unusual trend, researchers at the University of Ghana sought to understand what was happening. Through a unique project, “Exploring the crime and poverty nexus in urban Ghana”, researchers are challenging Western-centric theories of crime and urbanisation that do not adequately reflect the reality of the West African context.

The project studied the dynamics and impact of crime in urban areas and how it related to poverty. Through first-hand data and a mapping of twelve neighbourhoods in four Ghanaian cities — Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi, and Tamale — researchers found key indicators pointing to a number of disadvantages faced by poor people when it comes to crime in their neighbourhoods.

Key messages

- Urbanization has helped lower poverty rates in Ghana, but has coincided with an unexpected increase in crime and violence.
- The poor pay a penalty for being poor: they are at greater risk of victimisation while at the same time lack the resources to seek justice.
- Straightforward conclusions about crime and poverty are difficult to draw because they can create vicious cycles.
- Strong community bonds usually prevent crime, but in poor neighbourhoods they discourage reporting crime because the police are seen as “outsiders”.

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What did we learn?

The poor pay a penalty when it comes to crime and violence: they are at greater risk of victimisation and are least able to seek formal justice for it. However, the relationships among crime, poverty, and urbanisation in Ghana are dynamic, making linear conclusions difficult to draw, among the related social, psychological, and economic factors.

Among the clearer relationships are the negative impacts of poverty on the risks of becoming a crime victim. These relate to both property crimes and personal crimes. Inadequate access to toilet facilities, public lighting, road access, and formal housing that characterize slum life all increase an individual’s risk of being a victim. In lower-income areas, households can include up to eight people sharing a room. Children are forced to sleep outside which makes them more vulnerable to violence and abuse. Without indoor plumbing, poor people have to leave the home and make their way to communal toilet facilities. These may be unlit and far away, increasing vulnerability to crime, especially at night and for women.

Reporting crime in Ghana is rarely straightforward. Public perception of police corruption means people do not report crimes. Of surveyed households, 39% had experienced crime yet only 16.9% of households had reported crimes to the police. The perceived costs of achieving justice, community pressure, and informal conflict resolution mechanisms with financial incentives for victims deter reporting.

In light of this, victims often pursue informal justice mechanisms, which are less costly (or free) and present the potential of monetary gain. These involve a local authority figure who ensures the perpetrator financially compensates the victim. Poverty makes a situation more difficult since it creates an economic incentive to pursue monetary compensation that can benefit the individual and the family.

In Ghana, crime is not limited to poor areas and this is where the relationship becomes unclear. For example, across cities, crime limits people’s access to urban spaces. Women in all four cities reported experiencing harassment in public spaces such as markets, which contributed to increased anxiety. Crime has an impact on people’s health and well-being. Frequent incidents of crime — especially when they are not solved in a timely manner — can generate anxiety, fear, hopelessness, psychological insecurity, and consequent adverse health conditions.

The relationship between incidence of crime and perception of crime is also complicated. Household surveys show that crime rates in low- and middle-income areas were much higher than high-income areas, with personal thefts against individuals most reported. However, more affluent areas reported a higher sense of fear and perceived crime as a significant issue. In such wealthy areas, “fortressing” (for instance, building high walls with barbed wire on top, see photo below) of properties intended to prevent crime may actually increase it. Links to the community tend to reduce crime over the long term, but “fortressing” seems to weaken residents’ links to the community.

Additionally, it is not simply the case that bigger cities have more crime. Tamale, the smallest city of the four studied, had the highest crime rate. But, it also had the fewest resources applied to the problem.
What did we do?

The project chose four cities in Ghana based on their geographic location, urbanisation rates, and unique social and political characteristics. Accra, the capital and economic hub; Sekondi-Takoradi, experiencing rapid urbanisation as a result of the oil industry; Kumasi, a city governed by a traditional monarch; and, Tamale, the northern region capital and second largest city in Ghana by surface area.

Using the 2010 census, researchers classified neighbourhoods as “low”, “middle” and “high” income based on factors including: household income; population density (how many people live in a given area); and proximity/access to facilities such as sanitation, hospitals, schools, and police stations.

The research investigated crimes including: rape, armed robbery, theft, “defilement” (sexual abuse of children), and drug offences through official police data, analysis of media reporting of crime, and a survey of more than 2700 households. These data supplemented information gathered through interviews and focus groups with police officers, religious leaders, community leaders, youth leaders, and National Assembly representatives.

Researchers used Geographical Information System (GIS) mapping, based on police crime data, to identify crime “hot spots”. They combined these with socio-economic data on maps to analyse where different types of crime are happening in each city. Mapping helps target interventions such as police patrols and raise awareness among community members about where crime is actually happening to help manage fear.

Stories of change

The Ghana Police Service has asked researchers to contribute to its crime reduction strategy due to their engagement through the project. Based on the project’s findings, researchers are suggesting that the police increase their visibility and presence in areas affected by crime (as mapped by the project). This is helping police strategise and place resources where they are needed most as a deterrent to crime and as a means to provide security services to vulnerable populations.

The research provided opportunities for graduate students to hone investigative skills. Four master’s students and three PhD students from the University of Ghana departments of Development Studies and Geography have been involved in the project from the beginning, learning practical skills in research design, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination of findings. With early exposure to such practical tools, these researchers are well placed to become leaders in their fields.

What are the policy implications?

It is important to understand that “one-size-fits-all” policy recommendations do not work in Ghana, given the inherently diverse realities of crime in the country’s urban spaces. This research recommends that policymakers and practitioners:
• Recognise the role that informal systems play in crime prevention and reduction. To that end, strengthen links between formal and informal systems. Community policing in areas where formal systems are weakest would help strengthen the links between formal and informal systems. There are community policing aspects of Ghanaian legislation, not yet fully implemented, which could be employed.

• Reduce inequalities in seeking justice by improving crime-reporting structures for those less able to access criminal justice resources.

• Recognise that spatial factors influence crime both positively and negatively. Work with communities to increase public lighting in urban areas and identified crime “hot spots.” This should reduce the incidence of crime — in particular sexual assault — in public spaces and create more inclusive and accessible areas for people within these communities.

• Improve police data collection so that policymakers have a better picture of perpetrators. At present, little is known about people who commit crimes; research exclusively focuses on the victims. With disaggregated data on perpetrators, future interventions can better target crime prevention, thereby reducing harm and the cost of responding to crime and treating survivors.

• Use planning guidelines to prevent “fortressing” of properties so that residents can benefit from the crime prevention effects of stronger community bonds.

What next?

While the research has helped clarify the ways that crime and poverty interact in Ghana’s cities, it also raises questions that need to be addressed. Further areas of research include:

• Unpacking the gender dimensions of victimisation: how does gender affect victims’ experience of urban spaces and crime within them?

• Working with community leaders, National Assembly members, religious leaders, and youth to put the crime “hot spot” maps to use. How can the maps be used to raise awareness? How can community members use them to prevent and reduce crime? How can communities be sensitised on the differences between crime perception and reality?

Looking for more information?

Contact George Owusu, University of Ghana: Gowusu@ug.edu.gh.

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

Have more questions about the program? Email cities@idrc.ca.