

URBAN VIOLENCE PREVENTION AMID GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY

How Cities Are Navigating Global Trends While Investing in Local Safety

Edited by Flávia Carbonari, Rachel Locke, and Jai-Ayla Sutherland

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IN OUR CITIES

About the Editors

Flávia Carbonari

Flávia Carbonari is an international development specialist with 20 years of experience working with development banks, governments, and civil society across Latin America, Africa, and East Asia, leading the design and implementation of investment, research, and policy initiatives focused on violence prevention and social inclusion. Currently an Expert Advisor and Member Liaison for Peace in Our Cities, a Senior Consultant to the World Bank since 2007, and an Expert Advisor to the Halving Global Violence Task Force. She has taught graduate and undergraduate courses on urban violence prevention at universities in Argentina and at NYU Buenos Aires, and served as a Non-resident Fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Currently residing in Argentina with experience working across the Americas and Africa.



Rachel Locke

Rachel Locke is co-founder and Principal of Peace in Our Cities, a network of 100 global cities and organizations working to prevent and reduce serious violence through evidence-informed and rights-based strategies. She previously founded and directed the Violence, Inequality and Power Lab (VIP Lab) at the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, University of San Diego. Prior to directing the VIP Lab, Rachel served as Head of Research for violence prevention at New York University's Center on International Cooperation, Director of International Interventions at the National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College, and Senior Policy Adviser with the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Rachel focuses intentionally on the interconnectedness across various forms of violence—from war to criminally-motivated to interpersonal to political violence—she has a solid track record in launching and sustaining initiatives that explore new approaches to complex challenges. Rachel holds an MA in international affairs from Columbia University and has published widely on prevention, political violence, conflict, and transnational organized crime.



Jai-Ayla Sutherland

Jai-Ayla Sutherland is Program Officer for mass violence and atrocities at the Stanley Center for Peace and Security, where she supports efforts to prevent structural and acute violence by working with government and civil society representatives. Her work focuses predominantly on the role of cities, locally and internationally, in implementing evidence-based prevention strategies. Her team is part of the secretariat of the Peace in Our Cities Network, a global network of cities and organizations working together to reduce violence at the municipal level. She has an MA in international security from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver and a BA in international relations from the University of Southern California.



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Cover photo: The Streets of La Candelaria, Bogotá, Colombia. May, 2025. Adobe Stock.

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Amman, Jordan, November, 2021: Photo: Adobe Stock



INTRODUCTION

URBAN VIOLENCE PREVENTION AMID GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY

HOW CITIES ARE NAVIGATING GLOBAL TRENDS WHILE INVESTING IN LOCAL SAFETY

By Rachel Locke, Jai-Ayla Sutherland, and Flávia Carbonari

New technologies, rising authoritarianism, climate change, and the unraveling multilateral system threaten safety and security at all levels. Cities will feel these global shifts most immediately. This compendium supports city leaders in responding to these trends while implementing evidence-based approaches to violence prevention across a spectrum of safety-related factors, such as political violence, organized crime, access to justice, and fair housing and land policies.

Cities are places of connection, of innovation and imagination. They are remarkable for their tangible density of people, infrastructure, and commerce—but also the intangible density of ideas, narratives, and beliefs. The way people move through cities influences not only trade and production but also their sense of belonging, safety, and cohesion. As sites of constant interaction and home to the majority of the world’s population, cities constantly manage the complexity of interactions that fall within their borders.

While cities have their own unique ecosystems, they are also connected to and influenced by their broader environments, surrounding areas, subnational governorates, national dynamics, and global trends. Urban networks play an important role in helping cities understand the local implications of these broader contexts and to influence them in return. For a network specifically focused on supporting cities in preventing violence and building peace, this interplay doesn’t just require awareness, it requires active analysis, planning, and capacity building.

Peace in Our Cities is a member-driven network focused on supporting cities to significantly reduce and prevent serious forms of violence. Current global geopolitical shifts are significantly impacting the dynamics of crime and violence and the way governments at all levels respond. Public safety is both highly localized and highly influenced by global trends. Take, for example, how the flow of weapons across countries impacts local violence dynamics. But while global trends are highly impactful at the city level where the majority of people live, the ability of cities to influence those trends, particularly around violence dynamics, has historically been weaker than comparable nation-state governing bodies. That means the flow of influence moves more strongly in one direction than the other.

This situation must not, however, result in apathy. Instead, it reveals an opportunity for a new approach. This approach elevates cities to have a louder and stronger voice in global decision-making and to strengthen local multilateralism in the post-2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, and it empowers and encourages city actors to more deliberately integrate external dynamics into internal planning and policymaking.

This compendium focuses on identifying and sharing these strategies within a broader discussion of four global trends to help city partners think through their own violence-prevention architecture in a way that meets the moment we are in.

Advancing Peace and Security in the Current Context: Situating the Compendium

The size, power, and potential of cities have been growing consistently over the past two centuries. But it was not until 2007 when the global population of city dwellers surpassed the global population of rural inhabitants for the first time in history.¹ This is an important reminder that throughout nearly all of human history, the majority of people clustered in small communities.

Today there are more than 34 megacities, or cities with more than 10 million people, which is larger than many nation-states. But a city doesn't need to be "mega" in order to exert influence. Geneva is widely recognized as a globally influential municipality, but it has fewer than 300,000 residents. Regardless of size, what most cities have in common is their density—of things tangible and intangible—and a degree of self-governance. More than 4 billion people around the world today live urban lives, making the particular ecosystem of cities crucial to whether the majority of humanity lives in peace or is exposed to violence.

We know cities are not immune from the broader environment, and the world is facing a range of trends that are upending established systems and assumptions regarding human governance, existence, and cohabitation. This compendium highlights four specific trends that Peace in Our Cities has identified as having particular impact and influence vis-a-vis local efforts to uphold citizen security and public safety in cities around the world. These trends were selected from two overlapping sources. First, analysis completed by institutions such as the World Economic Forum and others.² Second, trends that demonstrate significant influence on local violence dynamics as highlighted by Peace in Our Cities members.

The four trends identified through this process are:

1. The advance of authoritarian systems of governance.
2. The rapid, largely unregulated technology revolution, including the advance of artificial intelligence and machine learning.
3. The increasingly unchecked and growing impacts of climate change.
4. The weakening and dismantling of the multilateral system.

We start by setting a baseline of what precisely is meant by these trends and their general impacts on safety and violence in the world today.

The Rise of Authoritarianism

Democracy around the world is in decline. Globally, we have reverted to pre-1978 levels, according to the V-Dem Institute's 2026 Democracy Report. The world today comprises 92 autocracies and 87 democracies, and most people—74 percent—now live in autocracies. Only 7 percent live in liberal democracies.³ In Latin America, less than half—48 percent—of survey respondents selected a preference for democracy over any other form of government, representing the lowest level of support ever recorded.⁴ The decline in democratic systems is not solely about voting or electoral processes. It is also about dismantling the institutions that are essential to consolidated democracies, including free press, due process, adherence to rule of law, respect for human rights, thriving civil society, advances in political participation, and more. These trends have important implications for safety and security.

Around the world, leaders with autocratic tendencies are using narratives of crime and violence, or fear, to reinforce their own power base. As Robert Muggah writes, "Politicians exploit it by converting diffuse anxiety into a straightforward electoral exchange that consists of expanded coercive power in return for the often false promise of control."⁵ The state

of exception in El Salvador that Enrique Betancourt speaks to in chapter 1 is not solely about reducing crime, it is also about reinforcing the central power of President Nayib Bukele and his administration. The two are intrinsically linked. Consolidated democratic systems that respect a free press, administer due process and equality under the law, ensure fair electoral processes, and ensure a balance of power are so important; they provide a bulwark against power-hungry leaders who will use and manipulate fear and force to their own ends. Further, in contexts where organized criminal organizations, political leaders, and/or public sector agencies broadly collaborate, the use of punitive control—whether enforced by the state or elements of criminal groups—substitutes for institutional reform.⁶ In addition, as highlighted by Santiago Tobón in chapter 2, these heavy-handed approaches often fragment criminal markets, increase violence, and fail to displace criminal governance. They may also revert progress made by years of investment in building trust between law enforcement and communities. And as Patrick Mutahi discusses in chapter 6, in these authoritarian settings, “police have become central actors in managing social unrest, migration, and political dissent, reshaping everyday policing, public safety in urban spaces, and police-community relations.”

