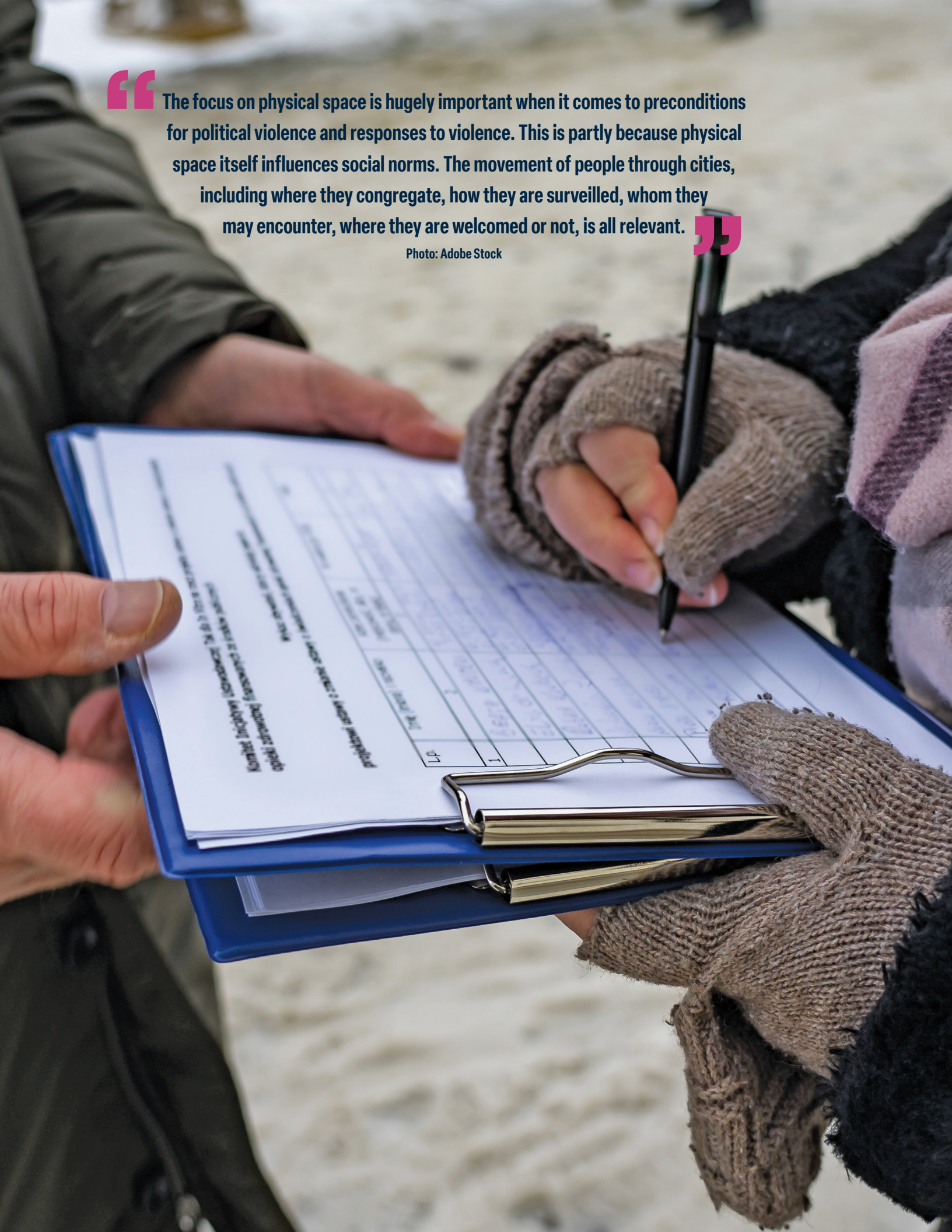


> The focus on physical space is hugely important when it comes to preconditions for political violence and responses to violence. This is partly because physical space itself influences social norms. The movement of people through cities, including where they congregate, how they are surveilled, whom they may encounter, where they are welcomed or not, is all relevant.

Photo: Adobe Stock

CHAPTER 3

UNDER ATTACK

THE ENDURING IMPACT OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND HOW CITIES ARE PUSHING BACK

By Rachel Locke

By nearly all measures, political violence is increasing. Not just in a few countries or just in certain urban pockets, but at nearly all levels of governance in a wide swath of countries. Political violence is not only a violence problem, it is also a governance problem. Political violence has the capacity to harm trust in institutions, to undermine access to and involvement in political processes, to incentivize raw power over legitimate and inclusive processes, to disenfranchise particular groups, and to degrade the effectiveness and integrity of systems of governance.

Further, political violence runs a high risk of snowballing, shifting norms of what is tolerated and diminishing the space for constructive and respectful debate. In their definition of political violence from 2019, Over Zero and New America identified "violence…meant to control or change who benefits from, and participates fully in…political, economic, and socio-cultural life."[1] Political violence impacts society beyond just the individuals who are immediately harmed because that is the intent. Political violence undermines the capacity of societies to self-govern, creating the space for non-democratic actors and systems.

