

> Among the most significant ways climate change will reshape urban safety dynamics is through migration and displacement, which can strain services, test social cohesion, and alter patterns of vulnerability within cities.

Nairobi Town, Kenya. Photo: Adobe Stock

CHAPTER 8

CLIMATE CHANGE, URBAN SAFETY, AND VIOLENCE

WHAT CITY LEADERS NEED TO KNOW

By Jessica Varat

Across the world, the impacts of climate change will continue to increase and worsen under current projections. Extreme weather events, including heat waves, natural disasters, droughts, and flooding are growing in prevalence. Wildfires are strengthening in intensity, resulting in decimated forests, lost homes, and polluted air and water. Rising sea levels have led to coastal communities experiencing more-frequent storm surges, water stresses due to salinization, and erosion, increasing the chance of landslides. Food and water insecurity are byproducts of these impacts and have grown significantly.

Climate change exacerbates many of the same conditions that also undermine peace and incentivize violence. The severity of climate change impacts on people depends on such preconditions as levels of inequality, poverty, resource scarcity, and institutional strength. (Crawford et al. 2023) The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concludes that there is "medium confidence that risks to peace will increase with warming, with the largest impacts expected in weather-sensitive communities with low resilience to climate extremes and high prevalence of underlying risk factors." (O'Neill et al. 2022, 2465) UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has explicitly acknowledged this linkage, stating, "Climate change is not the source of all ills, but it has a multiplier effect and is an aggravating factor for instability, conflict and terrorism." The impacts of climate change on ecosystems may include increased opportunity for organized crime and terrorist groups to take advantage of resource scarcity, and those impacts may increase the potential for violent competition for resources inside of and between nations. (HM Government 2026) The human costs extend beyond borders: Those who have left their homes and migrated because of the impacts of climate change often experience xenophobia in the form of direct physical violence or violent rhetoric in their new communities. This chapter looks at how all of these dynamics have impacted, and may in the future impact, urban areas. Specifically, it examines existing literature and city experiences to better understand the linkages between climate change impacts and urban violence.

Why Climate Change Is a City Public Safety Issue

The 2024 *World Cities Report* projects that by 2030 "at least 517 million people living in cities will be exposed to flooding" and that by 2050, half of cities will experience an increased mean annual temperature of at least 0.5C degrees warmer than 2025. (United Nations Human Settlements Programme 2024) These projections have deadly implications. For example, heat-related deaths between 2012 and 2021 were estimated at 546,000 per year, an increase of 63 percent since the 1990s. Increasing heat and drought in recent years is also associated with over 100 million more people worldwide experiencing food insecurity, a condition that leads to malnutrition, chronic health problems, and even death. (Romanello et al. 2025)

In 2025, the international system became less capable of responding to these challenges, especially for those communities that will suffer the most from climate impacts. The decline of multilateralism, illustrated in part by decreases in international development assistance to pre-2015 levels, will continue to diminish the ability of many countries, cities, and communities to respond to the dual threat of climate change and conflict in developing countries. (Kumar 2026)

Another global trend that broke through in 2025: The booming demand for artificial intelligence (AI) and associated growth in data centers exposed a complex paradox. On the one hand, artificial intelligence applications can help address the polycrisis. They can supercharge existing data platforms to help cities more efficiently predict, plan for, and respond to multidimensional climate change and violence challenges discussed below. On the other hand, data center growth worldwide may spark new conflicts over associated resource use (particularly water). The moment is ripe to explore how cities can get ahead of pressures on limited resources by looking at ways to prepare for and address these issues simultaneously.

Urban Migration

Among the most significant ways climate change will reshape urban safety dynamics is through migration and displacement, which can strain services, test social cohesion, and alter patterns of vulnerability within cities. Climate migration may occur over time as a response to deteriorating economic conditions in rural areas brought about by climate change, like drought in farming communities. Large migrations can also happen quickly to urban areas because of rapid onset of, and increasingly more devastating, natural disasters, which can set off chains of temporary or permanent displacement. Modeling predicts that climate change will have massive impacts on migration to and from urban areas over the next 20 years. (C40 Cities 2024) Cities across Mexico and Central America could see a projected population increase of up to 10.5 million people by 2050 due to climate impacts.

Climate migration must be discussed together with urban violence because of numerous documented cases of urban migrants demonized or attacked in the wake of large-scale migrations. In already fragile cities, large migrations could lead to scapegoating, often a precursor to violent reprisal. Antimigrant vigilante groups were on the rise in Europe as recently as 2025, generating insecurity in local migrant and refugee communities and stoking far-right rhetoric against these groups. (Kassan 2025) Scapegoating narratives combined with authoritarian tendencies—such as evoking national security to conduct activities outside of the normal legal process—can lead to increases in the use of force against migrants by the state. In Houston, Texas, for example, a media narrative arose linking the 2005 Hurricane Katrina evacuees to spikes in violent crime, which, while later proved unfounded, resulted in more-intensive policing aimed at the evacuee community. (Bittle 2024) Civil society organizations, which often serve to counter these narratives and support the economic and social integration of migrants, may be hindered from doing so, especially in authoritarian states where interference with local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is common.

Resource Scarcity

Globally, water-related conflicts are on the rise. Scarce water resources are targeted or weaponized by actors involved in geopolitical or local conflicts, and repressive government responses against protestors seeking access to resources, like water, can turn violent. (Gleick et al. 2022) This threat may increase further with the rapid growth of data centers, which increasingly evoke pushback from communities over water scarcity, increasing energy prices, and pollution.

