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What works to prevent urban violence
Solutions from Safe and Inclusive Cities

Cities of the Global South are on the frontline of change, facing rapid urbanization, deepening inequality, and spiralling crime. In some cities, up to 80 % of people live in sprawling slums lacking infrastructure, quality basic services, and effective governance. Yet much of what we know about the roots of urban violence is based on data and research carried out in the Global North.

From 2013 to 2016, experts supported through Safe and Inclusive Cities (SAIC) explored poverty, violence, and inequality in 40 cities of Latin America, South Asia, and sub Saharan Africa. They focused on what works — and what doesn't — to make cities safer for all citizens, providing fresh insight on issues shared around the world. This brief highlights interventions that have made a difference, while pointing to improvements and other promising solutions that research tells us are sorely needed.

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What's working

Public works programs that actively involve communities

In South Africa, research by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) on the Community Work Programme (CWP), a national employment scheme, showed the value of offering meaningful work and wages to low-income communities – especially when community members play an active role in shaping projects that can make their neighbourhoods safer. In contrast with infrastructure-based employment projects, the CWP focuses on "useful work" defined by communities. Bringing residents together to solve local problems — without favouring the better off or those with political ties — strengthens social bonds, while the state's investment in their priorities signals that government is a willing partner.

CWP has employed over 200,000 people, 75% of whom are women and 42% of whom are women over the age of 35. Researchers believe the program may be reducing violence through three different pathways:

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VPUU builds community cohesion and civic engagement, involving residents in crime prevention and victim support activities, and uses a "whole-of-society" approach that links civil society with government departments in urban planning and violence prevention programming.

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In Ahmedabad, urban planning had become a tool to displace low-income households from valuable core areas of the "city to the periphery, where basic services, and residents' opportunities and mobility are greatly restricted.

- It provides work and wages in areas with few other employers. For women with young children, the program's low wages supplement social grants, reducing their financial pressure and helping them provide more stable home environments for their children. At some sites, the program also provides meaningful work for ex-convicts.

- The 'useful work' that communities choose often targets crime and violence, such as through street patrols, public education on gang violence and drug abuse, and advisory services for victims of violence.

- It strengthens community bonds and social cohesion by bringing together diverse community members.

Project findings have prompted the national government to endorse a second phase of the research to test practical ways to scale up and strengthen interventions across the CWP's 186 sites.

Urban upgrading measures that target the roots of violence

Evidence from South Africa also shows that urban upgrading approaches can address some of the social roots of violence by improving public space. Research by the University of Cape Town shows that a state-led Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) program appears to reduce violence and improve mental health in intervention areas. In VPUU sites in the township of Khayelitsha, for example, 15% of households reported experiencing violence, compared with 23% in other areas. Mental health emerged as a major concern through community surveys and injury surveillance at local hospitals. Over three years, an average 22% of those in VPUU intervention areas suffered from serious depression versus 27% of those in non-intervention areas. Research also found that over a third of all injuries were linked to alcohol use, which played a major role in violence and traffic accidents.

VPUU builds community safety through urban planning and design features like improved lighting, more secure public spaces, and extending access to basic amenities such as water, electricity, and social services. It builds community cohesion and civic engagement, involving residents in crime prevention and victim support activities, and uses a "whole-of-society" approach that links civil society with government departments in urban planning and violence prevention programming.

In surveys carried out in contrasting areas of Rio, nearly 83% of men had experienced or witnessed at least two serious acts of violence before the age of 18.

The built environment may not directly cause social ills like alcoholism, depression, or spousal abuse, but research showed how infrastructure can exacerbate the problems. In Khayelitsha, where there are so many places to purchase liquor that most residents can reach one on foot within five minutes, 41% of all injuries are alcohol related.

Research findings have fed into a review of the Western Cape Province's alcohol policies. A Green Paper drafted with extensive contributions from the lead researcher, sets out a new alcohol policy for the province which shifts the focus from increasing alcohol sales to reducing alcohol-related harm.