Throughout history, the greatest atrocities, massacres, or genocides have all been framed by a narrative of protecting certain groups from a threatening “other.” While the specifics differ from place to place, the very same fear-based narratives are taking root today. Cities—as places where concentrated diversity is managed on a daily basis and government is empowered to make change—hold immense capacity to call out and undermine these efforts to demonize, within their own contexts and collectively at the international level. But cities aren’t innately benevolent; they are also places where large numbers of people can be detained, killed, or subjugated. And because autocrats know the power of cities, dissenting subnational leaders are also often threatened with being stripped of resources and decentralized power, as Betancourt discusses in chapter 1.

The chapters in this volume that address the trend of rising authoritarianism do so from a place of recognizing the various ways backsliding democracy is impacting public safety. They simultaneously highlight the innovative, brave, and community-oriented ways that people living and working in cities are responding.

The Rise of Unregulated Technology

While technology has been advancing at a steady pace since at least the Industrial Revolution, the advent of machine learning and adaptive artificial intelligence (AI) pose new and unprecedented opportunities and challenges for humanity. New innovations hold vast potential benefits across sectors of society such as health and education, but they also pose significant risk, from labor market upheaval to distorting fact from fiction to autonomous robots and weapons systems to exceptional strains on global energy supplies. While technology—in particular social media and useful AI tools—have quickly become absorbed into daily life for many people, anxieties about technology—either moving too fast or falling behind—also run high.

According to the World Economic Forum’s *Global Risks Report*, adverse outcomes associated with advances in AI is the risk with the largest rise in ranking over time.⁷ The use of technology to spread mis- and disinformation is an associated risk, which connects this global trend with the other three trends in a variety of ways. In particular, AI tends to be sycophantic, telling users what they want to hear. In a world with declining free and fair media, these tools are resulting in greater uptake of false narratives and conspiracy theories that reinforce confirmation bias. The power of these tools can—when used by autocratic regimes—fan the flames of division and repression, reinforcing biases and fears across social groups. As Rachel Locke discusses in chapter 3, 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,⁸ with violent actions carried out locally within municipal boundaries. This is but one example of the threat posed by a combination of rapid technical advancement and authoritarianism.

Those working in the public safety and violence-prevention space know that technology can be hugely beneficial to helping solve crimes through tools like facial recognition and ammunition tracing but can also be used to surveil and control. As is discussed by Luisa Portugal and Juan Camilo Cock Misas in chapters 4 and 5, this can impose burdens on certain segments of society that are somehow deemed a “threat,” and these tools, when not managed effectively and justly, can also be used to repress groups that the government sees as a risk. Technology has the potential to make court cases function more efficiently, thereby reducing pretrial detention. This advantage and others must be balanced against the risk for false identifications or further increasing divides between communities and the security agencies meant to serve them.

These advanced technologies also require huge amounts of energy and resources to function. In particular, the data centers that power AI need tremendous quantities of water to cool servers. In a world that is increasingly facing drought and where “water wars” influence past and future conflict, this truth cannot be overlooked. Unless there are significant policy changes and political commitments to alleviate these demands, AI in particular will make climate change outcomes worse in the short term, likely with generational implications, reinforcing the Gordian knot that ties these various trends together.

The Growing Impacts of Climate Change

As Jessica Varat writes in chapter 8 of this compendium, “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 pre-conditions as levels of inequality, poverty, resource scarcity, and institutional strength.” Climate change impacts everyone, everywhere in terms of more extreme weather patterns and the knock-on effects of extreme weather.

The impacts we feel globally include significant damage to food systems, whether the denuding of agricultural land, the wildfires that devastate grazing areas and livestock, the warming oceans that lead to marine life die-offs, or otherwise. And of course, these impacts are often felt most deeply by those with the fewest resources to cope, adapt, or transform; though, these trends are changing as neighborhoods burn, sea levels rise, and chaotic weather patterns erupt universally.

Under all of these circumstances, competition for resources increases, creating more grievances and opportunities for conflict. Reduced resources can also create or expand opportunities for illicit groups to corner markets and control access, as has been observed in many countries, as Varat discusses, and to grab urban land and properties, as Antônio Sampaio discusses in chapter 7. The significant shifts in markets, production, and value chains impacted by climate change—when paired with the weakening of the multilateral system—exacerbates this challenge as the political will and resources to manage and regulate system shocks shift away from a system of diplomatic cooperation to one of nationalist competition.

Further, climate change impacts patterns of displacement and migration. People are forced to leave their homes in search of more-fertile or safer ground elsewhere, often seeking greater safety or productive opportunity in urban or periurban areas. The vast majority of displacement and migration occurs within national borders, and migration is often very productive, helping to provide workers for labor-intensive industries and reinforcing connections between urban and periurban or rural areas. Therefore, nothing about displacement or migration in and of itself creates violence, but the movement of large numbers of people does require thoughtful management. This includes anticipating and responding to impacts on infrastructure, transportation, language resources, and cultural sensitivities. Without this management, a rapid population increase can create tension in receiving communities, particularly when migrants as a group are weaponized by leaders looking to stoke fear and reinforce their own power.

Beyond these indirect impacts on safety, climate change can also directly drive violence levels. Researchers have documented how the stressors caused by climate influence safety outcomes. This research includes work that demonstrates how an increase in family stress caused by a natural disaster can increase domestic violence. It also links increased “heat days” to higher levels of urban crime and violence, all of which Varat addresses in chapter 8.

Cities around the world are working hard to help lessen the factors that contribute to climate change, as is evidenced by the work of C40 and the leadership demonstrated in global climate negotiations. Cities are also in many instances at the forefront of finding adaptation techniques to reduce the impacts of climate change on their residents. But, as this compendium points out, more-intentional and deliberate investment is needed to mitigate the impacts of climate change specifically from a safety and security perspective. While cities can’t control the weather, people in cities can do a great deal to alleviate harm and suffering that results from extreme climate patterns.

The Dismantling of the Multilateral System

With adversarial relationships on the global stage in ascension, the weakening of systems meant to prevent cataclysmic confrontation is extremely worrying, a point reinforced in the World Economic Forum *Global Risks Report*: “Declining trust, diminishing transparency and respect for the rule of law, along with heightened protectionism, are threatening longstanding international relations, trade and investment and increasing the propensity for conflict. Geoeconomic confrontation is top of mind for respondents and was selected as the top risk most likely to trigger a material global crisis in 2026 by 18 percent of respondents, increasing two positions from last year.”⁹

The increasingly fragile multilateral space presents a range of challenges—yet also opportunities—for urban actors striving to advance peace and security. First, fewer financial and political resources are being deployed to support violence prevention and peacebuilding. A 2023 report by the OECD showed how, despite increasing trends of conflict and violence worldwide, the share of international development assistance dedicated to prevention and peacebuilding had been increasingly dropping in recent years to a small fraction—about 10 percent—of all development assistance; and that was before major blows, such as the closure of the US Agency for International Development in 2025.¹⁰ The withdrawal of resources doesn’t just limit actual financial investments in things like wraparound services for high risk youth or research into recruitment of organized criminal groups, but it also creates unhelpful competition among actors in the prevention space. It places significant burdens on decentralized funding streams, which, around the world, have seen years of austerity and recently have been further eroded as the wars in Ukraine and Iran have created massive strains on and shifts in budgets because of rising costs and changing priorities across a range of sectors.