Water access is a powerful example of where climate change impacts combined with existing vulnerabilities (e.g., insecure land tenure, informality, or poverty) create opportunity for criminality to thrive. Limited access to water and/or poor water governance mechanisms in impoverished or informal urban areas in South Africa, for example, have given rise to illicit actors, known as "water tanker mafias," who charge inflated water prices to residents. Similarly, in Nairobi, Kenya, residents of informal settlements are exploited by water and electricity "cartels" that are essential to providing services but often engage in criminal acts and create "false scarcity." The challenge exposed by these dynamics is for cities to address the structural violence—the unequal access to services, resources, and rights—that give rise to residents depending on entities that extort them.

Maladaptation

Understanding how adaptive measures impact public security is critical. This is particularly the case for ensuring that new forms of violence are not created by climate adaptation initiatives (a form of maladaptation) and that existing patterns of violence or conflict are not reinforced. In Guatemala's dry corridor town of Chiquimula, for example, climate adaptation is needed to respond to changing weather patterns that have caused drought and loss of livelihoods. However, adaptation efforts undertaken within the broader context of locally entrenched organized crime could actually worsen vulnerabilities. (Medina et al. 2025) Chiquimula is also a central location for drug trafficking across borders and illegal mining. (Insight Crime 2021) If local governance power is held by actors associated with organized crime or those who engage in illegal activities, these actors may also seek to consolidate the benefits associated with investments in adaptation at the expense of the truly vulnerable. When threats to public safety are severe, or public security is captured by criminal actors, the likelihood of maladaptation is higher. For example, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, is largely controlled by criminal gangs, while climate change-induced drought and other extreme weather have resulted in 50 percent of the country's population facing food insecurity. (Saleh and Mosello 2024) Yet any efforts to address these challenges will likely be undermined by the security situation. Gangs not only threaten urban populations but also use their control to disrupt rural-urban food supply chains and restrict entrance of international assistance.

Extreme Heat and Natural Disasters

There is a well-established association between hotter temperatures and urban crime. (Heo et al. 2024) The root causes of this association, such as psychological distress caused by heat, or increased opportunity for crime during hot weather, remain under study. Like other climate stresses, increased heat and natural disasters significantly impact the safety of already vulnerable populations. Of particular concern is gender-based violence, which is often not captured in larger studies on this topic. For example, in Madrid, Spain, heat waves have been associated with an increase in intimate partner violence. (Sanz-Barbero et al. 2018)

Natural disasters have extreme and personal consequences for individuals; the loss of property and livelihoods, physical trauma, displacement, and breaking of community bonds can be push factors into harmful coping mechanisms, including violent or criminal behavior. (Plänitz 2019) For example, studies have found that child marriage is a way for families to cope with the economic impacts of climate-induced disasters. (Fadilla 2023) The negative impact of natural disasters on the safety of women and girls is well documented, including increases in gender-based violence in their wake. Increases in human trafficking after extreme weather events have also been observed. (Acland 2025)

What Cities Can Do: Policy and Programmatic Responses

Solution 1: Strengthening Social Cohesion Between Migrants and Receiving Communities

Climate migrants often arrive in informal urban settlements whose populations are already experiencing vulnerability due to climate change. If social cohesion is not properly addressed through interventions aimed at supporting both climate migrants and receiving communities, dangerous polarization and/or scapegoating can occur. Social cohesion within migrant populations is also weakened when communities, particularly Indigenous ones, tied to their land by culture, livelihoods, and even language are displaced by climate impacts and uprooted to urban areas. Forced into new lives where their prior community norms are not enforced and they are considered "outsiders," youths may be particularly vulnerable to engaging in activities that promote a sense of "belonging," such as gangs.

The solutions discussed below illustrate the importance of social cohesion as a foundation for violence prevention between migrants and receiving communities. (World Bank 2022) While not directly responding to climate migration,

they are highlighted because of their potential applicability to cities receiving climate migrants or climate-induced internally displaced populations. The examples support social cohesion through inclusive government service provision, economic integration, community building, and cultural resilience.

The Global Cities Fund (GCF), developed to support cities in their efforts to receive refugees and migrants, has supported projects to build social cohesion between migrant and receiving communities. In Lima, Peru, funding provided by the GCF established local municipal offices in areas with Venezuelan refugee and migrant populations. These offices focused on support services to those populations and the wider neighborhoods where they settled. They also facilitated community events focused on bringing together the migrants with the receiving communities to promote a sense of shared culture and inclusion. (Mayors Migration Council 2023)

In Kampala, Uganda, where policy requires that 30 percent of nonfood-aid refugee budgets are shared with Ugandans, local attitudes toward refugees improved when nonrefugee recipients were informed that this shared assistance was part of refugee support. Underlying this change in attitudes was the aid's ability to mitigate resentment toward the refugee community, the authors surmised. The study used a local refugee-led NGO to distribute the aid, which may have furthered the positive association toward refugees in those communities. The type of intervention could be replicated across other urban areas where this type of aid-sharing is possible. (Baseler et al. 2023)

Mayors in Palermo, Italy, and Mechelen, Belgium, have taken a similar approach to migration into their cities with an eye toward social cohesion through economic integration and positive narratives. (Locke et al. 2022) In addition to community-building interventions, such as inclusive sports events and outdoor spaces, the Mechelen municipal government deployed a strategic communications strategy that included all government services and partners. Paramount in this campaign was repetition of a positive, inclusive narrative emphasizing the unique stories of residents, which were then incorporated into public displays. By focusing on inclusive over polarizing messaging, these mayors send a message of social cohesion by focusing on the positive contributions of incoming migrants to receiving neighborhoods.

