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Peace in Our Cities in a Time of Pandemic:

Digital Threats & Urban Violence Prevention

This research brief is part of the FCDO-funded project 'Peace in Our Cities in a Time of Pandemic' led by Impact:Peace, Kroc Institute of Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego.

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The Peace in Our Cities platform was launched on International Day of Peace in September 2019 out of an urgent demand to reverse trends of urban violence around the world. Peace in Our Cities (PiOC) brings together the political leadership of Mayors, local and international peacebuilders, the imperatives of the Sustainable Development Goals, and a bold assertion that we have the tools and knowledge to build peace and save lives in urban areas. With seventeen cities and more than two dozen organizing partners signed on to date, PiOC represents over 20 million people globally. Working together through evidence-based approaches, PiOC is committed to achieving a 50% reduction in urban violence by 2030.

Peace in Our Cities is co-facilitated by three organizations: Impact:Peace, Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego; +Peace Coalition; Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, Center on International Cooperation at New York University. Find out more about Peace in Our Cities: www.sdg16.plus/peaceinourcities

The COVID-19 Pandemic, Digital Threats and Urban Violence Prevention

Diverse threats have emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic. Around the world, the pandemic is triggering increases in urban violence. Many cities declared their violence prevention units "essential workers" at the start of Covid-19 lockdowns, recognizing the link between the pandemic and various forms of violence.[1] In Europe and other regions, the pandemic is increasing resentment toward refugees[2] and attacks on migrants.[3] Human Rights Watch reported increases in anti-Asian racism and xenophobia worldwide.[4] In Latin America, criminal groups are expanding their reach during the pandemic in what the International Crisis Group deemed "virus-proof violence."[5] In the United States, a study of 34 cities found a 30 percent increase in homicides in 2020 compared to 2019, noting that the pandemic is increasing physical, mental, emotional and financial stress for at-risk individuals.[6] Gender-based violence became widely known as "the pandemic within the pandemic," particularly in cities in Africa[7] and Latin America.[8] Experts in terrorism and violent extremist recruitment warn of increased recruitment during the pandemic.[9] In West Africa, Boko Haram increased terror attacks during the last year.[10] The January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol is but one example of how mass digital radicalization on social media is translating into violence during the pandemic.[11]

The pandemic also is triggering "infodemics," including contagious waves of false information about the source of the virus, conspiracies about who would profit from Covid-19, fake cures and anti-vaccine messages. Social media is playing a central role in all of these trends. While the Covid-19 virus is spreading primarily through the air, social media is the vector for spreading disinformation and incitement to violence.[12] Even before the pandemic, there was growing evidence that violent groups such as drug cartels[13] and violent extremist groups[14] were relying on social media communications—and that this reliance was amplifying levels of violence.[15] Social media is bringing a "techtonic shift" to human relations by acting as a vehicle for organizing violence and amplifying disinformation, xenophobic conspiracies and polarizing public discourse.[16]

People in urban areas tend to be more highly connected via social media platforms like Weibo, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, as well as via video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Webex. Digital connectivity seems to have brought both more access to information and services and more risk of exposure to false or dangerous information or cyberthreats.

> Social media platforms enable users to share information, ideas, photos, videos and other content. Unlike digital tools like email or messaging apps, social media platforms enable users to communicate with large digital communities via computers or cell phones. While platforms such as WhatsApp provide private messaging services, they are also used for large group conversations, therefore constituting a form of social media.

The pandemic accelerated technological innovation, as the lockdowns and social distancing required cities to help people figure out how to have virtual consultations with medical workers and local government, attend school, work from home, and develop new online business models. The Global Innovation Exchanges' Covid-19 Innovation Hub[17] documents how city leaders have used Zoom sessions for the public to attend city hall meetings, crowdsourced social media movement data to check on supplies of face masks and contact-tracing, new apps to

address fake news, and new digital networks to enable more people to work and attend school from home.