Beyond these resource constraints, the fragmented multilateral context combined with rising authoritarianism has limited the effectiveness of global responses to massive human rights abuses. Consider, for example, the anemic response to the mass atrocities that took place in El Fasher, Sudan, including the systemic killing of over 6,000 in just three days in October 2025.¹¹ Furthermore, in all the most recent theaters of war—from Ukraine to Sudan to Gaza to Iran, to name just a few—cities are where the majority of deaths have taken place. Thus, civilians are increasingly the targets—not just unintentional casualties—of war, a violation of the international laws and norms our multilateral institutions have been established to protect. In Colombia, which has been working hard to cement gains made during the 2016 peace process and where President Gustavo Petro committed to “total peace,” nearly a third of the country, or 386 municipalities, are vulnerable to violence from armed groups.¹²

For cities, protection of civilians is strongest where local investment in peace architecture complements and is complemented by national and global architecture. The weakening of the global system is dealing a heavy blow to this protective webbing, but city leaders still have options to work locally and collaboratively with other municipalities to uphold these global standards and implement the policies and priorities that will keep their citizens safe. The

research is clear that peace, stability, and safety are possible at the local level. At a time when global institutions are largely failing in their mandate, there is reason to be hopeful about the capacity of cities to make progress on their violence-reduction and peace priorities.

Chapter Breakdown and Flow

The trends identified here are consequential in their own right, but they also influence urban strategies for violence prevention in a range of obvious and less obvious ways. The chapters in this compendium provide insight into how cities are advancing particular aspects of public safety within the context of these trends, analyzing impact and response options. Peace in Our Cities asked each chapter author to consider the four identified trends and speak to the ones that were most relevant for their particular chapter topic. For some, one or two trends are most salient and are featured more prominently, whereas other authors treat all four trends in relatively equal measure. There are also three chapters—one on authoritarianism, one on technology, and one on climate change—that mirror the trends. Again, this is intentional. For these topics, the editors felt as though there was sufficient impact, sufficient material, and sufficient demand to do a deeper dive. These areas in particular often feel so far outside the control or influence of city actors, and yet there is a wealth of good practice to reference that is being done and can be strengthened at the city level.

All chapters in this compendium have been selected based on needs from Peace in Our Cities members. The chapters focus on:

1. Balanced versus repressive public safety strategies.
2. Organized crime.
3. Political violence.
4. Technology and AI.
5. Justice and access to justice.
6. Community-police relations.
7. Housing and urban land.
8. Climate change.

This compendium does not address one critical global challenge: misogyny. This trend is not new, but its manifestations across societies are deepening in spheres of power and influence with important implications for the strength of authoritarianism, how communities respond to climate change, and the use of technology to recruit and reinforce narratives that promote harm worldwide. For example, “In 2019, the Department of Homeland Security awarded a grant to fund research that aimed to understand the misogynistic incel movement, and a year later, a US Secret Service report named online misogyny as a concerning source of radicalization for mass attackers.”¹³ Yet “the misogynistic and gendered dimensions of extremist movements are often ignored or brushed aside in media reports, policy analyses, or during prosecution.”¹⁴

For those of us working to undermine the sources and drivers of violence, we must recognize misogyny as the menace it truly is—not just to women but to societies as a whole.¹⁵ City leaders must contend with the subversive presence and influence of misogyny across each of these trends and its direct impact on peace, citizen security, and violence. For this reason, in October 2026, the Peace in Our Cities network will be launching a working group focused specifically on gender and violence prevention.

Structure of the Chapters

Each chapter offers a brief overview of its topic, for example what political violence means in the context of urban violence prevention. Chapter authors then detail the relationship between their topic area and the identified global trends, which resonate differently across each chapter.

Each chapter then offers case-based, city-specific examples of the implications of the chapter's theme for crime and violence and explores the related work that is being done across policy, programs, and partnerships. This includes a discussion of both good practice and failed or challenged practice. Authors considered the following:

- How are global trends impacting city governments with regard to the specific key area under investigation?
- How are different actors responding to the dynamics covered in chapters, and what are some good examples of what can be done from policy, research, advocacy, and international cooperation perspectives?

By exploring these questions through concrete case studies, the editors and authors are aiming to help readers see themselves in the material, in order to help them think about strategies that could work in their own contexts.

Finally, each chapter provides recommendations or principles that cities can utilize to think about their own efforts in this arena. These recommendations, as briefly summarized below, are intended to provide food for thought based on the particular context of global-local dynamics across different city contexts.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Chapter 1. Cities Under Pressure: Delivering Integrated Solutions for Urban Peace

Cities that have produced sustained safety improvements—ones that simultaneously strengthened rather than eroded the state's legitimate authority—have constructed integration as a governance function. This requires cities to:

- **Engage in shared problem framing.** Four conditions must be present: a shared diagnostic that all key agencies accept; a coordination mechanism with authority to convene across silos; data flowing in real time to operational decision makers; and a political principal willing to defend the strategy publicly.
- **Build an architecture for collaborative design and implementation.** Cities require coordinating structures capable of convening agencies across sectors and sustaining implementation over time.
- **Iterate to adapt to progress and evolving implementation capabilities.** Solution design must build in flexibility from the start to sequence and iterate effectively based on reliable information.
- **Anchor solutions to political narratives.** Alignment between what strategies do and what political principals can credibly claim credit for is not a communications afterthought—it is a design requirement.

Chapter 2. Organized Crime as Urban Governance: How Criminal Groups Rule Cities and What Local Governments Can Do

Cities have options for addressing organized crime, even under constrained authority, fragmented policing and justice systems, and shifting global pressures.

- **Diagnose the governance problem, not only the violence problem.** Build a governance and extortion dashboard and map criminal governance as a service market.

- **Address the economic foundations of criminal governance.** Redesign public spaces that sustain retail markets, build local harm-reduction partnerships, and coordinate with national agencies.
- **Build state capacity where residents experience governance.** Strengthen municipal dispute resolution and small-claims justice and deliver services reliably.
- **Use enforcement in ways that reduce harm and avoid consolidation.** Pair focused enforcement with clear limits on the use of force, strong oversight, transparency, and community engagement, and avoid broad crackdowns that create leadership succession crises and prison-based consolidation.
- **Treat prisons as part of the city’s governance system.** Build a city-prison coordination agenda, monitor prison-based coordination among criminal groups, and expand reintegration and post-release supervision.
- **Govern technology to protect trust while improving effectiveness.** Adopt technology with rules, oversight, transparency, and community safeguards.
- **Protect civic space and reduce criminal capture of community life.** Create anonymous reporting mechanisms, support community leaders, monitor and prevent criminal group capture of local territory and systems, and invest in witness-protection coordination.
- **Plan for global shocks and shifting criminal portfolios.** Monitor changes in trafficking routes and markets that affect local rents, shifts in national enforcement priorities and extradition patterns, digital payment adoption and laundering opportunities, and migration and labor-market shocks that affect recruitment.
- **Join international networks that track geopolitical risks and organized crime trends.**

Chapter 3. Under Attack: The Enduring Impact of Political Violence and How Cities are Pushing Back

Political violence must be understood 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.

Reducing the risk for political violence requires municipal leaders to:

- **Prepare:** Proactively monitor risk and consider what capacities are available to prevent or respond to political violence.
- **Research:** Conduct research that pulls broad trends into the local reality and clarifies accessible protective factors.
- **Communicate:** Provide clear communication to residents, strengthen listening among key actors, consider the narratives that are circulating in communities, and proactively respond.
- **Resource:** Resource appropriately according to risk, ideally with funding support from national or regional sources.