This chapter will discuss political violence without limitation to the perpetrators or targets. While political violence aims to control or alter political, economic, or social benefit, the target is not always politicians or public servants, nor is the perpetrator always a civilian, a politician or a state-controlled entity.[2] Remedies and capacities to address political violence may differ if the antagonist is a state actor or institution versus an individual or nonstate actor, and this chapter includes discussion of both state-perpetrated and nonstate-perpetrated political violence.

The reasons for inclusivity are multiple. First, because this chapter and this compendium is primarily concerned with violence, omitting state-initiated violence would be disproportionate to the quantity of such violence perpetrated in the world today. But omitting nonstate-initiated political violence would not do justice to the significant threat facing those operating in the civic space today, including elected officials working to prevent violence at the urban level. Second, because violence in the civic space—regardless of who initiates it—is eroding norms and incentivizing more violence, this chapter prioritizes a broad perspective on the consequences, rather than a narrow perspective on actor groups. With a focus on the urban space, the value here is in taking a macro view of political violence, rather than siloing and separating particular forms in ways that do not reflect the urban reality.

Cities bring life to the tapestry of thousands, even millions, of people navigating their daily existence in proximity to one another. For these constant interactions to produce healthy, productive outcomes rather than destructive, harmful ones requires a healthy, functioning civic space, a civic space that is increasingly under attack because of the rise in political violence and the interaction of such violence with local and global trends.

Context

ACLED—the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data organization—provides the most comprehensive, annual global report of one type of political violence: violence that targets local officials. In its 2024 report, ACLED identified over 2,600 incidents of attack. "Asia-Pacific, Latin America & the Caribbean, and Africa were the main hotspots, accounting

for 88 percent of incidents worldwide, with Mexico, Myanmar, India, Nigeria, and the Philippines being the five most violent countries for local officials."[3]

While the reporting is not all inclusive,[4] it does demonstrate both the scope of the challenge as well as the trends. Namely, that increasingly, elected or political officials and candidates for office are targets of attack; that nonstate armed groups, which are involved in 70 percent of all monitored attacks, represent real threats; and that political competition significantly heightens risk.[5] Importantly, while this data speaks to violence perpetrated against local officials, a significant percentage of incidents are associated with decisions made at the national level.[6] For example, in California, elected local school board officials were threatened for implementing legislation that was decided at the state level, with a particular spike in such hostile reactions occurring during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.[7] Such individuals risk being victims of violence for a policy decision or statement that they were not part of shaping but that, through association or perceived association, they represent the face of locally. This phenomenon reinforces the importance of building local social infrastructure that can navigate pressures that are more purely internal to the city and that are influenced by a range of forces and dynamics that take place beyond municipal borders.

The five countries mentioned above—Mexico, Myanmar, India, Nigeria, and the Philippines—accounted for 45 percent of all violent attacks against local officials in 2024, according to ACLED. Four out of five—all but Myanmar—are home to Peace in Our Cities members. In Mexico, serious and lethal violence against local officials has become commonplace, with 2024 representing the highest year on record for attacks. In Nigeria (the most violent country for local administrators), high levels of political-criminal violence result in kidnapping for ransom, retaliation for anticorruption work, and state capture.[8] Similar patterns are observed in other countries experiencing political violence.

Beyond these top five, violence targeting elected and appointed officials is occurring in countries all over the world, high income and low income, large and small, full and partial democracies. In the United States in 2021, the Mayor's Innovation Project conducted a survey of mayors of cities with populations of at least 10,000 people. Ninety-four percent of respondents replied that they had faced psychological violence at least once in 2021, with nearly a quarter reporting having been threatened at least once and 15 percent reporting physical violence.[9]In Europe, Germany, France and Ireland rank high in terms of incidents of attack, but across the continent, political violence is a reality. In Colombia, 2025 saw a spike in political violence targeting politicians and activists: Reaching the highest level since the 2016 peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the United Nations tracked 32 homicides and over 120 threats and attacks against political leaders.[10]

Globally, 2024 was known as a "super year" for elections, with over half the world's population in 72 countries going to the polls. "In over 40 percent of the countries and territories that held national elections in 2024, candidates were targeted with assassination attempts or assaults, polling places were attacked, or postelection protests were suppressed with disproportionate force."[11] Meaning, with half the population of the world voting, nearly half of the locations were also sites of political violence.

Violence perpetrated against officials has a range of impacts across the individual, community, and democracy spaces. Across the United States, in response to a heightened threat environment, roughly half of state legislators reported being deterred from bringing their family members to public events, holding public events themselves, participating in online events, making media appearances or being interviewed, posting on social media, and working on controversial topics.[12] One study in California found people choosing not to run for office, participating less at official events, declining to weigh in on controversial topics, and resigning in significant numbers.[13] And, there is a gendered aspect to political violence. Women and those identifying as LGBTQ+ are far more likely to be on the receiving end of political violence when compared to their cisgender, male counterparts.[14] While political violence takes many forms, when the rhetoric or violation is sexual in nature, it is nearly always directed at women or members of the LGBTQ+ community.