City leaders around the world are keen to harness the positive power of social media to interrupt cycles of violence and to counter negative social media trends. Law enforcement in particular are finding social media a potent tool for identifying potential threats of violence, as well as communicating and building trust with communities. City leaders and communities are trying to keep up with the rapid expansion and explosion of new technologies that can bring communities greater empowerment and inclusion but also increased risk of hate and violence, particularly during the pandemic.

This brief offers city leaders ideas for and examples of urban innovations in the use of social media to address various forms of violence during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Methodology

Research took place primarily online and via interviews during November and December 2020. Search terms focused on examples of city actors working to prevent violence in the wake of COVID-19 related to social media, including responding to disinformation or incitement to violence promoted online, as illustrated in Figure 1. Where case studies from city actors could not be found, the brief drew on examples from state leaders, civil society and international organizations. According to this analysis, the UN system has done the most to create social media-based methods of addressing urban violence during the pandemic.

This brief explores forms of harm or violence that have accompanied the pandemic. The research draws on Peacetech Lab's Covid Violence Tracker, which finds that the primary forms of pandemic-related violence are gender-based and xenophobic violence.[18] It also explores the ACLED Covid Disorder Tracker covering violence and protests related to the pandemic.[19] Unlike these trackers, this brief does not cover protests or excessive use of force by police related to enforcing lockdowns or pandemic restrictions. This research focuses instead on the following forms of violence in urban areas (illustrated in greater detail below): Harms from lack of access to information or from disinformation; xenophobic violence; criminal, drug and gang violence; violent extremism; and gender-based violence.

In each of these areas, the brief offers examples of and recommendations for how city leaders have used or could use social media to counter these threats. The brief concludes with a series of recommendations detailing how urban leaders can simultaneously reinforce both positive public health messaging and public safety priorities via social media.

What Is Unique about Social Media Communication?

Social media is a potent new force in human history and a massive technological experiment that can be used to benefit and harm society. Social media is used to organize gang fights, to distribute violent pornography, to exploit children, to threaten minority groups, and to recruit new members to violent extremist groups. Social media is also used to offer webinars on women's empowerment, preventing gang violence, or countering hate speech. Authorities use social media to create communication channels between governments and the communities they serve to inform them of threats and how to stay safe. And communities and civil society groups use social media to share their stories of resilience and recovery.

Communication on the internet is distinct from communication via other "legacy" media such as radio, television or print news.[20] When compared to television or newspapers, a message on social media can travel faster, reaching millions of people around the planet instantaneously. Whereas legacy media's gatekeepers filter public information, digital technologies enable a single person to instantly post a false message about Covid-19 to millions of people around the world. Digital technologies allow groups of people to communicate with each other about Covid-19, gang violence or any other related topic by creating a shared digital space or "room" for discussion. With digital technology, a person can post a message on any topic with near total freedom of content, unhampered by editors, to millions of people with no or low cost. Unlike legacy media, information shared on social media carries legitimacy based on relationships, a dynamic known as social confidence. When people share either true or false information about Covid-19 online, they endorse that information, increasing the likelihood that their friends will consider that information important.

Social media also enables authorities to track data in new ways, with both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, scientists and health officials can collect and share Covid-19 data in real time, providing instant data on cases and deaths in different regions of the world.[21] On the other hand, with the ability to track users' locations, friends, interests and digital activities, some governments have used the pandemic to greatly increase social media surveillance and repression of political opponents.[22]

In addition, social media platforms operate on a different economic model than legacy media. Access to most social media platforms is free because users are the product, not the client. Political and corporate advertisers pay platforms for access to users. Platforms collect information from users about their interests and identities. The more information a platform can gather about users, the more they profit. Advertisers are able to target audiences more receptive to their ideas or products, making advertising on social media more effective than on legacy media. Platform designers use neuroscience and psychological research to keep users on platforms longer with emotionally-engaging colors and buttons and algorithms that show users sensational content. Some scholars argue social media addiction is built into the design. With Covid-19's lockdowns and restricted movement, unemployment and canceled schools, more

people spent more time on social media. Researchers in a variety of countries found significant increases in the use of digital technology during the pandemic, as well as increased mental stress related to social media.[23]

Types of Harm Related to Social Media and Covid-19

During the pandemic, social media fueled multiple forms of harm. Even before the pandemic, a large body of research documented the negative emotional impact of time spent on social media, particularly for youth.[24] With the pandemic and the additional anxiety, stress, economic insecurity and social isolation it has brought, these negative effects of social media are compounded, resulting in a wide range of mental illnesses, including self-harming behaviors not covered here. This brief focuses on forms of harm related to and resulting from both a lack of digital access and the spread of false or harmful information. Implications are described briefly below.