Efforts to fortify communities against political violence include:

- Reinforce rights-based norms, confront othering, and build strong propeace narratives.
- Build local social infrastructure through cross-sector collaboration to promote peaceful engagement and social cohesion in shared urban spaces.

- Engage in dialogue, especially during heightened moments, and model constructive behavior by calling for calm and establishing norms of productive disagreement.
- Counter disinformation and use technology in prosocial ways by leveraging preexisting resources, always ensuring controls for bias and responsible data management.

Chapter 4. Technology-Empowered Urban Violence Prevention in the Era of AI

Cities have the opportunity to build the foundation of a future in which technology is used to enhance the public good while safeguarding basic rights.

- **Leverage AI and technology.** Analyze your city at the hyperlocal level and understand the microdynamics that have reverberating impacts in the city as a whole.
- **Be data informed instead of data driven.** Use data to prepare, perform, and reflect, but consider the broader social, political, and economic context in which the data was produced, and be guided by social values and ethical boundaries.
- **Meaningfully include communities—particularly the historically marginalized—in debates about technology governance, and prioritize building trustworthiness.** AI should be used to increase community participation, including by incorporating community insights and creating open channels of communication between government, civil society, and the general public.
- **Ensure clear and transparent protocols, accountability systems, and proper human oversight.** Government staff have to be trained and empowered to exercise their human judgment at all times, recognizing that human intervention is required beyond AI processing.
- **Use technology to support legitimate, integrated, and holistic violence-prevention strategies, not to replace them.** Keep in mind that the human element is as integral to the success of policies as these new tools.

Chapter 5. Harnessing the Justice System to Reduce Violence in Cities in Times of Global Uncertainty and Technological Change

A fair, accessible, and effective justice system can help reduce violence in cities in multiple ways. Such a system will put checks on state violence; ensure rights and fair treatment for everybody; be easy to understand, access, and navigate; effectively solve problems and conflicts; and sanction offenders who commit serious crimes in ways that prevent further violence.

- **Violence-prevention strategies should be timely, balanced, and evidence based.** They must be perceived as fair and legitimate, be implemented before violence escalates, and reduce popular demand for tough-on-crime or authoritarian measures.
- **City governments and local actors can legally challenge exceptional measures that suspend constitutional guarantees and the normal rule of law.** To do so, cities should have strong legal counsel and legal departments capable of challenging authoritarian measures.
- **Coalitions, networks, and associations of cities and local governments—within and across national boundaries—can also push back against authoritarianism by promoting rules-based and fair violence-reduction strategies.** International cooperation and common agendas between cities can counterbalance this trend.

- **Cities should work to make justice systems and procedures easier to access and navigate.** Many legal problems can be solved outside the formal judicial system, in community settings, especially in excluded neighborhoods. Technology can be harnessed to make justice services more accessible and efficient.
- **Cities should work with law enforcement agencies, detective and attorney offices, and the court system to progressively adopt, with safeguards, new technologies that can improve the agility and capability to manage high caseloads and to solve cases.** A criminal justice system that is swift, can handle larger caseloads, and produces better outcomes that are perceived as fair and legitimate can contribute to reducing violence. Technology, including AI, can help achieve this, and cities can incorporate it in the areas under their responsibility or support other agencies in adopting them, including by ensuring proper oversight and training.

Chapter 6. Police and Community Trust in Contested Urban Spaces: Pitfalls and Policy Lessons

The central challenge for urban policymakers is to manage the expansion of community policing programs and community-police relations while protecting their democratic integrity.

- **Accountability must be treated as the foundation of community policing.** Authorities must provide protection without harm, fairness without discrimination, and consequences when police abuse their authority.
- **Effective community policing requires genuine community ownership and autonomy.** Communities should be encouraged to set priorities, lead local initiatives, be offered protection during community forums, and be enabled to hold police to account.
- **Cities must adopt transparent and ethical information governance.** Authorities should clearly articulate rules governing the collection, storage, and use of community-provided information, including robust protections for informants.
- **Cities need to invest in relational policing rather than simply creating new structures.** Practical policing reforms should prioritize continuity of neighborhood officers, training in mediation and conflict resolution, and performance metrics that reward trust building.
- **Community policing must be understood as part of a broader urban governance system.** Community policing delivers better outcomes when it is integrated with social programs and multiagency problem solving.
- **Approaches must be tailored to the realities of informal settlements and marginalized neighborhoods.** Community-led safety arrangements should incorporate existing local structures—such as elders’ councils, women’s groups, and youth networks.
- **Cities must ensure that community policing is genuinely inclusive and protective of vulnerable groups.** Design participation mechanisms that deliberately amplify marginalized voices (e.g., women, young people, migrants) and create safe reporting pathways for victims of police misconduct.
- **Cities must rethink how they measure success.** Effective evaluation should focus on outcomes as well as outputs. Do residents feel safer? Do they trust and engage with police? Are community priorities reflected in policing practices?

Chapter 7. Predatory Urbanization: Urban Land and Housing As Targets for Armed Groups and Mafias

Organized groups deliberately evict, grab land, illegally build, and conduct violence related to housing or land in cities to maintain control.

Governments, civil society, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and expert communities can collaborate to break down silos and develop useful solutions.

- Tackle predatory urbanization as a critical step in achieving safer, politically stable, and responsive cities.
- Establish unified language (e.g., predatory urbanization) and a consistent, coordinated approach to identify deliberate action by organized groups to evict, grab land, illegally build, and conduct violence related to housing or land in cities.
- Conduct more research on predatory urbanization through academia, think tanks, and NGOs to identify points in common between policy areas and geographies that are currently siloed.
- Join city networks that can help break down siloes, harmonize definitions, strengthen the evidence base, and share challenges and solutions.

Promising approaches to address these challenges include:

- Simplify laws and close regulatory loopholes in land markets.
- Reform or create public agencies tasked with formalizing property ownership.
- Issue collective land titles to communities, which can increase residents' tenure security and investment in their buildings and communities.
- Develop area-based assessments and urban profiles that integrate housing needs with other areas, such as infrastructure bottlenecks, basic service provision, and public security issues like criminal violence.
- Establish regular and institutionalized community consultation mechanisms on land tenure and codevelopment of alternatives to eviction between governments, civil society, and law enforcement.

Chapter 8. Climate Change, Urban Safety, and Violence: What City Leaders Need to Know

Cities are well positioned to identify practical, low-cost, and inclusive solutions to addressing the nexus between climate change and public safety.

Five actions most cities can take right now:

- Integrate public safety considerations into heat-action plans and disaster-preparedness strategies.
- Use existing data tools to overlay climate risks with violence or insecurity hot spots.
- Design cooling centers and green spaces with safety, accessibility, and community trust in mind.
- Invest in social-cohesion initiatives alongside climate-adaptation projects.
- Generate community-led vulnerability assessments that aim to capture the security context, as well as climate change risks.

Conclusion

This compendium is meant to be read in a few ways. First, specifically as food for thought to help city partners—across the public, private, and community sectors—explore and consider strategies to help reinforce peace and violence prevention. Second, to foster more intentional conversation on precise ways cities are coping with the massive shifts that are taking place globally. It is essential that city actors see themselves as agents of change, not merely passively coping with these shifts but finding ways to proactively manage them, investing in strategies that reinforce solidarity, community, connection, and inclusion, all of which are essential to peaceful, productive, and just urban environments.

About the Authors

Rachel Locke

Rachel Locke is co-founder and Principal of Peace in Our Cities, a network of 100 global cities and organizations working to prevent and reduce serious violence through evidence-informed and rights-based strategies. She previously founded and directed the Violence, Inequality and Power Lab (VIP Lab) at the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, University of San Diego. Prior to directing the VIP Lab, Rachel served as Head of Research for violence prevention at New York University's Center on International Cooperation, Director of International Interventions at the National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College, and Senior Policy Adviser with the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Rachel focuses intentionally on the interconnectedness across various forms of violence—from war to criminally-motivated to interpersonal to political violence—she has a solid track record in launching and sustaining initiatives that explore new approaches to complex challenges. Rachel holds an MA in international affairs from Columbia University and has published widely on prevention, political violence, conflict, and transnational organized crime.

