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When community ties lead to violent crimes

Exploring social cohesion and mistrust of the state as drivers of urban violence

Their neighbourhood may be famous worldwide for the dazzling white sands of Copacabana Beach, but residents of the Tabajaras/Cabritos district of Rio de Janeiro are uneasy over the tremendous changes they have seen in recent years. To combat Rio's ongoing epidemic of violent crime, in 2010, Pacifying Police Units were deployed throughout the area, aiming to displace the criminal networks that controlled large swaths of the city.

While armed shootouts are increasingly rare in Tabajaras/Cabritos, long-time residents now worry that the neighbourhood is no longer theirs. As it becomes safer, it is attracting new investment and new faces — which are not always welcome. One member of the local residents' association complains of being pushed further out by rising rents and of newcomers who are upsetting local norms: "[These are] people who do not respect [...] internal order. They throw garbage anywhere, they start building bars in every corner [...] So that you have an idea, there are today in the community, in an abusive way, buildings with up to eight floors, which is forbidden."

After years of government inefficiency, corruption, and impunity, Venezuelans have lost faith in the rule of law. Communities instead have developed their own norms and rules to deal with disputes and tensions over the chronic shortage of housing, basic services, and public space.

Earlier research in Europe and North America points to social cohesion — the shared values and norms that create trust and a sense of belonging among community members — as a positive factor that helps prevent violence in cities. Evidence suggests that these ties help communities to self-organize and take action for the collective good. Violence prevention programs in many Northern cities have thus been designed to strengthen community ties and trust in institutions. But new research from the Global South is showing that, in some contexts, these same social ties can also spawn violence.

From 2013 to 2016, experts supported through the Safe and Inclusive Cities (SAIC) program explored the links between poverty, violence, and inequality in urban centres in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. Several projects have explored how social cohesion may help to explain why some communities are less prone to violence than others. At the same time, evidence from these cities points to a darker side: those same social ties can deepen some forms of violence and exclusion, such as gang violence and vigilantism, especially where communities have lost faith in the rule of law or have experienced waves of migration.



Giving rise to parallel systems of authority

In several of the cities under study, residents have little access to basic services or social benefits — especially those in unplanned and low-income settlements. Where the state is absent or has withdrawn, the public’s limited relationship with state authorities may be one of mutual distrust. In such circumstances — where police and government officials are feared rather than respected — residents look to each other for protection and justice.

Venezuela today is one of the most violent states in Latin America. Even during its years as an oil-rich nation, the country saw a rapid increase in crime, with homicide rates more than doubling between 1999 and 2010, when rates went from 25 per 100,000 people to 57. After years of government inefficiency, corruption, and impunity, Venezuelans have lost faith in the rule of law. Communities instead have developed their own norms and rules to deal with disputes and tensions over the chronic shortage of housing, basic services, and public space.



PHOTO: MADIS NISSEN/PANOS



“The other day a neighbour who was the last one [to be robbed] was telling me that that they also [got into her home].”

– A social leader in Los Copihues, Santiago, describing her fears of foreign migrants

The positive expression of social cohesion can be seen in the trust people place in family, faith groups, and neighbours. Research found 68% of respondents trust their neighbours for protection while only 26% trust police. Women are also trusted as peacebuilders — in their traditional roles as mothers, teachers, and nuns.

But distrust of authorities has also emboldened paramilitaries and criminal gangs as alternatives to the state, with support from residents. Research in Brazil found a similar dynamic in Rio de Janeiro, where favela residents are caught between two competing sources of authority — drug trafficking gangs and the police.

Seeing migrants as ‘outsiders’

Research in Chile, Colombia, and Peru illustrated another dark side of social cohesion. The close bonds within established communities can weigh heavily against migrants and others perceived as foreign, even in neighbourhoods that had their roots in migration.

From the 1950s, many Latin American cities saw waves of rural migrants moving to urban areas. With little access to formal housing or services, the poor illegally occupied land and built homes. Some governments later grudgingly accepted these informal settlements, though few services were provided and residents live with the constant threat of eviction. The legacy of this pattern of land settlement is a high level of self-organization in poor neighbourhoods, and strong social ties.