> If elected officials, particularly those working at very local levels, pull away from their community out of fear, intimidation or abuse, this does not just impact representative democracy, it also harms the social networks and local bonds that are critical aspects of social cohesion. … If left unaddressed, this dynamic can create an environment of permissiveness for the ongoing perpetration of abuse, an increase in partisanship that may lead to more extreme positions, and an elevating risk to individuals and communities.
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> — California Threats and Harassment Initiative: Mapping the Threat Environment of Southern California's Elected Officials, 2024

The impacts of a significantly degraded security environment for local officials are dire. Violence frightens people away from the political space. Research from Mexico showed that for every attacked official, voter turnout declined by 3 percentage points.[15] When governing bodies become nonrepresentative or captured, when people see such systems as illegitimate, when the system feels broken to everyone, there is far less likelihood that the balanced, legitimate, and inclusive approaches that work to prevent violence will have purchase.[16] When violence against politicians or officials undermines the reliability of or appreciation for the state apparatus, it creates more space for other forms of governance. Haiti—where in some cities gangs actively tax residents, control markets, and exert power over nearly all forms of movement—is but one extreme example of what happens when criminal governance takes root.[17]

Around the world there are concerning trends regarding a declining faith in the system of democracy[18] and an increase in support for authoritarian systems or leaders.[19] If politicians remove themselves further from public view—even if for legitimate reasons of personal safety—and if people are less willing to run for office, particularly those historically disenfranchised, the risk is that this will further undermine faith in democratic systems, opening space for other forms of government, including criminal groups, as referenced above, but also authoritarian leaders or those with dictatorial or fascist intent.

> The most common form of election violence was attacks on candidates, which occurred in 20 countries. In Mexico and South Africa, the violence was perpetrated by criminal groups trying to wield political influence and control territory. In France, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States, among others, extremism or partisan grievances motivated physical assaults on individuals campaigning for office. Voters too were exposed directly to violence: voting places were attacked during elections in 14 countries and territories, making it dangerous or impossible for people to cast their ballots. Violence during election-related protests was widespread, taking place in 11 countries, including Georgia and Mozambique, where security forces used disproportionate force against protesters.
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> — Freedom in the World, 2025

Freedom in the world declined for the nineteenth consecutive year in 2024, with eight in ten people today living in "partly free" or "not free" countries.[20] Authoritarian systems are not only anti-inclusion, antidiversity, antihuman rights, and antiequity. They also rely on fostering and exploiting divisions, reinforcing narratives of fear that justify their use of violence to reinforce their power. Indeed, alongside the rise of authoritarian systems, we have seen remarkable increases in state-perpetrated violence. "State-led violence that targets civilians has increased threefold since 2020: State forces are now responsible for 35 percent of global violence directed at civilians, compared to 20 percent in 2020."[21] The combination of state capacity for violence, disregard for human rights, and a hyperfocus on power consolidation sets the stage for the use of violence to advance the political aims at a scale that is widespread and highly destructive.

State-led political violence is multidirectional. It focuses on political opponents, on the free press and media, on human rights workers and activists, and on vulnerable communities that are used as scapegoats. "By reframing advocacy and civic engagement as criminal activity, the state fosters a chilling effect that reaches deep into the democratic institutions. In this climate, 'domestic terrorism' risks becoming a label of convenience—where the target is not violence, but dissent the President finds politically inconvenient."[22] And, state violence is able to manipulate a core idea of nationhood itself, namely monopoly on use of force, in order to harm those residing within the state in the interest not of state flourishing but of power consolidation. When states use political violence as a means to control who is able to benefit from or be excluded or punished by the state, this sets the stage for human rights abuses, for violations of human dignity and right to life and freedom, and for increasing inequality across races, gender, ethnicities, religions, and more.

Whether perpetrated by the state or nonstate actors, the large-scale increase in violence in the public sector creates space for and is facilitated by narratives that dehumanize, justifying a belief that certain people or groups of people do not deserve protection, often based on narratives that demonize particular identities.[23] But hateful and violence-inspiring rhetoric doesn't just mean more physical violence. It also opens space for dehumanizing practices and policies that implicate entire groups, resulting in policies of mass incarceration, mass deportation, mass neglect, discrimination under the law and more.[24] In addition to its direct implications for safety, violence—both physical and rhetorical—shifts what people see as acceptable and paves the way for policy and practice that undermine the values of rights, democracy, and justice.[25]

Global Geopolitical Trends and Political Violence

This compendium is focused on helping cities see how issues they are struggling with at the municipal level are connected to four broad global trends and how they can think about practical interventions and policies in light of that global-local interplay. In our increasingly interdependent world, the notion that all politics is local has become more complicated. While people may be driven to prioritize immediate concerns in their communities, the way we live today—from what is taught in schools to where our recycling ends up to how our local banks are connected to global financial flows to what we read on social media—is influenced by global patterns. In the same way, political violence is nearly always a combination of local, national, and global dynamics tied to economic, social, and political structures that are highly complex, opaque, and increasingly unpeaceful.