Information Access

The World Economic Forum warns that the pandemic exposes the digital divide. Half of the global population have no access to the internet, and during the pandemic that means they have less access to health warnings, online services and other life-saving information.[25] A survey of U.S. city technology offices conducted by the Urban Institute found that "digital inequities and the digital divide [could lead] to higher rates of death" if communities without the internet did not have access to information about Covid-19, or were unable to work from home, attend school from home, complete homework on time, or access city services. Small businesses without an online presence, most often found in low-income communities, had a more difficult time surviving than those businesses that moved part or all of their services online. Four out of five U.S. survey respondents reported that the highest-demand technology-based city services included Covid-19 informational pages on small business loans, unemployment and food assistance.[26]

Pandemic Disinformation

Soon after the pandemic began, the World Health Organization announced that an explosion of information, much of it untrue, was emerging. This "infodemic" has contributed to a variety of harms, including increases in violence against medical workers and minority groups. A global study of disinformation related to the pandemic in 87 countries and 25 different languages published in the *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* found that during the first few months of the pandemic approximately 800 people died, 5,800 people were admitted to the hospital and 60 people developed complete blindness as a result of dangerous disinformation promoting drinking methanol as a cure.[27] The article also records dozens of conspiracy theories about who created the virus to make profit, who was using the virus as a biological weapon to weaken other religious or ethnic groups, or who was using the virus to wage an economic war on other countries.

- In Colombia, false rumors on WhatsApp accused doctors of running a "Covid cartel" to profit from the pandemic. The rumor caused distrust of and threats toward medical staff, with some patients dying because they were fearful of seeking treatment.[28]
- Mexico's Ministry of Interior documented 47 cases of aggression toward health workers by April 28, and some doctors and nurses avoided public transport and taxis to prevent attacks.[29]

Xenophobia and Ethnic, Racial and Religious Identity-Based Violence

The "infodemic" also included "Coronaphobia": the racist blaming of people from China (or anywhere in Asia) or of Jews, Muslims, immigrants or any minority group, spread primarily on social media. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres observed that the Covid-19 pandemic has created "a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering," adding that "[a]nti-foreigner sentiment has surged online and in the streets..."[30] Crises and disasters are often opportunities for those driving xenophobia and identity-based discrimination. Psychologists have long analyzed the human tendency to blame other groups, particularly in the midst of a disaster.

- In Țăndărei, Romania, xenophobic false accusations blaming Roma people for spreading Covid-19 circulated mostly on private social media messaging applications.[31]
- In Masanchi, Kazakhstan, mobs carried out a deadly pogrom against the Dungan population, who are Muslims of Chinese descent, charging they spread the virus.[32]
- In Delhi, India, social media accelerated Islamophobic accusations against all Muslims after a meeting of the Islamist group Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) became a super-spreader event.
- South Africa built a wall in an attempt to prevent migration from Mozambique during the pandemic. The growing "Afrophobia" movement resulted in potentially dangerous hashtags and protests with names like #ForeignersMustGo and #PutSouthAfricansFirst.[33]

Criminal, Drug and Gang Violence

The pandemic created conditions that escalated violent crime in many cities. Drug dealers and gangs have used social media as a tool to recruit new users, arrange for drug delivery, organize brawls or incite gang fights.

