

»» Urban Violence: Preventive Approaches

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Violence is a daily reality for millions of people. Violent interpersonal crimes such as domestic violence and sexual and psychological abuse especially affect children, young people and women. The boundaries are often fluid between interpersonal violence and collective violence, which is committed by (organised) groups with political or economic motives. Young men, in particular, are often involved as both culprits and victims. Urban environments with high population density and complex social, cultural, economic and political challenges are most heavily affected.

Although reliable international data on domestic violence or street crime is scarce, the extent of violence in urban areas can be compared on the basis of homicide rates. Up to 400 homicides are recorded each day in Latin America and the Caribbean alone. Caracas, the capital city of Venezuela, was one of the most dangerous cities with 130 homicides per 100,000 residents in 2016, followed by San Pedro Sula in Honduras with 113 and Victoria in Mexico with 85 (see Fig. 1).

Causes of Urban Violence

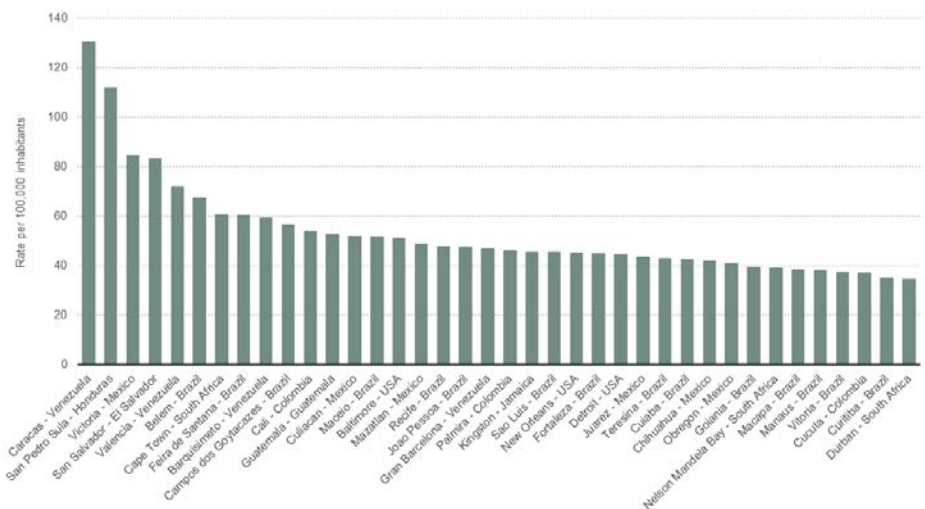
The causes of violence are multifarious and differ across regions.

The violence in South Africa's townships results from various causes stemming from the legacy of apartheid, including urban segregation, persistent structural inequality and a lack of rights among the population ("poverty-crime relationship").

Political repression over many years and weak and corrupt institutions have also significantly contributed to the high crime rates in Latin America and Asia. Aside from this, gang crime and drug crime also have considerable impacts. Terrorist violence also increasingly plays a role in some countries in Asia and the Middle East. In many countries, Vigilantism and abuses of police power instigate criminality.

Inhabitants of disadvantaged, often informal urban settlements suffer more immediately

Figure 1: Cities with the highest homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants (2016)



Source: Citizens' Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice (Mexico)

from impoverishment, unemployment, social exclusion and discrimination. People in these communities experience violence and fear of violent threats on a daily basis. Young people are often forced to become members of criminal gangs, which strengthens the supposed sense of belonging to a group with power and respect.

Curbing and Preventing Violence

Because the causes are so wide-ranging, violence control strategies must be geared to the context at hand. Experience in many of the cities in question shows that strategies centred on crime-fighting measures alone do not lead to a significant reduction in violence. Holistic, integrated urban development approaches demonstrate success (strengthening urban institutions, social services and building standards, as well as comprehensively integrating safety-related aspects). The city of Medellín in Columbia has achieved a significant reduction in its homicide rate with numerous, consistent measures (including breaking up drug cartels, regulated alcohol sales, supporting social projects and infrastructure to improve links between districts). Today, the former hotbed of crime is regarded as an innovative and livable city.

Possible approaches to curb violence in urban areas include:

- Establishing the rule of law and safe environments
- Developing social services for women, children and families to promote primary prevention
- Supporting employment for young and unemployed people
- Access to basic water, electricity, education, health, legal advice and local public transport services
- Formalising the status of informal settlements and promoting social housing construction
- Reintegration programmes for gang leavers

The most promising approaches are integrated ones, combining crime-fighting measures with measures to highlight economic alternatives for those involved and strengthen social cohesion. ■