The year 2024 was ranked as one of historically high conflict, with state-based armed conflicts rising from 59 in 2023 to 61.[26] And yet the international organizations established to intervene in and strive to prevent violent conflict are being rapidly eroded. In January 2026, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres raised the prospect of "imminent financial collapse" of the UN system if dues continued to go unpaid.[27] While the global multilateral system is far from perfect, for decades it has been a valued partner in both reducing the deadliness of violent conflict and working with conflicting parties to bring violence to an end. The decline in global systems established to advance peace has direct implications for political violence. Where the state perpetrates violence against those within its borders, this is perhaps the strongest case for external action—whether in the form of monitoring, reporting, or armed intervention. But from

Israel to Myanmar to El Salvador, UN bodies from the Human Rights Council to the Security Council are struggling to protect civilians in the face of state-led political violence.

The decline in support for multilateralism also feeds and is fed by the increase of authoritarianism. As this volume rightly points out, these global trends are not happening in isolation of one another, and they often fuel one another. Authoritarian leaders do not want external checks—they want to consolidate power internally and externally. Because authoritarian strategies are by definition antidemocratic and antihuman rights, the very purpose of multilateral checks on their tactics are to be denied. This helps create more space for strategies of identity politics, of demonization, and of othering.[28]

German Mayor Bernd Vöhringer of Sindelfingen, in his address on the International Day of Non-Violence 2024, "linked the increase in threats and attacks against local officials with the polarization of European societies, which leaves local politicians and civil servants increasingly exposed to disinformation, hate speech, and online threats."[29] There is a direct connection between what appears to be localized political violence and the rise of authoritarian systems, which depend upon division and othering in society in order to assert their own system of control and domination.[30] With the power of big tech, polarization is fanned in such ways that the average resident of a city can easily and regularly find reasons to hate those defined in some way as "other," linking these broader power ambitions, typically of national politicians but also external actors,[31] with violent actions carried out locally within municipal boundaries. This is but one example of the vicious cycle of rapid technical advancement and authoritarianism.

Big tech is also being used to surveille and control, key tools of authoritarian projects. "Hungary authorises its [facial recognition] use to identify individuals taking part in Pride demonstrations supporting LGBTQ+ rights, whilst China's 'social credit' system has been exported to countries such as Afghanistan, where it enforces Taliban policies. Predictive policing algorithms, increasingly adopted by Egypt and India, flag individuals as 'risks' based on biased datasets, enabling preventive arrests before protests materialise. Together, these tools create a digital scaffolding for repression—allowing states to disguise coercion as lawful, data-driven governance."[32] While not all technical tools are used in perpetuity (regimes and policies change), the combined power of authoritarian systems with big tech has vast implications for individual and collective freedom, as well as for state use of force.

These tools are not only highly efficient for centralized states, they also rely on massive energy reserves to operate, which connect to another global trend.

Data centers that power artificial intelligence and help propel the big-tech revolution are extremely high-energy consumers. They require massive amounts of water and have been accused of polluting and harming the locations where they have been established. Yet where politicians benefit from the capacity these tools offer, or from the official or unofficial financial contributions from AI companies, they are less likely to legislate or enforce the types of regulatory systems that would typically oversee such massive infrastructure projects. As ever-increasing technology demands grow, so does the strain on the energy grid. This is contributing to an already existential climate crisis that is producing extreme weather around the world. These events in turn are contributing to climate-related migration, which, ironically, is then used by many in power—including authoritarian government leaders—to scapegoat migrants in order to reinforce their hold on power. This is not to say all technology or systems that use artificial intelligence are bad. Just as cities are epicenters of risk when it comes to the dual-charged power of big tech and malevolent actors, cities are also using technology in ways that can help them to prevent and prepare for harm associated with such risks. Indeed, a chapter in this compendium offers productive uses of technology. But it is to point to the ways in which decisions regarding technology are being made for gain or power for some at the expense of others and how this reinforces dynamics that at local and global levels are straining peace infrastructures. The Gordian knot that connects all of these trends to political violence is complex and urgently needs disentangling.

Practice

On November 1, 2025, Carlos Manzo, the popular mayor of Uruapan, Mexico, was shot and killed during a Day of the Dead celebration by a 17-year-old assassin who died at the scene and who authorities connected to the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.[33] Mayor Manzo was an outspoken critic of both the cartels that plagued his home state of Michoacán and of Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum's plan for confronting cartels. Just months before his killing he told a radio interviewer, "I do not want to be just another mayor on the list of those who have been executed and had their lives taken away from them. … I am very afraid, but I must face it with courage." Manzo was the seventh mayor to be killed in Michoacán since 2022.[34]

In the days and weeks following his assassination, protests erupted not only in Uruapan but also in Mexico City.[35] The protests, which became heated at times with confrontation between protestors and police, served a purpose. In a country where serious and lethal attacks against politicians have become common, protests serve as a reminder of the idea that such violence should not—cannot—be tolerated.36 The next section below provides an overview of the different steps that people, institutions, and leaders are taking to try to reverse trends in political violence, including rejecting a process of normalization.

