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Demons of density: Growth of the violent city

The rise of the [fragile city](#) in the last 20 years has contributed to higher concentrations of poverty, crime, and violence in urban centres, often overwhelming both public and private responses. Not limited to developing countries – most urban settings have homicide rates far above national averages. This blog explores the relationship between rapid urbanisation and crime.

The [direct costs of crime](#) are visible and experienced daily – death, injury, theft, destruction to property, assets and public infrastructure. Indirect costs are less clearly understood, especially in developing countries. They can include psychological trauma, population displacement, disruption of social services, brain drain, and increased demand for law enforcement. All of these effects are heightened in urban centres. In cities, people are anonymous. Spending on law enforcement per capita tends to be lower as are levels of community cooperation with police.

From 1980-2000, total recorded global crime rates increased by ~30%; much of this coming from developing country cities. Historically, urbanisation has been a largely positive force. Rates of urbanisation were highest in [the richest countries, and the resulting economic development](#) from urbanisation reinforced structures of law and order, ultimately reducing crime rates.

Developing country urbanisation, however, does not seem to reflect this pattern as readily. [UN-Habitat](#) reports that over the past five years, 60% of all urban residents in developing countries have been victims of crime. This may be attributable, at least in part, to patterns of urbanisation emerging in [developing country cities, relative to urbanisation patterns experienced by richer countries](#).

Does infrastructure inadequacy in periods of rapid urbanisation exacerbate violent crime?

One explanation for elevated crime rates in developing cities is the [speed of urbanisation](#). This, coupled with lagging infrastructure and housing stocks, result in the expansion of informal settlements, or slums. Sensationalist, often neo-Malthusian, narratives around "[ethnic tensions, overcrowding and competition for scarce resources](#)" are often espoused as

and competition for scarce resources" are often espoused as explanations for violent crime. Slums become "forbidden zones" beyond the control of public security forces, leading to a heightened sense of fear. This causes a reduction in economic investment by the private sector, as well as in public sector provision of infrastructure and services.

Integrating slums and promoting social cohesion is vital for eliminating spheres of violence

Slums are certainly a highly visible symptom of rapid urbanisation, but they are hardly the primary or sole driver of urban violence and crime. Interventions tackling crime rates must be broader and designed to support spatial urban integration, with an emphasis on improving social cohesion through equality of access to services and infrastructure.

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UN-Habitat identifies three such endeavours as the most important for strengthening law and order – policing, community based approaches, and enhancing urban safety and security through effective urban planning, design and governance.

Police forces can either help or hinder urban securitisation efforts

When tackling urban crime, the classic response is to focus on police reform. Police forces in developing countries face a number of significant problems including low capacity and training and fewer resources. In India for example, Constables which make up almost 85% of the police force, are, by and large, not trained in criminal investigation. In most developing countries, the police are regularly seen to be one of the most corrupt bureaucracies. Extortion (false arrests for pecuniary or sexual services), corrupt transactions, and bribery are rife. Not only do these actions have direct physical impacts, but they also reduce public trust in institutions of law and order. Addressing police corruption is paramount to improve community trust in their police force.

In India, 62% of people report having paid a bribe to the police in 2013, twice the global average. 75% think the police are corrupt or extremely corrupt. One interesting initiative to combat police corruption in India has been the zero-rupee note a symbol of citizen protests against official corruption or the solicitation of bribes in return for services which should be free.

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Pillar. Since its inception in 2007, 5th pillar has distributed over
2.5 million zero-rupee notes.

Social Cohesion: Self-policing effectively reduces resource burdens

Perhaps more effective at fighting local crime than police
reforms have been collective community initiatives such as the
'neighbourhood watch' or informal community sanctions. As
Glaeser notes, communities can be even more effective than
outside authorities at monitoring and self-policing. Cities
however, limit the strength of such communities. The challenge
of urban anonymity makes it harder for communities to identify
culprits, let alone inflict punishment. Similarly, anonymity
raises barriers to encouraging collective action that is needed for
self-policing.

However, citizens need to be included in the process of policing.
It reinforces the social contract and encourages neighbourhood
cohesion, while reducing the burden on resourced-constrained
police forces. In the late 1980s, Uganda piloted an innovative
model of community policing in Kampala as a response to
community dissatisfaction with police performance.
Community Police Officers (CLOs) were identified, trained and
dispatched throughout Uganda. They are primarily tasked with
engaging with and raising community awareness about police
forces, including basic human rights and due process, and
establishing "neighbourhood watches". While recognised as an
important part of law enforcement and the restoration of order
in urban societies, problems of mis-management and a lack of
public understanding have been identified.

Environment and atmosphere – how structures and spaces cultivate security

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> "

Despite having a large effect on crime rates, the environment in
developing country cities is often overlooked in efforts to tackle
crime. UNICEF identifies a number of areas where
environmental factors worsen crime rates. Communities need
safe places for people to gather. Narrow alleyways or
insufficient street lighting create opportunities for violent
assault. Limited or poorly maintained water and sanitation
infrastructure (detailed in the first part of this series) increase
the risk, particularly to women, of physical or sexual assault
during daily activities (e.g. when fetching water or using public
toilets).

For this reason, urban crime experts have turned their attention
to Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) –
urban planners working in partnership with the support of the
community and local law enforcement to fix problems with the
built environment. CPTED typically takes one of two forms:

built environment. CPTED typically takes one of two forms. Target hardening, building fences and gated communities, which results in the privatisation of public spaces, or the expansion of communal spaces, the construction of more open planned and communal spaces.

Often, rapidly urbanising centres such as **Accra (Ghana)** take the first option. High walls and burglar-proofing devices have created "security islands". Not only do they have a limited impact on community crime, they also have a tendency to weaken social cohesion and increase fear.

Conclusion

The primary problem hindering further research in this area **is the lack of reliable and comparable data**. Newer efforts by researchers have focused on the potential applications of using **citizen-generated geo-coded data,** or **social media** to leverage collective action to identify and predict crime clusters or waves in cities. Further research is needed to understanding the potential for such approaches to have more wide-spread usage in both developed and developing cities.

To read more about the downsides of density, read the **IGC's Growth Brief**.