Additional research on the VPUU, led by the Human Sciences Research Council, found the program had mixed effects on social cohesion. In some areas, the Program created initiatives, such as street patrols and more formalized street markets that paralleled existing community-driven efforts. This undermined the community's ability to self-organize, and meant that in some cases upgraded spaces were not used as planned. Findings underscored the need for communities to be actively involved in defining the scope and nature of upgrades.

Offering boys and men nonviolent ways of expressing 'manhood'

In Rio de Janeiro, violence overwhelmingly affects low-income, young black men. The pressure to take part in drug trafficking and other forms of criminal activity is intense, luring boys and men who lack alternatives into a lifestyle that encourages the use of weapons and violence. In exploring what factors helped some to escape the cycle of violence, research led by Brazil-based Promundo revealed the importance of offering other, and positive ways of being masculine.

Findings in several Latin American countries showed how fear and childhood experiences of violence perpetuate the use of violence, traumatizing individuals, families, and whole neighbourhoods. In El Salvador, violence within families is widespread, with parental abuse of children reproduced by older siblings against younger brothers and sisters. This normalization of domestic violence creates a vicious cycle extending outward to involve neighbours. In surveys carried out in contrasting areas of Rio, nearly 83% of men had experienced or witnessed at least two serious acts of violence before the age of 18.

However, in-depth interviews with former drug traffickers, members of the police force, and local activists shed light on critical events and pathways that enabled some to end or reduce their involvement in violence. Chief among these were: becoming fathers; taking part in domestic tasks; having supportive social networks; gaining education; and learning strategies that allowed them to step away from conflict. Findings showed a strong correlation between violence and exposure to unequal gender relations. When men found ways to take part in nurturing and providing for their families, they were better able to see their own masculinity in nonviolent ways.

How can these findings inform policies and programs to end violence? Research suggests donors and decision-makers should:

■ invest in programs that prevent violence and transform gender norms, especially those targeting boys in the early years, before they are recruited into gangs;

■ create support groups for men who have committed, or are at risk of committing, intimate partner violence;

■ offer therapy and council for youth who have experienced violence; and,

■ invest in awareness and outreach programs that promote caregiving, involved fatherhood, and nonviolent role models for men.

More broadly, ending gender-based violence also demands addressing the inequalities, joblessness, and social exclusion that create fertile ground for violent masculinities.

Youth as young as ten years old are joining gangs due to social, political, and economic exclusion. The data also casts light on how young female gang members are luring potential victims and youth are replicating nuclear family life within gangs.

What's not working

Over-reliance on 'target hardening' to protect property

As in many cities of the Global South, middle- and upper-income residents of urban Ghana rely heavily on security fences, alarms, barbed wire and other 'target hardening' measures to protect their homes and property. Yet research led by the University of Ghana Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research found that middle-income neighbourhoods were actually less secure than low-income areas.

In comparing policing and various features of urban design across low-, middle- and upper-income areas in four key Ghanaian cities, the team found that poor neighbourhoods were made secure by the watchful eye of neighbours, who were more likely to be home. These neighbourhoods also lacked high walls and other features that tend to limit 'natural surveillance' — the ability of residents and passers-by to observe who is coming and going. Wealthy neighbourhoods were indeed the most secure, but in addition to the fortress-like conditions of their homes, the wealthy also enjoyed higher levels of policing.

Researchers recommend that to ensure greater safety for all neighbourhoods, regardless of income, policing should be more equitably distributed. Homes and neighbourhoods should also be designed to maximize natural surveillance and the development of community ties that predispose neighbours to look out for one another. Measures include windows and doors placed so that residents can see within and beyond their compounds; adequate street lighting; and low, transparent walls and fences rather than tall opaque ones that divide neighbourhoods and obstruct views. Homes and neighbourhoods can also be designed so as to limit the number of entry points, and better enable residents to observe and control the areas around their homes.

What's needed

Several SAIC projects shed new light on chronic problems facing cities of the Global South: gaps in governance, planning, infrastructure, and basic services are prevalent, and women, youth, and the poor are at greatest risk due to widespread inequality and informality.