In urban settlements in Fiji, the ability of climate-displaced communities to experience preexisting forms of social cohesion in new environments is essential to maintaining peace. (Darwish 2023) Rituals, including nonviolent forms of conflict resolution, facilitated by traditional leaders recognized across different ethnic communities are key elements, as are religious institutions. (Darwish 2023) Religious institutions are key to supporting youths, who are more likely to experience marginalization due to displacement. Recognizing climate migrants' existing norms for social cohesion (including traditional forms of conflict resolution) and how they might be supported in receiving communities should be a fundamental part of how cities plan for integrating climate migrant communities.

Solution 2: Managing Water Stress and Preventing Conflict in Cities

Cities can preempt the tension and conflict created by resource scarcity through tools designed to predict future resource scarcity based on analyzing historical trends. These data tools can also help to better understand the nature of violence related to this phenomenon. For example, the Pacific Institute's Water Conflict Chronology provides an instructive historical account of conflicts specifically involving water. Data from 2020 to the present shows that over 600 conflicts worldwide have been attributed to water and demonstrates the extent to which protests over water shortages or lack of access to water can be a catalyst for violence. The Water, Peace, and Security platform publishes a quarterly early warning tool to highlight the potential for violence as a result of water, providing analyses at national and subnational levels.

In order to capture the multiple factors that may lead to violence in the face of water stress or water scarcity, cities should consider approaches to water resilience that are inclusive, prioritize access to water, and improve water governance. For example, the Integrated Urban Water Management (IUWM) approach aims to address challenges facing water supply,

quality, and access exacerbated by climate change at the basin level. This approach ideally involves all local stakeholders in an inclusive decision-making process over water governance. Importantly, by including access alongside water supply and quality, it addresses scarcity, a key risk factor driving illegal behaviors (such as water siphoning) and/or social unrest. Examples of IUWM-aligned approaches include South Africa's Catchment Management Agencies and Peru's Juntas Administradoras de Servicios de Saneamiento (Sanitation Services Administration), both of which are legal entities charged with water management and governance at the local level.

National-level climate plans can set the agenda for subnational water governance, planning, and policy that address conflict and violence risks. Brazil's National Adaptation Plan, for example, recognized that water scarcity can create local conflicts and includes a section that recommends conflict management groups be involved in negotiations between stakeholders over water. (Ministry of Environment 2016) Brazil's more recent climate plan aims to learn from these groups as they manage conflicts in moments of disasters (floods or droughts). (Ministry of Environment and Climate Change 2026) As it finalizes a new National Adaptation Plan, Brazil's government includes clear actions to involve community-level entities, like river basin communities, in water management and direction to cities and subnational entities for carrying out these and other subactions. (Brasil Participativo 2026) Colombia's newest Nationally Determined Contribution recognizes the importance of local mechanisms for water governance, known as consejos territoriales de agua (local territorial councils), which are designed to manage conflicts over resources and, more broadly, incorporate an environmental justice lens that recognizes unequal access to water, among other things. (Colombia NDC 3.0 2025) As more water conflicts are likely to arise in response to increasingly arid weather caused by climate change, these types of governance mechanisms that aim to enable water diplomacy and prevent violence will be more important than ever.

Solution 3: Designing Climate Adaptation with Public Safety in Mind

Adaptation initiatives are meant to mitigate the impacts of climate change, especially for the most vulnerable populations. To plan adaptation interventions, officials use assessments that look at the various aspects of climate risks and community vulnerability to these risks. However, these assessments tend to take a narrow view of vulnerability, focusing more on the specific threats posed by climate impacts than the underlying socioeconomic vulnerabilities of the population. (Dabelko 2022) This can result in gaps on issues like social cohesion, inequality, trust, and culture. By not capturing these vulnerabilities, officials may miss factors important for preventing maladaptation (e.g., the potential for conflict or violence created by adaptation responses) or harm to the most vulnerable populations (women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities). These assessments rarely capture the explicit threats to public safety or citizen security faced by those who are also vulnerable to climate impacts.

Adaptation assessments that take a broader approach to resilience, particularly community resilience, can be more effective in identifying public safety issues that might impact adaptation efforts, especially in urban areas. This broader approach may result in identifying important community resilience structures for officials to support in the wake of disasters. One promising example of a wider-scoping assessment is the CORVI Risk Assessment, which focuses on coastal urban areas and is conducted by local experts over 12 to 18 months. It uses a category for "social/political risk" as well as looking at indicators in economic and ecological categories. The 2020 CORVI Risk Assessment conducted in Kingston, Jamaica, recognized the impacts of high crime rates on social cohesion, which is a crucial element for recovery after a disaster. (Rouleu et al. 2020) An assessment carried out in Mombasa, Kenya, similarly recognized the risk of high levels of unresolved social tension and civil unrest to the city's resilience to climate impacts. (Stuart 2021)