Resetting Norms and Influencing Narratives

Speaking out is hugely important as a bulwark against the normalization of violence in the civic space. Demonstrations of popular frustration in the form of protest is one way people are voicing their opposition. But there are other ways individuals and institutions are trying to shift the conversation.[37] In the context of increased political violence in the United States, for example, the Oklahoma City Declaration, signed by 230 Republican, Democratic, and independent mayors, outlines ten points that condemn violence, reject dehumanizing language, defend civility, and more.[38] Steps such as these intentionally aim to reset social norms, or commonly held beliefs about what is typical or acceptable. As the examples above and below demonstrate, resetting norms is the work of politicians and nonpoliticians.

> Perceptions of what is normal or expected of peers ('perceived norms') powerfully influence how we act, even when inconsistent with our privately-held beliefs…. Given the intensity of identity-based polarization, it will be necessary to prioritize norm-setting within groups, rather than expect a single campaign or spokesperson to be effective across polarized communities.
>
> —Building U.S. Resilience to Political Violence, 2019

Norms are influenced by the narratives that surround us. In January 2026, armed agents of the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) were videotaped shooting and killing two US citizens in Minneapolis, Minnesota.[39] Both individuals were present as observers of DHS enforcement actions in the city, where thousands of federal agents were deployed, outnumbering the municipal police four to one. Following the second killing, of Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old nurse, White House and DHS leaders labeled him a "domestic terrorist" and someone with "murderous intent," claiming as justification the firearm, which was both registered and fully legal, that he was carrying. "Pretti had a sidearm on his waist, and they shamelessly pointed to it as evidence, even though the gun was holstered, he was legally carrying it, and agents shot him after they had removed the weapon."[40] The federal government has stood by this claim using it as the narrative it needs to justify his killing, even in the absence of any factual evidence.

While there has been backlash to this false narrative, including from usually staunch White House allies such as the National Rifle Association, in a battle for control, the tools, reach, and capacity of a national government are often unmatched. Municipal and state leaders in Minnesota have consistently rejected these claims, have provided evidence to the contrary, and have brought charges against DHS officers. But in a highly segmented media landscape, the voice and reach of these more-local leaders simply cannot compete with the bullhorn of the national government.

In the initial days of the 2021 nationwide strikes in Colombia, the city of Cali saw peaceful protesters, protesters who behaved less than peacefully, and criminal elements who sought to take advantage of the moment. But the Ministry of Defense and the attorney general quickly asserted that armed groups (namely the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and National Liberation Army) were part of the protest, blurring the line between angry—but legitimate—protesters and criminal, violent groups in an attempt to undermine and delegitimize protesters. "After 60 years of internal armed conflict in the country, the police are inclined to treat social protest and civic mobilization as a subversive threat." As was done by the Trump administration in Minneapolis, the national government deployed a narrative of an "enemy from within" to allow for repression of civil dissent. For local leaders who may be seeking a more dialogue-based approach to addressing protests, such demonizing or delegitimizing narratives can present real obstacles, but not ones that are insurmountable.

The case of Cali in 2021 is instructive from a perspective of thinking about language and norm setting but also because of what has followed the strikes, which is an attempt to reckon with the inequality that has long plagued the city. Following the strike, business leaders, political leaders, local civil society organizations, and others came together to form Compromiso Valle to coordinate investment to close opportunity gaps, particularly for young people. Compromiso Valle doesn't just invest in Cali but also in neighboring municipalities in the state. This is crucial, not only given significant regional disparities but also because Cali is a regional migration hub. The more regional stability, the more urban stability and the fewer pools of individuals who are more likely to engage in antisocial activity or who are easier to recruit into armed groups.

Compromiso Valle works with a range of partners on expanding educational and work opportunities for young people,[42] but also to address social, emotional, and mental struggles that are often associated with high levels of community violence, deprivation, and disorder. The initiative also works to instill leadership capacity, encouraging and uplifting young people to be the agents of their own futures while supporting their communities. Importantly, the initiative helps create bonds across various institutions with broader responsibility. This includes private companies that are shifting barriers to entry, making it easier for individuals without formal education or who may otherwise have faced prejudice to gain employment. The initiative has also influenced urban planning, specifically the transit system to try to make it easier to support people's physical movement around the city, particularly in such ways that connect more-marginalized areas of the city and reduce commuting times for those with fewer resources to support private transport.

The focus on physical space is hugely important when it comes to preconditions for political violence and responses to violence. This is partly because physical space itself influences social norms. The movement of people through cities, including where they congregate, how they are surveilled, whom they may encounter, where they are welcomed or not, is all relevant. In Argentina, the military dictatorship that lasted from 1976– 1983 knew this all too well and worked hard to control urban space, from disallowing the congregating of groups to destroying entire neighborhoods and preventing people from engaging in public discussion.

