

Engaging youth in positive action to curb violence

Excluded from mainstream society and economy, youth in West and Central Africa increasingly turn to gangs for a sense of belonging and to violence to survive. Countering the problem requires policies that promote employment, education and social inclusion, rather than repression.

The issue: Societies and youth in crisis

Conflict in Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has destroyed the countries' economic fabric, driving masses of people to overcrowded, unplanned, unserved settlements on the outskirts of cities. These mushrooming slums represent growing urban poverty and inequality. Families and communities have been divided and already fragile public institutions destroyed, including the education system.

Youth are most affected by the social, economic, and political chaos: 38% of Côte d'Ivoire's population is 14 years of age or under. In the DRC, that proportion rises to 46%. Uneducated and unemployed, a growing number of marginalized youth have no choice but to live on the streets – as beggars, thugs, and drug addicts.

Authorities have relied on repressive tactics to counter violent crime, but with little evidence about the drivers of violence, its perpetrators, or its victims. They have met with little success.

Findings: Social and economic deprivation breeds violence

Since 2013, researchers in both countries have investigated the drivers of youth violence. The picture they paint is grim: youth gangs are growing larger and the age of members is dropping. Some — boys and girls — are as young as 10.

Recommendations

The studies have shown that repression will not end youth violence. They recommend prevention by focusing on social inclusion, education, employment, and reintegration, and note that implementing solutions will require a strong partnership between national and municipal authorities, community and religious leaders, non-governmental and international organizations.

More specifically, they recommend:

- Engage with youth and include them in assessing the problem, designing and implementing programs to address them, and monitoring, and evaluation.
- Implement inclusive social and economic policies and programs such as mandatory schooling, counselling and rehabilitation, and income-generating activities for parents and children.
- Improve housing, revitalize insecure neighbourhoods, and provide essential services to limit violence, particularly against women.
- Support structures and inclusive security to promote resocialization of young criminals.
- Create a rigorous data collection system for police services.

Drivers of youth violence:

- Social, economic, political, and communal exclusion
- Poverty
- Lack of education
- Unemployment
- Breakdown of social bonds and family structure
- Poor city infrastructure and services
- Discriminatory government policies
- Cultural norms that support violence and entrench male dominance

The gangs vary in age, organization, and motivation. While the DRC's *Shegue* are street children driven from home by poverty and abuse, the better organized Kuluna often live with their families, who support and protect them – and live off their takings. Côte d'Ivoire's younger gangs, known as *Microbes*, roam the city, attacking and robbing victims. *Gnambros* control Abidjan's informal transport hubs, extorting fees from drivers and passengers. Girls belong to all gangs, serving as scouts and lookouts, luring victims, and themselves becoming victims of exploitation and prostitution.

There are other differences between the two countries. The high birthrate in the

DRC — averaging 10 children per woman—has increased youth marginalization and social exclusion. Some are pushed out of family circles because of cultural beliefs and superstition. In Côte d'Ivoire, criminal violence related to rural land disputes has been exported from villages to urban neighbourhoods.

Regardless of their differences, youth in both countries consider crime — looting, theft, extortion, gangsterism — to be a legitimate economic activity and violence an important life skill. For some, such as the Kuluna, it is also revenge against social injustice. So too, Côte d'Ivoire's *Microbes* seek to take what they consider to be rightfully theirs, but that they have been denied.

If youth are often the perpetrators of violence, they are also its victims. Rape, for instance, is widespread in Côte d'Ivoire. The majority of victims — more than 65% — are children. Rarely prosecuted, rape is largely treated as a domestic matter. In some areas, it is condoned by lingering cultural beliefs.

Researchers warn that if action is not quickly taken, things will get worse. The environments in which these youth struggle are breeding grounds for radicalization.

The research

A multidisciplinary team from Université Alassane Ouattara in Bouaké and the Université Houphouët Boigny in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire focused on the cities of Abidjan, Duékoué, and Bouaké. Mapping techniques and qualitative and quantitative methods were combined with documentary research to collect data from municipal, national, and international sources. Community leaders, administrative authorities, female leaders, and victims of crime took part in the surveys. Interviews were also held with criminals, gang members, and ex-convicts.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, researchers from the University of Kinshasa's Chaire de Dynamique Sociale and the Institute for Development Research and Strategic Studies collected quantitative data from 1,939 respondents in Kinshasa and Mbuji-Mayi. In-depth quantitative interviews were carried out with both victims and perpetrators of violence, scientists, decision-makers, opinion leaders, and social actors.

Resources

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Safe and Inclusive Cities 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.



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