Peacebuilding in conflict-affected regions provide examples of how efforts to address climate threats and also social vulnerabilities can be resolved through a broader assessment approach. In Beledweyne, Somalia, a UNDP-funded project embedded climate risk into peacebuilding efforts by conducting community consultations that explicitly focused on how

climate risks could exacerbate conflict through, for example, increased competition for key resources. This information was then integrated into the community's Climate Security Plan. Interventions have included radio programs and social dialogues that reflect the cultural, religious, and traditional norms of communities to facilitate adaptation to climate risks, as well as "healing broken societal relationships". (Berghoff Foundation 2025)

Solution 4: Reducing Heat Risk While Strengthening Community Safety

Increases in extreme heat will negatively impact the living conditions of populations in high-density urban areas, making vulnerable populations even more vulnerable to a number of physical, social, and economic risks. Green infrastructure, or "urban greening," are interventions widely agreed to help combat extreme heat in urban areas. (Chakraborty 2019) This type of intervention, designed thoughtfully, can mitigate heat safety concerns in vulnerable neighborhoods and address underlying structural violence. For example, the Heat Action Roadmap in Tucson, Arizona, prioritizes greening neighborhoods that typically have not had access to tree coverage. It also explicitly links youth workforce development to green infrastructure development by providing job opportunities in urban forestry. (Tucson Clean and Beautiful n.d.)

How green infrastructure is developed and designed, and particularly whether the processes are participatory, inclusive, and gender sensitive, will have an impact on their ability to reduce a population's vulnerability to urban heat and serve to address broader social vulnerabilities, such as insecurity. The Cities4Forests guide demonstrates the need to design urban green spaces in a way that acknowledges community fear and perceptions of safety and offers suggestions, such as improved lighting and less-dense vegetation. (Cities4Forests 2020) Officials must also mitigate the potential for these spaces to be used for criminal activity and can look to tailor community programming in green spaces to do so.

Some literature has also suggested that green infrastructure may be connected to reduced crime rates. (Wolf et.al 2020; Heo et. al 2025) For example, research in Youngstown, Ohio, and Flint, Michigan, drew a connection between urban greening projects that incorporated community engagement and reductions in violent crimes. (Gong et. al 2023) The Flint research particularly highlights the importance of avoiding "green gentrification" by following a more community-engaged version of the longstanding practice of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design. (Rupp et al. 2025)

As with broader efforts to combat maladaptation previously discussed, heat action plans in urban settings will benefit from a broader assessment of community vulnerabilities in localized heat islands to help ensure that heat-mitigation efforts account for and even help address public safety. Cooling centers, a key intervention for addressing extreme heat events, could be used to address not only heat-related health risks but also serve as a place for building community and providing social services to otherwise vulnerable populations. Resilience hubs are an example of how these types of entities can support social cohesion based on community needs on a regular basis, thereby ensuring greater resilience when a crisis occurs. For example, the Cambridge Community Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, provides mental/behavioral health programming for youths, workforce-development services for young adults, and community events while also serving as a designated resilience hub for natural disasters or other events.

Officials must also recognize the interaction between crime and mobility when identifying and placing cooling centers. Whether people choose to leave their home to access a cooling center in the midst of extreme—and potentially life-threatening—heat is based on a number of factors, including lack of information, required distance of travel, and access to other mitigating resources. In Baltimore, Maryland, for example, residents living in low-income neighborhoods reported insecurity as one of the reasons for not using air-conditioning on first floors (fearing the unsecured window will make a break-in more likely). They also report limiting children's time outside during hot weather for similar reasons. Households without air conditioning can often reach higher levels of indoor heat than even the outdoors. Elderly

residents or those with chronic health conditions may not be able to walk or access transportation to the centers. For these residents, cooling centers are not necessarily a solution. Indeed, according to a local elected official, "We wouldn't need cooling centers if we had healthy neighborhoods." Baltimore's City Council president in 2019, Brandon M. Scott, summed up the response needed: "For me, when you're thinking about issues like heat, that's connected to safety. It's all interconnected. We need to stop thinking in silos." (Round et al. 2019)

Tucson has also sought to address some of the above issues comprehensively through its Heat Action Roadmap. (City of Tucson 2024) First, the city developed a plan to transition its cooling centers into resilience hubs led by community members. Second, it set out a 10-point plan to improve cooling centers, including enhancing accessibility and adding services. Through a walkshed analysis, it aimed to identify barriers to accessing cooling facilities on foot. This type of analysis could also serve to uncover safety concerns in the community that prevent access to these facilities.

Solution 5: Disaster Response, Recovery, and Urban Security

Reflecting many of the points already discussed above, disaster-risk-resilience literature points to the need for underlying social, economic, and physical vulnerabilities to be addressed to prevent and recover from the impacts of natural disasters. Addressing the strains and impacts of displaced populations into urban areas, particularly those already underserved and impoverished, in the wake of natural disasters is a central part of planning for increased migration due to climate change. Assessments that incorporate all aspects of local community vulnerability, from physical infrastructure to governance to cultural norms, all play a role in preventing unintentional risks to safety during rebuilding.

Further research on the dual impacts of increasingly frequent natural disasters and widespread criminal activity is needed. In Haiti, an extreme example, the convergence of rapid onset natural disasters combined with state capture by criminal armed actors has made it challenging to implement both disaster recovery and resilience measures. For example, food security is worsened not only by the crop and farmland destruction caused by 2025's Hurricane Melissa but also the growing presence of armed actors in rural areas limiting access to agricultural land and forcing internal migration. (Fews Net 2026) These pressures have a significant impact on urban centers dependent on domestic food supply and under increased stress from internal migration. The dire situation of Haiti underscores climate change as a threat enhancer, and only through resolving the security situation will climate impacts be addressed.