Jai-Ayla Sutherland

Jai-Ayla Sutherland is Program Officer for mass violence and atrocities at the Stanley Center for Peace and Security, where she supports efforts to prevent structural and acute violence by working with government and civil society representatives. Her work focuses predominantly on the role of cities, locally and internationally, in implementing evidence-based prevention strategies. Her team is part of the secretariat of the Peace in Our Cities Network, a global network of cities and organizations working together to reduce violence at the municipal level. She has an MA in international security from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver and a BA in international relations from the University of Southern California.

Flávia Carbonari

Flávia Carbonari is an international development specialist with 20 years of experience working with development banks, governments, and civil society across Latin America, Africa, and East Asia, leading the design and implementation of investment, research, and policy initiatives focused on violence prevention and social inclusion. Currently an Expert Advisor and Member Liaison for Peace in Our Cities, a Senior Consultant to the World Bank since 2007, and an Expert Advisor to the Halving Global Violence Task Force. She has taught graduate and undergraduate courses on urban violence prevention at universities in Argentina and at NYU Buenos Aires, and served as a Non-resident Fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Currently residing in Argentina with experience working across the Americas and Africa.

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In El Salvador, the state of exception—combined with well-documented negotiations between the government and gang leaders—produced one of the sharpest crime declines in modern history... To be clear, the state of exception was not solely centered on stronger policing tactics and harsher incarceration measures. This policy also encompassed the suspension of key due process guarantees—including the right to legal counsel and the presumption of innocence—enabling mass arrests without individual charges.”

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San Salvador, October, 2021.
Photo: Esaú Fuentes González/Unsplash



CHAPTER 1

CITIES UNDER PRESSURE

DELIVERING INTEGRATED SOLUTIONS FOR URBAN PEACE

By Enrique Betancourt

Context: What Is the Problem?

In November 2023, six months after the state of exception took hold in El Salvador,¹ on my way from the international airport to San Salvador, I had the chance to speak with my taxi driver for about an hour. As I listened from the back seat, I watched his face in the rearview mirror. A couple of years earlier, his fourteen-year-old daughter had been harassed by the son of a local gang leader. The day he decided to intervene, after failed attempts to get help from the school and police, the gang leader came to his home that same afternoon. There was a price, he was told, for being left in peace. “For more than a year we lived under indescribable stress,” the driver said. At the time of our conversation, both men, father and son, were in prison following one of many police raids targeting the driver’s neighborhood. He knew that critics of the state of exception had raised concerns about due process, constitutional limits, and democratic safeguards. He did not dismiss those concerns. But they competed with something more immediate and tangible. He did not dismiss those views. But they competed with something more concrete and urgent. For the first time in years, he felt relief that his daughter would come home safely.

Citizens rarely experience security as an ideological question. They experience it as a daily calculation about risk, predictability, and whether their families can plan for tomorrow. For policymakers, this creates a profound challenge. When democratic institutions fail to reduce violence in the short term, public demand shifts toward whoever appears capable of acting decisively. Support does not necessarily signal a rejection of democracy. It reflects a search for urgent relief.

In El Salvador, the state of exception—combined with well-documented negotiations between the government and gang leaders—produced one of the sharpest crime declines in modern history: The national homicide rate fell from approximately 52 per 100,000 residents in 2021 to roughly 2.4 per 100,000 by 2023. For communities living with chronic violence, crime reduction is not a statistic; it marks the boundary between fear and possibility. To be clear, the state of exception was not solely centered on stronger policing tactics and harsher incarceration measures. This policy also encompassed the suspension of key due process guarantees—including the right to legal counsel and the presumption of innocence—enabling mass arrests without individual charges.

The rising appeal of autocratic measures is only one of four major global shifts affecting the way local systems are required to deliver solutions to complex public problems. Along with autocracy, the widespread presence of new technologies in every aspect of private, civic, and institutional life; the disruptive effects of climate change; and the game-changing weakening of multilateralism exacerbate the challenges that public, private, and social problem solvers are facing globally.

Democracy’s central tension is clear: Legitimacy rests on both procedure and performance. When governments cannot show tangible improvements in people’s lives—sustained reductions in homicide, extortion, and serious violence—procedural commitments alone rarely sustain public confidence.

Fragmentation by Design: Why Cities Struggle to Deliver

These global shifts find their most concrete expression at the city level, where governments confront both the complexity of violence and the demand to deliver visible results. Cities sit at the intersection of global transformations and citizens' expectations for effective policy delivery. National governments establish legal and policy frameworks, but cities govern the street, the settlement, the school, the police station, and the community center where safety is ultimately produced or withheld. City leaders are close enough to violence to see it at the resolution that matters and politically accountable enough to experience the consequences of failure directly. Understanding why cities struggle therefore requires examining not only what they do but where and how they intervene within a complex governance system.

Public security is, by design, a fragmented policy domain. Responsibilities are distributed across institutions operating at different levels and branches of government, each with distinct mandates, budgets, cultures, and accountability structures. Police, prosecutors, courts, social services, municipal agencies, community organizations, and international partners operate according to institutional logics that were rarely designed to function in an integrated way. Cities compound this fragmentation because they simultaneously confront high-incidence crime, criminal economies, and organized violence operating at different scales and requiring different institutional responses. Security and justice systems have consistently struggled to govern this convergence. The result is a persistent gap between how violence is diagnosed, how strategies are designed, and what actually happens on the ground. From a systems-thinking perspective, violence often persists because local institutions intervene too late, too weakly, or in fragmented ways that fail to alter the underlying dynamics producing harm.²

This structural failure also has a spatial expression. In cities across the world, disadvantage concentrates geographically, clustering poverty, unemployment, family instability, inadequate housing, and institutional abandonment in the same neighborhoods where violence is most acute. Robert Sampson's work on concentrated disadvantage demonstrates that these conditions are mutually reinforcing: The colocation of multiple forms of deprivation produces social dynamics—weakened collective efficacy, eroded informal social control, and normalized exposure to violence—that no single sectoral intervention can resolve.³ The taxi driver's neighborhood was not random. Fragmented institutions do not simply fail to coordinate; they fail to coordinate repeatedly in the same places, generation after generation, producing the territorial geography of violence that cities then struggle to explain and address. Integration is therefore not only a coordination challenge; it is also a question of spatial justice.

Four global shifts are deepening these structural conditions, each shaping urban security through different mechanisms. The first is democratic erosion. The V-Dem Institute's 2026 Democracy Report documents that democracy has declined to levels not seen since the late 1970s, while Latinobarómetro surveys show declining support for democracy across Latin America.^{4,5} Crime has become a powerful political argument against systems perceived as slow, fragmented, and constrained, and that argument often gains force even where objective security conditions improve because public narratives about crime consistently outpace crime statistics in shaping political demand.⁶ As central governments consolidate power, municipal authorities often lose the autonomy, resources, and jurisdiction required to govern security effectively, even as evidence increasingly points to cities as the most appropriate level for designing and coordinating violence-reduction strategies.⁷ (Muggah et al. 2016).

The second of these shifts relates to the way technology is simultaneously transforming criminal networks and the local systems mandated to counter them. Criminal organizations are rapidly integrating encrypted communications, digital financial tools, cryptocurrencies, and social media ecosystems into recruitment, coordination, and financial operations, often adapting faster than public institutions charged with responding to them.⁸ In some contexts, criminal groups have also used influencers and digital platforms to normalize illicit economies and expand recruitment networks beyond traditional territorial boundaries.