Including women and the poor in urban planning

In nearly all the cities under study, failures in urban planning were grossly apparent in the sorry state of housing, water, sewage, energy, and transportation in areas housing the poor. In informal settlements, a lack of recognition for the tenure rights of the poor leaves them vulnerable to eviction and excluded from formal processes of planning.

In India, where researchers with CEPT University's Centre for Urban Equity set out to document best practices of urban planning and governance to address violence and inequality, they found a near-complete lack of professional and inclusive planning. Instead, in settlements studied in Ahmedabad and Guwahati, urban governance was co-opted to the exclusion of the poor, largely to the benefit of private sector interests. In Ahmedabad, they found urban planning had become a tool to displace low-income households from valuable core areas of the city to the periphery, where basic services, and residents' opportunities and mobility are greatly restricted. In one resettlement site, local government provided physical infrastructure for water, but no process to maintain its quality or govern its distribution. The displacement, meanwhile, made way for luxury developments in the city centre.

In Pakistan, research by the Institute of Business Administration found a similar pattern of state neglect of basic services to informal settlements. In six out of seven neighbourhoods studied in Karachi, poor urban residents were exploited by unscrupulous 'water mafia' who effectively tap into state water sources and resell the water to residents at extortionate prices. Women pay a heavy price for the lack of water and sanitation: they are held responsible for cleaning and cooking, and male relatives take out their frustrations — often violently — on wives, sisters, and daughters. They also face daily risks due to a lack of safe transportation choices. In Karachi, up to 80% of bus space is reserved for men. Surveys found that 90% of women without access to safe transport had experienced violence.

While CEPT University found few opportunities to work with local and state governments on reforming urban planning in Indian cities, they documented how some community organizations achieved small improvements in services through protest and pressure on local officials, particularly in the context of local elections. In Guwahati, one local NGO is carrying research recommendations on women's transportation safety into their engagement with state political parties. CEPT University is also looking to instil more inclusive approaches in future generations of urban planners, reaching out to students through workshops that engage them in addressing the challenges of informality.

Schooling, jobs, and civic engagement for youth

In least developed countries, 41% of the population is under the age of 15. In parts of West Africa, including fragile contexts such as Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of Congo, SAIC research teams have gathered evidence that youth as young as ten years old are joining gangs due to social, political, and economic exclusion. The data also casts light on how young female gang members are luring potential victims and youth are replicating nuclear family life within gangs.

In Côte d'Ivoire, Université Alassane Ouattara identified several factors drawing youth into violent crime: deepening poverty, marginalization, simmering conflict over land, inadequate housing, and chaotic urban planning. In the wake of civil war and ongoing political crisis, organized crime and "doing politics" for one faction or another provide a means of survival and a ladder of opportunity.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, researchers with Université de Kinshasa confirmed that socially-marginalized boys and girls are using drugs and violence to survive on the streets. Evidence from Kinshasa and Mbuji-Mayi highlights how extremely high birthrates —averaging ten children per woman – are creating serious stress for families and the state. Youth are becoming increasingly marginalized by the lack of resources.

Recommendations for policymakers and practitioners include investing in income-generating activities for marginalized communities, and skills training and 'diversion' programs to enable young men and women to leave gangs. These findings have prompted the Ivorian government to expand a nationwide program, focusing on re-socializing gang members between the ages of 14 and 21, and providing them with skills and training to support their social reintegration. Civic training aims to replace the political and criminal exploitation of youth with more positive inclusion as active citizens.

Looking forward

SAIC results have shed light on strategic areas where further research is needed to reduce both violence and inequality in the burgeoning cities of the Global South. In particular, results have deepened our understanding of the vulnerabilities of women and youth and are helping to inform new directions for IDRC's Governance and Justice Program. They are also helping our Inclusive Economies program to design research responses that address how:

■ local governance structures might increase women and girls' access to basic health services and strengthen their sexual and reproductive health rights;

■ social inclusion for youth can reduce violence and gang-affiliations; and,

■ capacity building for local governance structures could create a more transformative approach to creating social inclusion within cities.