How natural disasters impact ongoing public safety initiatives is also in need of additional research. What is the interplay between rapid onset natural disasters and hazards and ongoing public security efforts, and how does this impact the most vulnerable communities? This is particularly important for coastal cities that are vulnerable to sea level rise and/or other natural hazards and have high rates of organized-crime infiltration or gang violence.

How police and members of the public-security apparatus support disaster preparedness, response, and recovery has been studied in nonurban areas with low crime, but there is a need to further analyze its applicability for urban areas. (Blaustein et al. 2023) The concept of resilience policing that emerged from rural Australian communities relied heavily on community-police trust, allowing police to be a key part of disaster resilience and management in response to local wildfires.

What we do know is that social resources—networks, community cohesion, and trust—are essential for residents to recover in the wake of natural disasters. (Benz 2025) When residents of cities of differing income levels in New Jersey impacted by Hurricane Sandy in 2012 were surveyed, those areas with more social resources reported a greater sense of resiliency. (Benz 2025) Crime can degrade those social resources; thus, cities should consider what safeguards to promote resilience can be put into place to increase resilience when social cohesion and community trust are low.

Key Takeaways

Climate change will likely surface and exacerbate existing pressures that could lead to increased forms of violence in cities. Most cities are likely already well prepared to address the climate-change-induced strains listed above through smarter, more efficient urban governance and preventative public safety approaches. However, intentional emphasis on the following areas will help ensure greater effectiveness, including through complementary resource investments.

Improve Coordination

Recognizing the shared drivers of climate change and violence risks—including inequality, weak service delivery, and trust—local governments that integrate responses to climate change and public safety threats will be better positioned to respond to these threats. Urban planning, working alongside climate and sustainability offices and the public safety apparatus, can better address the economic and social resource strains generated by displaced populations arriving in urban areas that are already underserved, impoverished, and experiencing high levels of insecurity or structural violence (such as in informal settlements). (Habitat for Humanity 2024) One such form of coordination could be through data platforms, assisted by AI, to support integrated data, for example, overlaying climate-migration predictions and crime hot-spot mapping with other urban climate risks. Alternatively, they could identify where areas of high propensity for extreme heat or potential for flooding overlap with existing criminal activity to allow officials to more holistically and comprehensively design responses to these challenges. The Igarape Institute demonstrated how crime and heat (in New York City) and crime and air pollution (in Chicago) converge through this type of spatial mapping in its 2021 report, Climate Change and Crime in Cities. (Muggah 2021)

As cities prepare greening solutions to address increases in extreme heat, there is a clear opportunity for urban planning practitioners, public security officials, and community representatives working on urban forestry/nature-based solutions, public health, and crime prevention to share insights and learn from one another.

Public Safety as a Climate Partner

The public safety apparatus can be a key partner not only in disaster response but also in all climate initiatives. However, its role must reflect its relationships with potentially impacted communities. In addition, this type of engagement will require planning and training that many public safety departments simply may not have. (Lydon 2024) Crucially, police should be trained and prepared to address the higher levels of gender-based violence in extreme heat and postnatural disaster contexts.

Drawing lessons from the growing efforts by cities to incorporate police as part of an integrated disaster response plan will help identify where to focus investments and planning. For example, Phoenix, Arizona, partners with police to run a cooling center with an integrated approach to cooling, service delivery, and safety. In July 2025, Chicago, Illinois, opened all the city Police Department district stations to be used as cooling centers during extreme heat days. (Office of Emergency Management 2025) Police are also increasingly involved in preventing and investigating crimes that contribute to adverse climate impacts, such as illegal logging, mineral extraction, and wildlife trafficking. This was not discussed at length in this chapter, but the productive relationships that many security forces have forged with communities and civil society as partners for work on environmental crime may serve as models for similar types of engagement around other climate and extreme weather issues.

Service Delivery and Infrastructure

Improving governance and delivery of public resources that are increasingly at risk from climate change, such as water, is a win-win strategy for also reducing the threat of urban violence. Local governments should address barriers to water

access through improved water management and build community-level conflict-resolution mechanisms into water governance. Housing and tenure rights should also be addressed in areas vulnerable to climate change impact in order to improve the overall resiliency of residents in these areas, reduce reliance on service providers that engage in criminal behavior, and mitigate further displacement of populations into areas where they might be threatened.

As more investments are made in nature-based solutions in urban areas, particularly in fragile or insecure contexts, public safety considerations should be well integrated into their design. Further exploration of the overlapping design principles between nature-based solutions used to prevent climate impacts (e.g. parks) and those used for designing environmental solutions to crime (e.g., Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) would help ensure that these interventions have positive outcomes for safety and climate resilience.

Social Cohesion and Trust

The Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities initiative understood the importance of social cohesion in urban settings for responding to and recovering from "shocks and stresses". (100 Resilient Cities 2019) Social cohesion not only provides a foundation for rebuilding after natural disasters but can also mitigate the dangerous impacts of extreme weather as well as reduce the potential for violence by building trust between social groups and between city residents and their governments. (100 Resilient Cities 2019)

When considering the impacts of climate change on public safety, cities expecting large numbers of climate migrants can prioritize responses that support migrants and their receiving community through improved service delivery, financial assistance, and inclusive narratives from local leaders. These approaches aim to foster social cohesion between migrant groups and receiving communities that are already vulnerable.