At the same time, cities now possess unprecedented technical capacity to improve coordination through shared data systems, interoperability platforms, and predictive analytics capable of addressing many of the information-sharing failures that historically undermined interagency collaboration. Yet these same tools carry substantial risks. Research on predictive and algorithmic systems has shown that poorly governed technologies can reinforce patterns of unequal surveillance and discriminatory enforcement, often accelerating existing institutional biases faster than ethical and legal safeguards can adapt.⁹ The challenge for cities is therefore not simply technological adoption but governance: building systems that improve coordination and responsiveness without deepening mistrust or reproducing exclusion.

Climate change, the third major shift, is reshaping urban security in ways that go beyond the familiar language of stress and instability. As the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina demonstrated, major climate events do not simply displace communities; they expose and accelerate preexisting governance failures, reshaping the territorial and social conditions that security systems must interpret and respond to. The widespread breakdown of public order, institutional coordination, and trust following the disaster illustrated how environmental shocks can rapidly intensify existing social vulnerabilities and governance fragmentation.¹⁰ In Nairobi's flood-prone informal settlements of Mathare and Korogocho, climate-related displacement and environmental shocks continuously alter population density, economic vulnerability, and community composition faster than local systems and interventions can adapt. While the interaction between climate change and urban security governance remains unevenly understood, it is increasingly clear that cities must build adaptive coordination systems capable of operating in environments where territorial conditions and vulnerability patterns are constantly shifting.

The fourth major shift is the weakening of the multilateral system. At its strongest, this system made important contributions: financing experimentation, generating global evidence, and providing cities with political and technical support to pursue balanced approaches to violence reduction. Yet even at its height, the system struggled to solve a central implementation problem: how to adapt broad models and global evidence to highly specific local conditions. As development scholars such as William Easterly have argued, externally designed solutions often struggle when they are insufficiently adapted to local political and institutional realities.¹¹

Cities were often presented with portfolios of interventions—community policing, violence interruption, youth employment, sports and social-cohesion programs—without sufficient institutional capacity to sequence, combine, and adapt them to local realities. What the current weakening of multilateral cooperation removes is not only funding but also the technical assistance, peer-learning infrastructure, and operational support that made local experimentation possible. Cities increasingly require a translational layer: institutional capacity capable of converting global knowledge into locally viable strategies. This means adapting evidence and interventions to specific combinations of violence drivers, institutional fragmentation, and political constraints. This challenge also reflects a broader shift identified by Beth Simone Noveck and other scholars of public problem-solving: Governments are no longer defined primarily by their ability to design policy but by their capacity to continuously learn, integrate knowledge across sectors, and adapt solutions collaboratively under conditions of uncertainty.¹² In the context of urban violence, this means building local systems capable not only of adopting external models but of translating, testing, coordinating, and iteratively adjusting them within rapidly changing political and territorial environments.

Under conditions of persistent insecurity, social pressure, and institutional fragmentation, political systems gravitate toward simplified responses. Leaders across regions have mobilized support around punitive strategies: militarization of urban space, mass incarceration, and states of exception. This demand emerges not only from citizen support for heavy-handed measures but also from communities that have resigned themselves to accepting rights violations as the price of approaches that at least appear to deliver results. This pattern is visible across Latin America: in Ecuador's emergency security declarations, in the electoral success of law-and-order platforms across multiple countries, and in

polling data showing broad support for *mano dura*—Spanish for “iron fist,” and the term commonly used across Latin America to describe governing through the deliberate suspension or erosion of institutional constraints on security forces, using criminal threats as the justification—approaches even where democratic norms remain formally intact.

The demand for simplicity is political. But the inability to deliver complexity is structural.

Modern public administration still operates through largely sectoral and hierarchical structures inherited from the nineteenth century. Transportation, housing, health, education, and security systems were designed to address bounded and relatively stable problems. Contemporary urban violence does not fit those boundaries. The drivers of violence are transversal by nature, while the institutions responsible for responding to them often compete, duplicate efforts, or fail to coordinate altogether. The result is a structural mismatch between the architecture of the state and the complexity of the contemporary city. Repressive shortcuts remain politically attractive in part because governments struggle to deliver integrated responses at the scale and speed citizens demand. Urban governments that accumulate social agendas without the capacity to deliver fundamental services lose legitimacy, creating space for substitutes: corporate actors, populist movements, and informal powers that fill what the state cannot. In this context, governing urban security effectively requires both political legitimacy and institutional capacity for coordination and delivery.

Default Responses Under Pressure

When cities lack integration infrastructure, political pressure generates responses from whatever institutional capacity exists, producing recognizable defaults that are structural outputs of fragmented systems under pressure.

Mano dura requires minimal cross-sector coordination, systemic diagnosis, and portfolio logic. A vertical security sector can implement *mano dura* responses unilaterally and deliver visible results on short timelines. Critically, when the state holds a decisive power asymmetry over criminal groups, it can suppress violence durably. The tough-on-crime measures in the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte and, more recently, El Salvador demonstrate that repressive strategies can produce real, sometimes lasting reductions in different forms of violence and crime. *Mano dura* is not reducible to territorial control; it typically combines mass incarceration, militarized policing, suspension of due-process guarantees, and deliberate concentration of security decision-making in the executive. What distinguishes it from legitimate hardline enforcement is not the use of force but the removal of the constraints that govern how force is used and who it is accountable to.

What the violence numbers do not capture is how *mano dura* functions simultaneously as a political consolidation strategy. In El Salvador, the state of exception did not simply remove gang members from the streets, it provided the institutional cover for eliminating a functional opposition, capturing the judiciary, rewriting the constitution, and abolishing presidential term limits. The gangs were the justification; the dismantling of checks and balances was the product. Nayib Bukele’s security strategy and his political consolidation were not separate projects—they were the same project.

The V-Dem Institute classifies El Salvador among the most rapidly autocratizing countries of the past decade, with the speed of democratic decline comparable only to military coups.¹³ Even within the security policy community, there is recognition that *mano dura* strategies face structural limits: They depend on a power asymmetry that must be actively maintained, legal conditions that require continuous political authorization, and a governing coalition capable of sustaining both. These are not permanent foundations. The window that concentrated force opens is real, but what gets built inside that window determines whether results outlast the exceptional conditions that produced them. In El Salvador, what has been built is political consolidation, not integration infrastructure. The institutions that would hold gains beyond the exceptional moment—an independent judiciary, accountable police, accessible justice—are precisely those that *mano dura* required dismantling to function.

The deeper warning is this: *Mano dura* does not succeed despite democratic failure—it succeeds because of it. Where democratic institutions are fragmented, underresourced, and have repeatedly failed to protect families like the taxi driver’s, the political ground for authoritarian consolidation is already prepared. Citizens do not turn to *mano dura* because they have abandoned democratic values. They turn to it because democratic governments abandoned them first—in the neighborhood, on the street, at the school gate. Every homicide that democratic institutions fail to prevent, every extortion that goes unanswered, every year of accumulated insecurity without a credible response, is a political gift to leaders who offer clarity through the removal of constraints. Reframing this dynamic—making visible what democratic security delivery can achieve and why it matters—is itself a strategic imperative.¹⁴ Unless democratic governments organize themselves to deliver safety, autocracy will not need to argue for itself. It will simply fill the space that democratic failure leaves open.

Prevention Without Integration: Three Failure Modes

Performative prevention, naive preventionism, and ideological preventionism share a common failure—programs and interventions deployed without enforcement accountability, sequencing logic, or measurable targets tied to violence outcomes—but they arrive at that failure through different routes and require different responses.