Urban space can reinforce integration and cohesion, which reduces the "stickiness" (e.g. the ability of ideas to take hold) of othering or fear-mongering campaigns. Urban space can also reinforce separation and anxiety, particularly when people seldom interact with others across race, religion, gender orientation, political belief, or other characteristics. In

such instances, powerful narratives that demonize or criminalize "other" groups are more easily believed. Cities working to build social cohesion and prevent violence have recognized this and are leaning into shared space and infrastructure that is welcoming of all, such as libraries, parks, and "third spaces."[43]

Fear mongering can more easily take hold in areas that are home to violent groups, have experienced high levels of violence in the past, or have a history of demonizing a particular group as violent. In El Salvador, the Bukele government has used anger toward and fear of gangs in the country to justify a state of emergency that has been in place for years. The state of emergency has resulted in the incarceration of nearly 100,000 alleged gang members, with recent reporting indicating that "for every two gang members arrested during the state of emergency, one person with no gang affiliation was detained."[44] The Bukele government is manipulating people's fear of gangs to justify its narrative that extreme measures are required, resulting in reinforcing the power and control of the central government, simultaneous to violations of human rights on a massive scale. This is state-sanctioned and state-led political violence, and it was made possible, in part, because the level of violence previously in the country made people more susceptible to these narratives. In this context, civil society, media, and human rights organizations have continued to try to push back on false narratives, although several have had to flee the country, and others have themselves been incarcerated for voicing dissent.

Whether political violence is perpetrated by the state or by individuals (organized or not), there is evidence to demonstrate a link between support for such violence and hostile views toward certain categories of "others." "Racism, hostile sexism, homonegativity, transphobia, xenophobia, antisemitism, and Islamophobia were each strongly associated with support for and willingness to commit political violence in the United States."[45] In societies that are highly unequal, or where inequality is increasing, the potential for prejudicial or biased fears toward others goes up, with autocratic leaders looking to exploit these prejudices for their personal gain. It is precisely for these reasons that efforts to build bridges or to minimize the likelihood of prejudice taking root is directly linked to lowering the potential for political violence.

The city of Mechelen in Belgium is home to roughly 90,000 people and more than 70 languages. In 2016, Mayor Bart Somers was awarded the World Mayor of the Year by the City Mayors Foundation in recognition of work done by Mechelen around integration of the city's immigrant population. "In 2014, Mechelen initiated *The People Make the City* campaign that revealed the faces and stories of residents in a variety of mediums throughout the city. Through podcasts, murals, exhibitions, and street art, residents and visitors can see the faces and learn stories about the people of Mechelen in the public spaces where they are already actively engaged." Through all of these efforts, people don't just get to know one another's differences, they get to know one another. An increase in interaction, in human connection, and in community cohesion all help to lower potential risks for political violence.

As the dictatorship in Argentina was showing signs of crumbling, human rights activists and artists came together to reclaim the urban space in Buenos Aires and to counter the normalization of the violence. In September 1983, artists and activists traced the outlines of 30,000 bodies near the Obelisk, a central landmark in the city. "In the face of the inherently invisible crime of enforced disappearance, this artistic intervention reappeared those bodies in the public sphere, visually representing the scale of the crimes that had been committed and making the absence of the disappeared present and perceptible."[48] Public, physical reminders of victims or of oppressed groups can help reframe narrative, making it harder for malevolent leaders in the near term or in the future to use the power of narrative to divide or mislead.[49]

Dialogue and Modeling Behavior

As described above, the urban space is crucial in moments of heightened political tension. The 2021 strike in Cali—protesting against high unemployment, rising inequality, persistent criminality, reported corruption, and the restrictions imposed because of the COVID-19 pandemic—provoked a heavy-handed response from the state. Within weeks, over a dozen people had died and nearly a hundred were injured as a result of the government response.[50] There are various

historical and current reasons why the strike was as violent as it was in Cali. "Since the 1970s, armed conflicts between the state and guerrilla groups in rural regions have led to economic migration and internal displacements that have increased social and economic pressure on the city. A history of government failure to create strong and effective institutions has engendered a culture of civic-mindedness and activism among Cali's citizenry; civic engagement has always been high in the city.."[51] While Cali has a unique history in this sense, it is not unique in that the very way the state responds to a protest or civil uprising can itself be seen as an act of political violence or can help diminish the likelihood of political violence.

Just next to Cali, in the city of Palmira, zero deaths were reported and the strike opened dialogue between city government and activists that would otherwise not have taken place. The mayor at the time, Oscar Escobar, worked tirelessly to engage with those who were striking, to hear their concerns, and to make space for dialogue within a highly contested and heightened moment. This is another takeaway that is hugely important when it comes to political violence, namely that the conduct of political leaders can be determinative.

Elected officials modeling civil and civic behavior, particularly in moments of high anxiety and fear, presents an opportunity to engage and bring calm, and it can stop cycles of retribution between state and nonstate actors. In the aftermath of the killing of Charlie Kirk, a right-wing political activist and founder of Turning Point USA, there were calls for retribution and a palpable sense of fear and division. In this melee, Governor Spencer Cox of Utah, the state in which the killing took place, leaned on efforts he had made to bring people and politicians together around shared values.[52] Although he was mocked by some, his calls for calm in the face of chaos and fear reminded people of their shared values, that disagreement need not equate to hate, and that there is much to lose in division. When the room seems to be filled with voices calling for violence and retribution, it is essential to counter this with calls for calm and productive disagreement. This does not mean asking people to disengage. Rather, it requires supporting productive pathways for channeling such emotion, ideally into processes that can prove transformative rather than destructive.