As public cooling centers become a more frequent response to extreme urban heat, cities should consider how high levels of insecurity at the neighborhood level may impact those with access to, and who can benefit from, these centers. On the other hand, the possibility to strategically use an existing community gathering place/hub as a cooling center should be thoughtfully considered for furthering community cohesion.

How Cities Can Act Now

Cities are well positioned to identify practical, low-cost, and inclusive solutions to addressing the nexus between climate change and public safety. Existing global networks that support cities in both the climate and public safety spaces, such as C40 Cities, the Mayors Migration Council, Peace in Our Cities, and the International Association of Chiefs of Police, are well positioned to facilitate and/or provide the learning needed to implement these solutions, building on their existing relationships with local officials.

1. Five actions most cities can take right now are:
2. Integrate public safety considerations into heat action plans and disaster preparedness strategies.
3. Use existing data tools to overlay climate risks with violence or insecurity hot spots.
4. Design cooling centers and green spaces with safety, accessibility, and community trust in mind.
5. Invest in social-cohesion initiatives alongside climate-adaptation projects.
6. Generate community-led vulnerability assessments that aim to capture the security context as well as climate-change risks.

Cities sit at the frontline of the climate–safety challenge. They are the first to experience the human consequences of extreme heat, flooding, resource scarcity, and displacement—and the first to confront the resulting pressures on public safety, social cohesion, and service delivery. At the same time, cities are uniquely positioned to act. Through their control over planning, infrastructure, public safety, and community engagement, local governments have the authority and proximity needed to integrate climate adaptation with violence prevention and resilience building. As climate impacts intensify, the ability of cities to break down silos, center vulnerable communities, and design climate responses with safety and equity in mind will be critical—not only to managing risk but to strengthening trust, stability, and opportunity in urban communities.

References

100 Resilient Cities. 2019. *Social Cohesion Handbook*. Resilient Cities Network. https://resilientcitiesnetwork.org/downloadable_resources/UR/Social-Cohesion-Handbook.pdf.

Acland, Olivia. 2024. "In Sierra Leone, Climate Change Worsens Human Trafficking of the Poor." *Al Jazeera*, January 29, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/1/29/in-sierra-leone-climate-change-worsens-human-trafficking-of-the-poor.

Baseler, Travis, T. Ginn, R. Hakiza, H. Ogude-Chambert, and O. Woldemikael. 2025. "Can Redistribution Change Policy Views? Aid and Attitudes toward Refugees." *Journal of Political Economy* 133 (9) https://doi.org/10.1086/736209. 25-29.

Bekana, T. H., M. G. Ebrea, and N. H. Yessuf. 2025. "Urban Water Scarcity in Addis Ababa City: Hard versus Soft Path Solutions: A Systematic Review." *Discover Geoscience* 3: 63. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44288-025-00164-z.

Benz, Jennifer. 2025. *Stronger Together: How Social Resources Influence Disaster Recovery Outcomes*. NORC at the University of Chicago. https://www.norc.org/research/library/stronger-together-how-social-resources-influence-disaster-recovery-outcomes.html.

Berghof Foundation. 2025. "Celebrating Ten Years of Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation in Somalia." https://berghof-foundation.org/news/celebrating-ten-years-of-peacebuilding-in-somalia.

Bittle, Jake. 2024. "They Settled in Houston after Katrina—and Then Faced a Political Storm." *Grist*. https://grist.org/extreme-weather/they-settled-in-houston-after-katrina-and-then-faced-a-political-storm/. August 27, 2024.

Blaustein, Jarrett, Maegan Miccelli, Ross Hendy, and Kate Hutton Burns. 2023. "Resilience Policing and Disaster Management during Australia's Black Summer Bushfire Crisis." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 95: 103848. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2023.103848.

Brasil Participativo. 2026. "Consulta Pública dos Planos Setoriais e Temáticos de Adaptação: Recursos Hídricos." https://brasilparticipativo.presidencia.gov.br/processes/planoclima/f/542/.

C40 Cities. 2024. *Future urban landscapes: Climate migration projections in cities*. https://c40.my.salesforce.com/sfc/p/#36000001Enhz/a/Vo000000Ecev/s2aMWA.1OlkzPhbL_rQQvcJJi3eaSu_E2OWDPpb6xSo.

Calvin, Katherine, Dipak Dasgupta, Gerhard Krinner, et al. 2023. *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Summary for Policymakers*. Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647.001.

Chakraborty, T., et al. 2019. "Disproportionately Higher Exposure to Urban Heat in Lower-Income Neighborhoods: A Multi-City Perspective." *Environmental Research Letters* 14: 105003. https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ab3b99.

Cities4Forests. 2020. "Social Equity Considerations for Cities' Decision Making Related to Inner, Nearby, and Faraway Forests." https://cities4forests.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/C4F-SocialEquity_LearningGuide.pdf.

City of Chicago, "The City of Chicago Urges Residents to Prepare for Extreme Heat," June 2025, https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/oem/provdrs/emerg_mang/news/2025/june/the-city-of-chicago-urges-residents-to-prepare-for-extreme-heat-.html.

City of Tucson. 2024. *Heat Action Roadmap*. Tucson, AZ. https://assets.tucsonaz.gov/share/gis-docs/caap/COT_Heat_Action_Roadmap_FINAL_G.pdf.