Performative prevention is a political strategy—distinct from genuine prevention efforts that are simply deployed without the sequencing, coordination, and enforcement accountability that would make them effective. The distinction matters: The critique here is not of prevention as a domain but of its deliberate deployment as a substitute for the harder integration work. For governments facing progressive constituencies or donor pressure, prevention provides rhetorical cover: Crime is structural, solutions are long-term, and metrics are difficult to define. For nongovernmental organizations, it sustains organizational relevance and funding streams without requiring the uncomfortable proximity to enforcement that integrated approaches demand. For private sector actors, corporate social responsibility programming in violence-affected communities generates reputational value largely decoupled from measurable safety outcomes. For international partners, it funds cleanly, reports well, and transfers neatly into global indicators that bear little relationship to whether anyone in the taxi driver’s neighborhood is safer. Across all four, the incentive structure is the same: Activity is visible, attribution is diffuse, and accountability for results is structurally absent. The program exists to demonstrate action, not to deliver results. When procedure becomes the product—meetings replacing decisions, documentation replacing coordination, process replacing outcomes—the gap between what institutions report and what communities experience is not a failure of design. It is the design.

Naive preventionism is a different problem entirely. Practitioners who lead with upstream social intervention are often motivated by genuine evidence: The causal links between deprivation, exclusion, and violence are real, and the long-term case for prevention is intellectually sound. What naive preventionism underestimates is not the value of prevention but the sequencing constraint it faces: Prevention programs cannot take root in territories where criminal actors retain physical and social control. In those conditions, the first task is not to prevent—it is to intervene, stabilize, and create the conditions under which prevention becomes possible. Prevention is not retroactive; it requires a territorial and social baseline that enforcement must first establish. Prevention deployed without that baseline is not wrong in theory—it is wrong in sequence. The sophistication gap is not about values or evidence. It is about the capacity to define the right problem before pursuing the right solution. As Noveck argues, effective public problem-solving requires building a shared understanding of an urgent challenge that matters to real people, diagnosing before prescribing, and resisting the tendency to default to preferred interventions when circumstances demand a different response.¹⁵ It is about recognizing that an integrated strategy must design all elements together while deploying them in the order that conditions on the ground demand, and that leading with prevention in the wrong conditions produces the same visible inaction as performative prevention, even when the intention is entirely different.

Ideological preventionism is a third variant, and the hardest to address. Some practitioners reject enforcement on principled grounds: State coercion is inherently suspect, engagement with police and prosecutors compromises community trust, or the security system that integration would strengthen is itself a source of the harm being addressed. These are not naive positions—they reflect real historical experience of institutional violence, particularly in communities where the state has been predator as much as protector. That experience is rational and must be taken seriously in any honest diagnosis. What it cannot become, however, is a permanent reason to foreclose engagement. The question is not whether enforcement institutions are imperfect—they are, often profoundly so. The question is whether refusing to engage with them produces better outcomes for the communities that preventionists are trying to protect. In most contexts, it does not. Integration requires working with institutions as they are while building toward what they should become, which is a more demanding position than either endorsing them uncritically or refusing to engage with them at all.

All three leave communities unprotected, but the response to each is distinct. Performative prevention requires political accountability and outcome-linked metrics that expose the gap between reported activity and actual results. Naive preventionism requires not criticism but a more complete theory of change, one that locates prevention within an integrated portfolio rather than treating it as a standalone strategy. Ideological preventionism requires the harder conversation: acknowledging the legitimate grievances that drive the refusal to engage while making the case that transformation requires presence, not abstention. The failure mode differs; the consequence is the same.

The compounding effect of these defaults is structural. *Mano dura* concentrates power and removes constraints. Prevention without integration absorbs resources and produces activity without results. What remains is a system in permanent fragmentation: cities accumulating disconnected programs with no shared diagnostic, no integration mechanism, and no one responsible for the portfolio; national governments simultaneously stripping municipal authority through direct security deployment, resource capture, or legislative centralization of security competencies. Individual interventions may show local results—the aggregate does not move. Mayors are left operationally responsible for violence they cannot govern. The layer of government closest to the problem and most capable of reading its specific configuration is progressively disempowered. This is a description of a system producing exactly the outcomes its architecture was designed to produce, and one that makes *mano dura* and performative prevention perpetually attractive because the alternative requires a level of coordination that the system structurally resists.

This is the condition the cities examined next chose to confront—and found ways to demonstrate that these defaults are not destiny.

How Cities Are Responding: Integration in Practice

What distinguishes cities that have produced sustained safety improvements—ones that simultaneously strengthened rather than eroded the state’s legitimate authority—is the construction of integration as a governance function: a persistent institutional capacity to align actors across fragmented systems, sequence interventions into a coherent portfolio, and sustain that alignment across the political pressures that routinely destroy coordination efforts.

The evidence from city experience across contexts points to four integration practices that recur wherever progress has been made. The cases below are not complete portraits; they are evidence for a structured argument about what integration requires.

Problem Framing: The First Integration Move

The most consequential integration move comes before any intervention: developing a shared, data-supported definition of the specific public safety problem to be solved. This is harder than it sounds. Noveck (2021) argues that effective public problem-solving begins with disciplined collaborative problem definition: a process of identifying the specific problem to

be solved, its root causes, the populations it affects, and the conditions that sustain it.¹⁶ Institutions operating in parallel develop their own problem definitions calibrated to their mandates—police frame violence as an enforcement deficit, social agencies frame it as a deprivation problem, justice institutions frame it as a capacity issue. Each framing is defensible within its silo. Together, they produce fragmentation: parallel diagnoses of the same reality that generate parallel responses with no shared logic. The precondition for integration is a problem frame that all key actors accept, built from evidence granular enough to identify who is driving violence, through what mechanisms, in which specific places, and shared explicitly enough that it creates genuine common ground rather than nominal alignment around vague shared goals.

Baltimore's Gun Violence Reduction Strategy illustrates what disciplined problem framing looks like in practice.¹⁷ The city's systematic shooting reviews—regular structured meetings where police, probation officers, prosecutors, community representatives, and outreach workers examined every shooting incident together—were primarily a problem-framing mechanism before they were anything else. Rather than each institution working from its own partial picture, all actors were required to look at the same granular data: who was involved, what network relationships connected them, what prior interactions each agency had already had with the individuals involved, and what the incident revealed about emerging conflict dynamics. The shared picture that emerged was the foundation on which everything else—direct notifications to individuals at high risk of violence, coordinated enforcement actions, and referrals to outreach and social services—was built. Close to real-time information-sharing systems allowed that shared frame to be continuously updated, creating a living diagnostic rather than a static assessment. Underlying this approach is Mark Kleiman's core insight: that swift and certain consequences alter behavior more effectively than severe ones, and that delivering certainty requires coordination across agencies that typically operate in isolation.¹⁸ Independent evaluation found that homicides and shootings declined by approximately 25 percent in the Western District during the strategy's first 18 months of implementation.¹⁹ (Kapustin & Chalfin, 2024) . Results remain contingent on sustained political protection; the coordination infrastructure has not yet reached the threshold of self-sustaining institutionalization that would allow it to survive a wholesale change in political direction.²⁰

What Baltimore also demonstrates is that problem framing is itself a coordination technology. The shooting review did not just produce information—it created a recurring obligation for institutions to confront the same reality together, building the interagency relationships and shared vocabulary that coordination depends on. The diagnostic process was the integration process.

Nairobi, Kenya and Cali, Colombia show that the diagnostic finding varies radically by context—and that deploying the wrong intervention for the problem configuration is worse than deploying nothing, because it consumes political capital and community trust without producing results.