- In Lagos, Nigeria, gangs spread rumors on social media about a Covid-related increase in violent crime, but most were fake attacks and false rumors.[34]
- In Mission Bay, New Zealand, over a hundred youth organized a massive school brawl on social media during the Covid-19 pandemic.[35]
- In Liverpool and Manchester in the United Kingdom, drug traffickers recruited local youth to "work the county lines" to distribute drugs in urban areas via social media during the pandemic.[36]
- In Brooklyn, United States, two prominent gangs, known as Woo and Choo, were more active on social media during the pandemic both to organize fights and to share music that includes references to violence.[37]

Violent Extremism

During the pandemic, violent extremist groups including ISIS, Al Qaeda and far-right white supremacist groups actively capitalized on the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to advance their ideology, recruit new members, raise funding for operations, and carry out training. Violent extremist groups have long exploited social media because of its privacy and anonymity, particularly on platforms like Telegram, a secure, encrypted messenger app that protects against government surveillance. Experts anticipate a potential increase in online recruitment, given that more people are spending more time on social media, particularly among vulnerable groups including young, unemployed men looking for a sense of meaning and belonging.[38]

- In a variety of U.S. cities, far-right extremist groups have used social media to share conspiracy theories that Covid-19 is a hoax and that Bill Gates created the virus to profit from the vaccine.[39] The Wall Street Journal reported that the first five months of the Covid-19 pandemic saw a 600 percent increase in membership in the ten largest QAnon Facebook groups.[40] QAnon conspiracies about both Covid-19 and the U.S. election prompted many social media followers to take part in the January 6 white supremacist extremist violence in Washington, DC. [41]
- Among German-speaking populations, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue reports that online extremist activity dramatically increased by at least 14 percent during the pandemic. This online increase, primarily on Telegram, seems to have contributed to growing support for real-world demonstrations and rallies against Covid-19 safety measures and has often included anti-migrant, antisemitic and anti-vaccine messaging.[42]

Gender-Based Violence

The pandemic's lockdowns, unemployment and family stress have dramatically increased domestic violence as well as cyber abuse against women and girls, including physical threats, sexual harassment, stalking, zoom-bombing and sex-trolling. UN Women also reports that people with minority identities (i.e., members of LGBTQI) also experience high levels of online abuse through discrimination and hate speech. As a result, they tend to self-censor and withdraw from digital discussions.[43] During quarantine, privacy is scarcer, and many have fewer outside contacts on which to call for help. Domestic abusers often monitor all phone and computer activity, such as texts, emails and social media accounts, also limiting access to help.[44]

- In Pakistan, 40 percent of females reported cyber abuse including sexually explicit messages, sex-trolling and blackmailing.[45]
- In Orlando, United States, police investigators noted a dramatic rise in reports of online child pornography, particularly as children attending school online potentially spend many hours each day unsupervised and vulnerable to online abuse.[46]

Smart City Recommendations

Covid-19 accelerated urban adoption of digital technologies by city managers and leaders. "Smart cities" leverage technology to improve governance in a variety of ways. Analysts estimate that in the next few years "smart city investment" will reach $203 billion globally. In

an urban "internet of things," cities increasingly use physical objects embedded with sensors, software and other technologies to connect and exchange data via the internet to improve public services such as public safety.[47] Urban leaders are ramping up their public-private-people partnerships, mapping out how new technologies can serve information needs of both residents and public officials, and also taking care to anticipate potential digital risks, such as privacy violations or cyberwarfare.[48] The pandemic provides an opportunity for city authorities and urban populations to build capacity for using social media to prevent violence in a range of different ways with low cost and high impact.