"Research on international violence and peacebuilding reveals that much can be done to prevent violence and increase resilience—if leaders with influence and resources are ready to face these challenges squarely now."

Many city leaders, as well as officials and others in roles of influence, are developing codes of conduct to provide guidance on how to engage more effectively during times of high tension. While such codes differ in their specifics, the intention is to set boundaries and reinforce consistent expectations of behavior. The Institute of Local Government provides samples of such codes from cities across California.[54] These codes do not just clarify expectations for dialogue but also clear consequences for breaking norms. This is important so that any use of censure or more explicit force (e.g., removing someone from a city council meeting) is viewed as in alignment with stated procedure and therefore legitimate, rather than arbitrary or capricious. But other steps can be taken, including thinking about how physical space is utilized for public meetings, how agendas are shaped and shared ahead of meetings, and how to anticipate issues that could attract nonproductive vitriol.[55] As stated above, with local officials facing high levels of violence and aggression, having standard codes of conduct that can be implemented and adhered to regularly can help to lower tensions and ensure accountability for those who would seek to cause harm.

In Nairobi, Kenya, the Tuimarishe Amani Mjini initiative organized by Life and Peace Institute is working to reduce the potential for violence and build social cohesion in six informal settlements: Kangemi, Kayole, Kibera, Korogocho, Mathare, and Majengo. Through training, the initiative is fostering practical skills in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and resilience while encouraging deeper reflection on systemic drivers of conflict such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. The training included sessions in which participants reflected on the ways people "see what they want to see," choosing to focus on familiar or comfortable narratives while ignoring other equally valid viewpoints about their community. This selective perception can have implications, especially in leadership and community contexts, where

narrow interpretations may fuel divisions. There was a shared concern that some leaders may even exploit these divisions, particularly when communities are unwilling or unable to consider other communities' perspectives. The training helped participants to self-reflect and understand how tendencies to stay within comfort zones or to dismiss opposing views can make it easier for malicious actors to fuel divisions.

Countering Disinformation and Engaging Technology Prosocially

These connections and human experiences are also essential when disinformation campaigns are used, by political actors or others, for nefarious or violence-reinforcing purposes. When authoritarianism and technological supremacy operate in alignment with one another, the stakes are exponentially high. Disinformation, which is often turbocharged in today's highly interconnected world, continues to influence people's thinking in ways that are deadly and destructive. Cities are increasingly epicenters of response to disinformation and where the potential to trigger violence is perhaps most severe.

In 2024, the Melbourne Centre for Cities at the University of Melbourne and the German Marshall Fund released *Disinformation in the City: Response Playbook* with a range of examples of how cities are countering disinformation. These strategies are organized across three categories: pre-empting and early detection, spread prevention and pre-debunking, debunking and recovery. Strategies should not only respond or react to disinformation but also anticipate when disinformation may be released and understand the fault lines that may be galvanized by propagandists. In this case, there is a lot that cities can learn from each other in real time. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation campaigns were rampant globally, influencing how people felt about vaccines, what people understood to be the origins of the virus, and the scapegoating of people of Asian descent. In real time, cities exchanged information on what they were experiencing and helped one another set up specialized units to monitor and respond to disinformation.

According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, disinformation campaigns across the African continent increased nearly fourfold between 2022 and 2024. Nearly all countries have been targets of specific disinformation campaigns as rates of social media and internet usage skyrocket across the continent. "Africans who are online rely on social media platforms for consuming news at among the highest rates in the world. Social media users in Nigeria and Kenya are near the top of the globe in the number of hours per day spent on social platforms. They are simultaneously the countries that report the most concern about false and misleading information." To counter this kind of intentional disinformation, in-person bridge-building work and counter-disinformation is key.

In Abeokuta, Nigeria, the Peace Initiative Network (PIN) brings young people together from across diverse backgrounds to increase their interaction with one another and their capacities for peaceful coexistence. These exchanges also help people spread messages of peaceful engagement to help combat hate and dangerous speech in their community. PIN also provides training in civic education, human rights, and peacebuilding, all of which are necessary to counter divisive disinformation. PIN also hosts a weekly radio call-in show, where these topics and more are explored with a broader audience, offering a space that promotes messages of peace and coexistence in contexts of division and aggression.

The Tuimarishe Amani Mjini initiative in Nairobi mentioned above used a video exercise to help participants reflect on the ways leaders can use physical and narrative tools to foment division and create room for misunderstanding and tension. Youth in the training flagged that community leaders all too often remain quiet in the face of heightened tensions, which they recognized as an enabling factor that allows conflict to fester. When community members recognize tensions but their leaders remain silent, this creates space for alternative narratives, including those spread across social media and the disinformation landscape. This powerful example clearly connects the points above regarding norms and narratives with the algorithmic power of social media and disinformation.