City of Phoenix. 2026. *City of Phoenix 2026 Heat Response Plan*. Phoenix, AZ. https://www.phoenix.gov/content/dam/phoenix/heatsite/documents/2026%20Heat%20Response%20Plan.pdf.

Clement, Viviane, Kanta Kumari Rigaud, Alex de Sherbinin, et al. 2021. *Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Crawford, A., A. Hammill, and A. Tadgell. 2023. *Peace, Conflict, and National Adaptation Plan (NAP) Processes*. NAP Global Network Guidance Note. Winnipeg: International Institute for Sustainable Development.

Dabelko, Geoffrey D., et al. 2022. *Navigating a Just and Peaceful Transition: Environment of Peace (Part 3)* Stockholm: SIPRI. https://doi.org/10.55163/BHYR7656.

Darwish, Siad. 2023. *Resilience and Social Cohesion in Fiji's Climate-Affected Informal Settlements*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.

Fadilla, Maulia Inka Vira. 2023. "On Jakarta's Vanishing Shoreline, Climate Change Seen Abetting Child Marriages." *Mongabay*, September 28, 2023. https://news.mongabay.com/2023/09/on-jakartas-vanishing-shoreline-climate-change-seen-abetting-child-marriages/.

FEWS NET. 2026. "Security Gains Remain Limited with No Improvement on Acute Food Insecurity." https://fews.net/latin-america-and-caribbean/haiti/key-message-update/january-2026.

GFMD Civil Society Mechanism. 2024. "'Narratives Are at the Heart of Everything': Multi-Stakeholder Action to Change Migration Narratives." https://gfmdcivilsociety.org/.

Gleick, Peter, and Morgan Shimabuku. 2023. "Water-Related Conflicts: Definitions, Data, and Trends from the Water Conflict Chronology." *Environmental Research Letters* 18: 034022. https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/acbb8f.

Gong, C. H., Bushman, G., Hohl, B. C., Kondo, M. C., Carter, P. M., Cunningham, R. M., Rupp, L. A., Grodzinski, A., Branas, C. C., Vagi, K. J., & Zimmerman, M. A. 2023. Community engagement, greening, and violent crime: A test of the greening hypothesis and Busy Streets. American Journal of Community Psychology, 71, 198–210. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12622.

Heo, S., H. Choi, J. Berman, and M. Bell. 2025. "Temperature, Violent Crime, Climate Change, and Vulnerability Factors in 44 United States Cities." *Environment International* 195: 109246. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2024.109246.

Hill, Alice, and Lindsay Doyle. 2026. "Less Foreign Aid, More Climate Risk." *Foreign Affairs*. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/less-foreign-aid-more-climate-risk. January 16, 2026.

HM Government. 2026. *Global Biodiversity Loss, Ecosystem Collapse and National Security: A National Security Assessment*. London: HM Government.

Hubbart, Sarah, and Camille Bridger. 2024. *How Greening Communities Can Reduce Violence and Promote Health*. Washington, DC: National Environmental Education Foundation.

Insight Crime. 2021. "Chiquimula, Guatemala." https://insightcrime.org/guatemala-organized-crime-news/chiquimula-guatemala/.

Kalema, Nai Lee. 2025. "Equity-Powered Public-Sector Dynamic Capabilities for Greener Futures." London: UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose. https://medium.com/iipp-blog/equity-powered-public-sector-dynamic-capabilities-for-greener-futures-lessons-from-the-city-cape-240a9a281e21.

Kassam, Ashifa. 2025. "'Most of This Is Symbolic': The New Wave of Anti-Migrant Vigilantes in Europe." *The Guardian*. August 20, 2025. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/30/europe-anti-migrant-vigilantes-spain-poland-netherlands-iceland-northern-ireland.

King, Robin, and Nadia Shah Naidoo. 2025. "Multilevel Action for Community-Led Climate Resilience in Informal Settlements." Washington, DC: World Resources Institute.

Kumar, Raj. 2026. "The Old Aid Model Is Dead." *Devex*. January 26, 2026.

Locke, Rachel, Twila Albrecht, and Julie Canney. 2022. "Harnessing the Power of the 'Other': Cities Where Human Mobility Is Not a Threat." *New Security Beat*. April 12, 2022.

Lydon, D. 2024. 'This is not a drill': Police and partnership preparedness for consequences of the climate crisis. *International Journal of Police Science and Management*, *27*(1), 16-30. https://doi.org/10.1177/14613557241248295.

MacCarthy, James, Jessica Richter, Sasha Tyukavina, et al. 2025. "The Latest Data Confirms: Forest Fires Are Getting Worse." World Resources Institute. July 21, 2025. https://www.wri.org/insights/global-trends-forest-fires.

Mayors Migration Council. 2023. *Global Cities Fund for Migrants and Refugees Progress Report*. December 7, 2023. https://mmc-production.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/28190658/Progress-report-under-40.pdf.

Medina, Leonardo, G. Pacillo, P. Laderach, S. Sieber, and M. Bonatti. 2025. "Adapting to Climate Change under Threats of Violence." *Current Research in Environmental Sustainability* 9: 100276. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crsust.2024.100276.

Ministry of the Environment of Brazil. 2016. *National Adaptation Plan to Climate Change*. Brasília.

Ministry of Environment and Climate Change of Brazil. 2025. *Climate Adaptation Plan: National Adaptation Strategy*. Brasília.