Gather Digital Information for Violence Prevention
City staff can use sentiment analysis software to collect data from social media platforms to understand public attitudes, identify potential threats, and find sources of false information. Bearing in mind that any type of surveillance tools must be accompanied by strong accountability mechanisms, examples of such work include the following:

- In Cape Town, South Africa, the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) uses social media to analyze polarization, divisive rhetoric and narrative manipulation related to xenophobia and Covid-19.[49]
- In Chicago, United States, social workers use social media to build relationships with community members to improve their understanding of individuals' wider circle of influence and to enable more effective violence prevention interventions.[50] When racial justice protests began after the police killing of George Floyd, the information officers followed social media conversations about the protests in order to develop effective messaging for communicating with the public about wearing masks at the protests.[51] Chicago researchers note that it is important to have racial and cultural literacy in decoding social media posts.[52]
- Taiwan's Digital Ministry uses the social media polling platform Polis to create public conversations about responses to Covid-19. With this method of developing "collective intelligence," ordinary citizens can vote up or down on each other's ideas, providing feedback and helping each other understand differences as well as common ground. This prompts people to "listen at scale" to develop a rough consensus that also leads to more creative, crowdsourced policies that address the needs of others.[53]
- In India, Safe City invites anonymous reporting of sexual and gender-based violence by crowdsourcing reports of assaults that take place in public spaces.[54]

Use Ad Campaigns to Prevent Violence
In many countries, the public primarily accesses information through social media, not legacy media. Public health officials could adopt well-tested methods of reaching constituents with fact-based narratives.[55] Advertising companies do extensive research to find out where their potential customers get information, what they care about, and how to frame information to attract attention. Advertisers like to use social media because major platforms enable them to show different ads to different identity groups, making it possible to be more culturally attuned to their unique interests. City governments could use these same social marketing techniques, leveraging social media to frame culturally sensitive information to diverse urban populations.

Before the pandemic, the Ohio State University's Moritz Law School had developed a slate of ideas for city leaders on how to use social media to help reduce community divisions in the midst of a crisis—ideas that are now relevant for the current crisis.[56] For example, city leaders can develop a social media following over time by posting a constant stream of compelling, culturally relevant digital content and collaborating with urban influencers online to amplify city leaders' posts. These examples below illustrate how city leaders have used social media ad campaigns to prevent violence during the pandemic:

- In Mexico City, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) identified rumors suggesting that migrants and refugees were transmitting Covid-19, fueling xenophobia. They developed a social media campaign to sensitize citizens about the importance of protecting human rights and avoiding xenophobia and hate speech. The campaign targeted urban locations where there are migrant shelters, safe houses or temporary camps for people on the move. The goal was to foster greater empathy and understanding, urging the public and officials tasked with helping address the pandemic not to discriminate and to understand migrant vulnerability. IOM found that the campaign reached hundreds of thousands of users on Facebook and Twitter. IOM is now in the process of researching how the campaign affected public perceptions of migrants over time.[57]
- In New York City, United States, the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs developed a multilingual campaign in newspapers and on social media promoting city services available to all New Yorkers regardless of immigration status, ability to pay or employment status.[58]
- In Uzbekistan, a national program before the pandemic that had used sports to promote youth resilience to violence moved online. The "I Choose Sport" campaign developed social media videos featuring Uzbek sports champions as positive role models for the country's youth.[59]
- In Vancouver, Canada, Lt. Governor Janet Austin launched an anti-racism campaign on Twitter called "Different Together." The campaign aimed at reducing hate by celebrating diversity during the pandemic.[60]
- In Spain, the government launched a digital campaign "We stop this virus together," using the official Twitter account of the Ministry of Social Inclusion and Migration.[61] The campaign published short videos and tweets informing the public about the important positive contributions that migrants make to the Spanish economy and society, including contributions to the pandemic response efforts, for instance as volunteers or intercultural mediators.[62]
- In Lagos, Nigeria, the EU-UN-funded Spotlight Initiative uses social media videos to sensitize people to gender-based violence as "the pandemic within the pandemic." Videos also combated victim blaming.[63] The #IDeyWithHer digital awareness-raising campaign is modeled after the global Spotlight Initiative to raise awareness of and challenge harmful gender stereotypes that perpetuate violence against women.[64]
- During the pandemic, UNESCO created a "social media package," including messages and hashtags like #HumanJustLikeYou, #IAmNotAVirus and #FightXenophobia. UNESCO also created shareable graphics for cities, organizations or individuals to post on their social media accounts. One interactive element of the campaign was asking people to take a photo of themselves and use a message frame with one of the hashtags.[65]