But just as cities are epicenters of risk when it comes to the dual-charged power of big tech and malevolent actors, cities are also using technology in ways that can help them prevent and prepare for harm associated with such risks. Strong Cities Network has collected several examples from Barcelona's Municipal Data office, which analyzes social media for hate speech and mis- or disinformation, or Malmo (Sweden's) mapping of online hate using natural language processing algorithms developed by Nordic Safe Cities.[59]

Edmonton, Canada, is developing Civil Signal, an early warning system that strives to monitor online trends in a way that can raise awareness and trigger city-led responses to hate. "The system is designed to leverage open-source information from news sites, blogs and public forums to forecast hate trends and potential incidents. Edmonton's approach prioritises ethical data use, avoiding personally identifiable information while instead focusing on identifying sentiment patterns and emotional cues that could indicate emerging threats. This concept, developed in collaboration with a data ethics advisor, seeks to balance robust monitoring of publicly-available information with responsible data usage to protect privacy and build community trust."[60]

What should be clear from all of these examples is that while the power of media and disinformation is strong, there are also a range of powerful, exciting, and engaging efforts that can be made to resist hate, manage tension constructively, and build peace.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This chapter has focused on norms and narratives, building local social infrastructure, engaging in dialogue and modeling constructive behavior, and countering disinformation and using technology in propeace ways. These are not all-encompassing categories but are essential to understanding the rise of political violence as well as efforts to address its spread within the context of broad global trends. These four categories also represent meaningful and productive opportunities for city-based actors to engage in countering political violence.

It should be clear from the examples above that cities are actively centers of risk for political violence but also actively centers for resilience and transformation. In order to move from risk to transformation, cities need to proactively understand and get ahead of potential political violence. Some core principles can help set cities up for reducing the potential for political violence or at least reducing the extent or reach of efforts to foster violence.

1. **Prepare.** The rise of nondemocratic and autocratic regimes alongside the rise of technological spread of dis- and misinformation is not going to reverse anytime soon. This puts cities in nearly all countries at risk for political violence shaped by domestic dynamics (e.g., inflation, political control, and declining economic opportunities) and influenced by global ones. All cities should be proactively considering what their risk profile is, how they are, or are not, monitoring for heightened risk, and what capacities they can bring to bear to prevent or respond to political violence when or if it occurs. It is important in this regard for cities to think of political violence not only as large events—such as the January 2021 or January 2022 attacks on legislative capitals in Washington, DC, and Brasilia respectively—but also the daily, more insidious attacks against governing bodies or those seeking to run for office.

2. **Research**. In order to prepare, cities need research that is useful to them. Understanding broad trends is useful, but for localized responses, cities often need research that pulls broad trends into their local reality. Luckily, there is an increasing knowledge base from which to pull. Research can be done by cities themselves, in collaboration with universities, with networks such as Peace in Our Cities, with individual organizations, and more. There is an increasing wealth of knowledge regarding the insidious rise of political violence, and cities should avail themselves of this knowledge to increase their protective factors.

3. **Communicate.** This includes not just municipal governments communicating messages to urban residents but also all actors learning to listen better to one another. The Better Politics Foundation has good resources on listening better.[61] When there is a lack of prosocial, bridge-building messages, the space will be filled by divisive and conflict-fueling actors. Importantly, communications strategies should take into consideration the narratives that may be circulating within and across communities and proactively respond to them when appropriate.

4. **Resource.** The best preparation in the world will fall flat in the face of a lack of resources, both financial and human. In Italy, the "government has established a dedicated fund to support local initiatives that promote legality in areas where local officials have been exposed to intimidation and violence."[62] In California, recent state legislative efforts aimed to increase the percentage of campaign funds that political candidates could spend on their personal safety and security in an environment of increased risk. Municipalities should invest in understanding their risk portfolio and resourcing appropriately, ideally with additional funding support from national or regional sources.

Regardless of context, political violence in the world is at high levels and increasing every day. Such violence is fed by and feeds into the broad global trends this compendium is concerned with, in particular the rise of AI and increase of authoritarianism. In order to respond effectively, political violence must be understood both as a violence challenge and an antidemocratic challenge that simultaneously erodes rights-based and justice-centered systems. The dynamic and ever-evolving tapestry of urban life contains the very ingredients to prevent political violence. Left to rot, however, or be manipulated by spoilers, these same ingredients can prove deadly.

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About Peace in Our Cities

Peace in Our Cities (PiOC) is a unique global network of over 30 cities and more than 50 community-based and international partners.

PiOC seeks to reduce and prevent urban violence worldwide—preserving lives and helping cities thrive. It does so by creating concrete, participatory, and evidence-based platform exchanges to reduce and prevent severe violence in member cities, while also building a global movement of urban-violence-reduction advocates.

The PiOC approach is based on three lines of action:

- **Amplify** policymaker awareness of the genuine scope and scale of urban violence and opportunities available to help cities address it.
- **Advance** evidence-informed, balanced policy solutions and peacebuilding approaches to reduce the most severe forms of violence in urban contexts.
- **Accompany** city leaders, community partners, and civil society through peer exchanges and information access to realize ambitious targets for violence reduction.

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