Moser, Caroline O. N. 2004. "Urban Violence and Insecurity: An Introductory Roadmap." *Environment and Urbanization*16 (2): 3–16.

Mozur, Paul, Adam Satariano, and Emiliano Rodríguez Mega. 2025. "From Mexico to Ireland, Fury Mounts Over a Global A.I. Frenzy." *New York Times*, October 20, 2025.

Muggah, Robert. 2021. *Climate Change and Crime in Cities*. Rio de Janeiro: Igarapé Institute. https://igarape.org.br/en/climate-change-and-crime-in-cities.

O'Neill, B., M. van Aalst, Z. Zaiton Ibrahim, et al. 2022. "Key Risks across Sectors and Regions." In *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Plänitz, Erik. 2019. "Neglecting the Urban? Exploring Rural–Urban Disparities in the Climate Change–Conflict Literature on Sub-Saharan Africa." *Urban Climate* 30: 100533. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.uclim.2019.100533.

República de Colombia. 2025. *Contribución Determinada a Nivel Nacional (NDC 3.0) de Colombia*. Bogotá.

Romanello, Marina, Maria Walawender, Shih-Che Hsu, et al. 2025. "The 2025 Report of the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change." *The Lancet* 406 (10521): 2804–2857. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(25)01919-1.

Rouleau, Tracy, Jack Stuart, and Sally Yozell. 2020. *CORVI Risk Assessment: Kingston, Jamaica*. Washington, DC: Stimson Center.

Round, Ian, Jazmin Conner, Jermaine Rowley, and Sandy Banisky. 2019. "In Urban Heat Islands, Climate Crisis Hits Harder." *Capital News Service*. September 13, 2019. https://cnsmaryland.org/interactives/summer-2019/code-red/neighborhood-heat-inequality.html.

Rupp, L. A., Bhatia, S., Lee, D. B., Wyatt, R., Bushman, G., Wyatt, T. A., Pizarro, J. M., Wixom, C., Zimmerman, M. A., & Reischl, T. M. 2025. Community-engaged crime prevention through environmental design and reductions in violent and firearm crime. American Journal of Community Psychology, 76, 94–109. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12802.

Saleh, Karim, and Beatrice Mosello. 2024. "Spotlight Haiti: What Are the Long-Term Prospects for Climate, Peace and Security?" *Climate Diplomacy*. June 11, 2024. https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/conflict/spotlight-haiti-what-are-long-term-prospects-climate-peace-and-security.

Saliba, Samer, and Vittoria Zanuso. 2022. *Climate Migration in Mexican and Central American Cities*. Mayors Migration Council.

Sanz-Barbero, Belén, C. Linares, C. Vives-Cases, et al. 2018. "Heat Wave and the Risk of Intimate Partner Violence." *Science of the Total Environment* 644: 413-419. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2018.06.368.

South African Government. 2025. "Deputy Minister David Mahlobo on Water Infrastructure Sabotage and Criminal Syndicates in the Sector." July 30, 2025. https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/deputy-minister-david-mahlobo-water-infrastructure-sabotage-and-criminal.

Stuart, Jack, Sally Yozell, Valentine Ochanda, Tracy Rouleau, Victor Indasi, and Kaitlyn Lombardo. 2021. *CORVI Risk Assessment: Mombasa, Kenya*. Washington, DC: Stimson Center.

Sverdlik, A., et al. 2025. "Nairobi: City Report." ACRC Working Paper 2025-24. Manchester: African Cities Research Consortium.

Tucson Clean and Beautiful. n.d. "Youth Workforce Development." Accessed February 13, 2026. https://tucson-cleanandbeautiful.org/.

United Nations. 2021. "Climate Change 'a Multiplier Effect' Aggravating Instability, Conflict, Terrorism." UN Press Release. December 9, 2021. https://press.un.org/en/2021/sgsm21074.doc.htm.

United Nations Human Settlements Programme. 2024. *World Cities Report 2024*. Nairobi: UN-Habitat.

Wolf, Kathleen L., Sharon T. Lam, Jennifer K. McKeen, Gregory R. A. Richardson, Matilda van den Bosch, and Adrina C. Bardekjian. 2020. "Urban Trees and Human Health: A Scoping Review." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17 (12): 4371. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17124371.

World Bank. 2022. *Social Cohesion and Forced Displacement: A Synthesis of New Research*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

About the Author

Jessica Varat



Jessica Varat is the Senior Development Manager for Climate, Economics, and Finance at WRI. She previously served as Deputy Chief of Party for the USAID Countering Nature Crime (CNC) project. Prior to joining WRI, she worked at the Pan American Development Foundation as a Senior Proposal Writer and Development Manager. She has also managed projects in Latin America focused on human rights, conflict resolution, and violence prevention at Partners Global, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and as a consultant for the World Bank.

Jessica holds a BA in International Relations from Wellesley College and a Master of Law and Diplomacy from the Fletcher School, where she specialized in conflict resolution and human security. https://www.wri.org/profile/jessica-varat.

Disclaimer

The opinions and views presented are of the author alone and do not necessarily represent the opinions and views of the World Resources Institute.

peace
IN OUR CITIES

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.

Peace in Our Cities is co-facilitated by Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies at New York University's Center on International Cooperation; the Stanley Center for Peace and Security; Co-founder and Principal, Rachel Locke; and Expert Advisor and Membership Liaison, Flavia Carbonari. To learn more, donate, or join, please contact info@peaceinourcities.org or visit www.peaceinourcities.org.