Promote Fact-Checking and Digital Literacy to Debunk Disinformation

There is no quick fact-checking technological fix. Countering disinformation requires a long-term strategy that also addresses broader cultural factors. Urban leaders are best able to prevent and counteract disinformation when they develop a proactive social media strategy to provide science-based public guidance in culturally accessible ways. Public information officers can "meet people where they are at" by addressing the identity and cultural factors that help explain why disinformation is attractive to some people. People share false information for a variety of reasons, including profit, public attention, a sense of civic duty, humor, social cohesion and trust with others, and uncertainty or anxiety.[66] Even before the pandemic, there was an urgent need to conduct digital media literacy, given the destructive effects of disinformation on electoral processes, xenophobia and polarization. These innovative examples of cultivating digital literacy provide inspiration for how city leaders might counter disinformation:

- In Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, the Ministry of Health worked with Tik Tok to create captivating social media videos to prevent Covid-19 disinformation that garnered more than eight billion views. The #ONhaVanVui Campaign encouraged people to "stay happy at home" in the fight against Covid-19.[67]
- Taiwan Digital Minister Audrey Tang argues her country was effective at stopping disinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic because of its coordinated "humour over rumour" campaign. Her staff and local comedians worked to develop humorous memes to share on social media to combat disinformation.[68]
- In South Sudan, local community groups organized the #DefyHateNow campaign: a digital community of youth collaborating to address misinformation related to Covid-19.[69]
- In Indonesia, a consortium of tech companies and civil society groups worked together to develop a fact-checking organization called Cek Fakta to counter disinformation that spreads on both social media and legacy media in the country.[70]
- "Digital first responders" increase the volume and reach of trusted, accurate information surrounding a crisis. Building on successes debunking disinformation in Latvia, the UN launched the Verified program to create a cadre of journalists during the pandemic to share science, solidarity and solutions.[71]
- Finland has been at the forefront of ensuring its entire population develops digital media literacy skills that enable people to debunk disinformation and conspiracy theories. Finnish leaders noted that digital media literacy skills could help other populations identify dangerous Covid-19 disinformation.[72]

Provide Public Information via Chatbots, Websites and Apps for Violence Prevention

Cities are innovating special websites and apps to provide reliable and high-quality online-accessible public services. Cities have been working for a long time to develop a suite of tools for digital or digitally delivered responses to domestic and intimate partner violence during COVID-19.*[73]* Cities can use technology to hold public meetings and education events via digital platforms. In research conducted by the Urban Institute during the pandemic, survey respondents reported cities are increasing low-cost or free internet, improved access to

connected devices (computers, mobile phones), and digital literacy training.[74] Such efforts facilitate the kind of access necessary to making digital outreach and services practical in the first place. Ideally, city leaders can build social media engagement with the public long before a crisis, so that when a crisis emerges, the public turns toward the city's own social media channels for information. The following initiatives illustrate how digital public engagement can help in violence prevention efforts:

- In Birmingham, England, a community organization called Solve: The Centre for Youth Violence and Conflict holds webinars to help professionals understand the scope of the gang violence problem in their city, including how gangs taunt each other on social media apps like Houseparty and Snapchat to intimidate their rivals.[75]
- Piloted in Ghana and now rolling out in 29 countries, Primero X was launched by UNICEF and Microsoft in December 2020. Primero X is an open-source case management web application that helps social service providers coordinate critical support to vulnerable children who may be affected by domestic and gender-based violence linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. The app provides access to lifesaving services and protection programming, including psychosocial support, assistance to unaccompanied and separated children, family reunification and tracing, while observing physical distancing and movement restrictions due to Covid-19.[76]
- In Israel's remote Bedouin communities cell phone reception is sparse. Tech innovators created the "Wonder Jewel," a 3D-printed jewelry sensor that can send a distress signal to local authorities,[77] making it useful to urban settlements without phone access.
- Saahas is a platform operating in 196 countries providing access to information that can help prevent gender-based violence. Saahas ("courage" in Hindi) is a web-based and mobile app, as well as chatbot operating on Facebook and Telegram social media platforms, that helps survivors access support and information on resources such as legal and medical services.[78]
- In U.S. cities, a coalition of suicide-prevention agencies developed an interactive web resource to offer digital applications for coping, relaxation, distraction and positive thinking to ease mental distress during the pandemic. For example, the Virtual Hope Box (VHB) is a smartphone application designed for use by patients and their behavioral health providers as an accessory to treatment. The Breathe2Relax app uses breathing exercises to manage stress.[79]