In Bogotá and Lima, internal migration continues to play a major role in shaping the urban environment. Roughly half of the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods under study were born elsewhere in their country. In Bogotá, social relations within neighbourhoods are strained by the transience associated with this displacement. Lima experienced more limited conflict migration

in the 1980s. While it has affected patterns of neighbourhood growth, it puts less strain on local relations. In Santiago, however, neighbourhoods were found to be very stable, with more than 80% of residents born in the city. As a result, the small percentage of foreign immigrants in study areas there are highly visible — and more likely to be seen as “criminals” and “terrorists”.

A similar tension between the positive and negative faces of social cohesion was seen in Cape Town’s Khayelitsha settlement. South Africa’s second largest township, Khayelitsha has high levels of both poverty and violence, including some of the country’s highest murder rates. Research found many examples of mutual help and solidarity between residents, based on the South African ethos of Ubuntu (we are human through others). But this solidarity was also seen as justifying vigilante action against those perceived as foreigners or criminals.

Among the local informal traders, for example, vendors keep a close eye out for one another. “We trust each other,” one explained, “If someone has a problem they can approach the other person for help.” But this mutual help can quickly coalesce into mob violence against ‘outsiders’ as illustrated when residents banded together against a Chinese merchant accused of mistreating a worker:

“It was around lunch time when I saw people amalgamated in front of the Chinese 5 Rand store, carrying stones, umbrellas, and brooms from the toilets in the mall [...] People claimed that Chinese treat their workers [badly] and they [...] were singing that they must go back to China.”

The protective effects of social cohesion

There has been a longstanding assumption that deeper poverty equates with higher rates of crime. However, research in Ghana suggests that social cohesion may be a great leveller, providing a measure of security to impoverished neighbourhoods, at least against some kinds of crime. In a comparison of low-, middle-, and upper-income neighbourhoods, research found middle-income neighbourhoods to be the least secure. Poor neighbourhoods were made secure by the watchful eye of neighbours, who were more likely to be at home than in middle-income neighbourhoods. The wealthy, meanwhile, could afford security guards and surveillance systems to “harden” their property against break-ins.



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Low-income neighbourhoods also tended to have fewer walls and other barriers, which can provide cover for criminal acts while weakening social interactions and bonds between neighbours. The team’s analysis suggests that, while policing was the most significant factor in securing neighbourhoods, care is also needed in designing buildings and neighbourhoods to avoid compromising community cohesion.

Rebuilding collective effort and trust in the state

Across study areas, a loss of trust in government authorities seemed to be associated with the more negative expressions of social cohesion, such as vigilantism and the empowerment of criminal networks. To restore trust, states must demonstrate they are accountable and responsive to citizen’s needs. Research in South Asia and South Africa illustrated, in different ways, how involving communities in decision-making is an important step towards building such trust. At the same time, supporting communities in exercising the positive expressions of their social ties — such as their faith in family and neighbours, or the organization of grassroots community groups — can channel citizens’ energies into constructive measures that reduce violence, insecurity, and social exclusion.

In India and Sri Lanka, a comparative study of displaced communities in Colombo, Kochi, and Jaffa suggested that one factor that determined the degree of social cohesion in resettled communities was prior consultation and the perceived “fairness” of

the resettlement process. In Colombo, for example, where residents of several slum areas were rehoused in modern, multistorey condominiums, ties remained frayed due to the perceived injustice of putting all residents in comparable housing, despite differences in their earlier assets. In contrast, in South Africa, a national employment scheme known as the Community Work Programme increased residents’ sense of security by investing in “useful work”, as defined by communities themselves. Research suggests it may be the community-driven nature of the program that is making neighbourhoods safer. Bringing residents together to solve local problems appears to strengthen positive expressions of social bonds among community members of diverse backgrounds.

Looking forward: using lessons on social cohesion to build safer cities

These new insights into the workings of social cohesion in cities of the global South highlight important lessons for the design of programs aimed at reducing violence. In particular, we need to understand pre-existing social norms and ties and ensure that interventions preserve rather than replace the positive ways in which neighbours, families, and local networks support each other and enhance collective wellbeing.

Evidence from SAIC suggests that practitioners and policymakers should:

- Recognize that social cohesion may manifest differently in the global North and South.
- Tailor violence prevention measures to reflect local history, norms, and values, taking advantage of the ways in which local communities self-organize and regulate collective behavior.
- Engage communities at the early stages of program design, and create opportunities for them to set priorities and participate throughout planning and implementation.
- Strengthen the role of informal institutions (neighbourhood and church groups, etc.) that play a role in maintaining security and social order.
- Encourage urban design and housing features that foster social interaction among neighbours and enable natural “surveillance”.

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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