Offer Individual Counseling and Group Meetings via Social Media to Prevent Violence
Digital technologies offer a wide variety of innovations for providing psychosocial support that can contribute toward violence prevention with at-risk populations. Social media also offers the best option for reaching people in a pandemic due to both the scale of need and people's inability to access help in other ways because of stay-at-home orders. Social media enables anonymous, non-judgmental forums for sharing mental health challenges. Over ten thousand mobile phone applications exist to aid mental health, including chatbots that can offer automated supportive messages, spaces for people to share stories and support each other, and professional support direct to those in need. City leaders can also invite the public to share positive messages and stories to demonstrate how urban communities are responding with

resilience and innovation. These examples below illustrate how city residents can gather virtually to share stories online and to support one another in new ways:

- In Istanbul, the Turkish Ministry of Health partnered with EU-funded Refugee Health Training Centres to provide online psychosocial support to Syrian refugees. Digital technologies enabled the provision of safe, affordable, culturally sensitive health services to over 40,000 refugees.[80]
- In Sacramento, United States, La Cultura Cura offers online discussions to promote transformational health and healing based on Indigenous teachings related to sacred values and cultural identity.[81]
- Columbia University in New York City (United States) is building a "Digital Social Worker" to collect stories about how Covid-19 is impacting people's mental health and how people are coping. The hope is that hearing these stories will help others cope, thereby preventing self-harm and domestic violence and limiting the appeal of drugs or gang involvement.[82]
- In Jordan, the "HeForShe" campaign addresses the gender impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The program has used social media to host online discussions about gender-based violence during various crises, including the present public health crisis.[83]

Host Hackathons, Games and Contests for Violence Prevention
City leaders can create contests and hackathons to develop creative digital solutions to violence during the pandemic. Examples include the following:

- In Kenya, Konza Technopolis partnered with the Kenyan Association of Countrywide Innovation Hubs in April 2020 to host the "Great Covid-19 Innovation Challenge," which fosters partnerships between government, communities and technology companies to innovate solutions to Covid-19-related challenges in poor and remote communities. The collaboration aimed "to birth the next frontier of techno-developmental-governance interface" necessary to solve complex problems.[84]
- In Israel, a partnership of local governments and tech companies held a hackathon to develop new technologies to prevent gender-based violence. The hackathon event included over 1,500 participants and delivered 100 registered ideas for life-saving technologies. Technology entrepreneurs partnered with domestic violence experts from the courts and law enforcement and with tech partners such as Google, Wix, Amdocs, Waze, and Intel, among others. A panel of judges from academia, government and tech companies (like Facebook, Microsoft, and Salesforce) decided on the winning digital innovations, who won free legal and strategic counseling, plus monetary prizes.[85]

Follow and Make Available Safety Guidance for Digital Violence Prevention
Digital technologies also expose cities and their populations to privacy concerns, hacking and ransomware attacks. Cities exploring new digital methods of violence prevention should also take note of potential unintended digital threats.

- Australia offers a variety of resources to address technology safety for domestic and family violence, including a set of best practices for digital safety with phones or emails,

as well as guidance for texting or videoconferencing with survivors of gender-based violence.[86]

Conclusion

The pandemic accelerates the need to both tackle digital threats fueling violence and harness the full power of social media to prevent violence and increase public safety. This brief has outlined dozens of creative ways that urban leaders are innovating new approaches to violence prevention via social media and digital technologies demonstrating the power of local action to address urban challenges.

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