In Nairobi's informal settlements of Korogocho, Kayole, and Mathare, the primary fragmentation was relational: a fundamental rupture between communities and security actors. Between April and August 2020, Mathare recorded 17 deaths attributable to excessive police force. The Pamoja Mtaani program, implemented by The Legend Kenya in partnership with the Life & Peace Institute from July to December 2021, addressed this prior condition directly (Peace in Our Cities, 2024).²¹ Structured dialogue sessions, joint peace actions—including shared meals at police stations—and community mapping exercises involving youth, women, police officers, and local administrators has helped to rebuild the foundational relationship that any subsequent enforcement or prevention work requires. Over six months, more than 700 people participated in 300 dialogue sessions and nearly 400 community activities. The program's gender architecture reflected a dual imperative. Separate sessions for women addressed gender-based violence and the specific trauma of mothers who had lost children to extrajudicial killings. Separate sessions for male youth addressed identity, purpose, and alternative constructions of male belonging, drawing on the insight that Richard Reeves identifies in his analysis of male disadvantage: When legitimate institutions withdraw structured pathways to meaningful roles, criminal networks fill the

vacuum with precisely the identity and belonging that young men are seeking.²² The decision to disaggregate before integrating was itself a diagnostic finding: The fragmentation ran within the community along gender and generational lines, not only between the state and the community. Deploying an integrated, balanced approach in Mathare without first addressing the police-community relationship would have accelerated violence. The sequencing is the strategy.

In Cali—a city operating under severe organized crime pressure, with multiple armed actors competing for territorial control—the diagnostic step was more complex and more consequential.²³ Standard community violence intervention approaches assume a baseline of territorial accessibility that organized crime conditions frequently deny: Credible messengers may be co-opted, community mediators may be mistaken for negotiators with criminal actors, and external operators may lack safe access to the neighborhoods where intervention is most needed. Cali’s integration work, therefore, began by mapping which territories were controlled by which actors, under what conditions external operators could safely function, and which community figures retained sufficient autonomy from criminal networks to serve as credible intermediaries—before any program design decisions were made. The Abriendo Caminos program that emerged from this prior step coupled violence interruption with community mediation and youth development, calibrated to the specific organized crime geography rather than imported from an external model. An impact evaluation documented a 74 percent homicide reduction in the Charco Azul neighborhood and successful interruption of revenge violence cycles.²⁴

Coordination Architecture: Making Integration Work

Two cities illustrate how coordination architecture can be built under radically different institutional conditions—one without command authority, one without additional resources—and what both share is more instructive than what distinguishes them.

Bogotá’s Sistema Distrital de Justicia demonstrates that coordination does not require command authority.²⁵ Colombia’s centralized legal structure places criminal justice authority at the national level—Bogotá’s mayor cannot command prosecutors, judges, or corrections officials. Yet between 2016 and 2020, the city demonstrated that convening power—backed by democratic legitimacy and mayoral visibility—can substitute for formal command when deployed intentionally. Bogotá’s most consequential innovation was the design and integration of differentiated attention routes—pathways through the justice and security system built around the actual experience of citizens navigating institutional mandates, not around the convenience of the institutions themselves. Casas de Justicia were the physical expression of this logic: prosecutors, public defenders, social workers, psychologists, police, and community mediators brought together under one roof in neighborhoods where residents had historically faced prohibitive barriers to the formal justice system. Community justice mechanisms—conciliation, mediation, arbitration—provided legally recognized resolution pathways for conflicts that would otherwise have escalated to violence, reducing the load on formal courts while simultaneously building the community-state relationship that enforcement depends on. Angélica Durán-Martínez’s analysis of criminal violence in Colombia and Mexico provides essential context: Where state legitimacy is structurally weak, justice accessibility is itself a security intervention—which is precisely what the Casas de Justicia were designed to deliver.²⁶

Pelotas, Brazil, provides the most complete documented example of coordination architecture institutionalized at the portfolio level.²⁷ The Pacto Pelotas pela Paz’s five operational pillars—prevention, law enforcement and justice, reduction of illicit markets, urbanism, and technology and data—function as a portfolio with internal logic rather than parallel programs. The Observatory of Public Security and Social Prevention generates diagnostic intelligence. The Municipal Integrated Management Office coordinates across institutions and serves as the backbone agency. The Special Advisory, anchored directly to the mayor’s office, provides the political authority to sustain cross-sector alignment across electoral cycles. Technology is embedded as integration infrastructure—the shared operating picture that prevents agencies from

reverting to separate logics. An independent impact evaluation found that the pact was associated with a 9 percent reduction in homicides and a 7 percent reduction in robberies citywide.²⁸

What Bogotá and Pelotas share is more important than their differences. Neither waited for the perfect institutional conditions. Neither required new additional financial resources. Both treated coordination as a governance design problem—and solved it by building the architecture that fragmented systems do not generate spontaneously: shared diagnostic capacity, a backbone agency with cross-sector authority, and political protection anchored at the highest available level of municipal government.

Legitimacy as Infrastructure, Not Outcome

The third integration practice is treating legitimacy as a prerequisite rather than a downstream result—the condition without which enforcement cannot function and prevention cannot take root.

The Nairobi case makes this argument most directly. The pattern recurs across contexts. Mexico City’s Alto al Fuego—adapting the focused deterrence model of Boston’s Operation Ceasefire—paired deterrence messaging with credible offers of assistance to individuals willing to disengage from violence.²⁹ The program targeted specific neighborhoods and networks, convening law enforcement, social service providers, and community organizations around a shared list of highest-risk individuals. Those individuals received a direct message: Continued violence would trigger a coordinated enforcement response, while disengagement would open access to employment, housing, health services, and personal support. The offer was credible only because the coordination infrastructure behind it was real—not a promise from a single agency but a commitment from a coalition that had aligned around the same individuals.

Evidence from procedural justice training across Mexico City’s police force reinforces the legitimacy argument from a different angle. Tom Tyler’s foundational research demonstrates that people are more likely to comply with the law and cooperate with authorities when they perceive the process as fair—when officers explain their decisions, treat people with dignity, and apply rules consistently—regardless of the outcome of any specific encounter.³⁰ When Mexico City officers received structured training in these principles, public satisfaction increased and complaint rates declined.³¹ Legitimacy gains at the officer level translated into measurable community-level outcomes, demonstrating that the relationship between enforcement and trust runs in both directions—and that communicating this relationship publicly is as important as building it operationally.³² Like Pelotas, Mexico City now faces the challenge that follows early success: institutionalizing what worked as pilots into governance arrangements durable enough to survive leadership transitions, budget cycles, and the political pressures that routinely cause cities to abandon what is working precisely when it begins to produce results.

Adaptive Precision: Dynamic Concentration in Practice

The fourth integration practice is adaptive portfolio management—the institutionalization of real-time learning and adjustment across the full intervention portfolio as conditions change. The intellectual foundation of this approach draws from Kleiman’s concept of dynamic concentration: the idea that violence prevention and enforcement resources should adapt as violence shifts across territories and groups, rather than remain fixed in static zones.³³ Criminal actors respond to pressure by moving, adapting, and exploiting new territorial opportunities, requiring cities to continuously recalibrate their interventions.

Beginning in 2022, Rosario, Argentina, faced an acute escalation of organized crime violence driven by competition between local drug trafficking groups. In response, the city implemented Targeted Neighborhood Interventions across nine priority zones, deploying interdisciplinary teams tailored to each neighborhood’s specific dynamics. Rather than applying a standardized intervention model citywide, authorities combined enforcement, outreach, social services, and

environmental improvements based on evolving local conditions. To sustain this adaptive approach, the city established the Integrated Benefits Forecast (IBF) committee, which met weekly to analyze incoming violence and intelligence data, identify shifts in criminal dynamics across neighborhoods, and rapidly reallocate resources across the intervention portfolio.³⁴ This created a continuous intelligence-to-action cycle capable of responding to violence as it evolved, rather than relying on static annual or quarterly planning processes.

The Fragilities of Integration

The cases discussed also reveal that integration is not self-executing. Person-dependent coordination is the most common failure mode: When key officials depart, coordination mechanisms built on personal trust collapse. Baltimore's Gun Violence Reduction Strategy has survived multiple leadership transitions but required intensive rebuilding each time; Bogotá's Casas de Justicia represent the alternative: physically and legally institutionalized infrastructure designed to outlast the individuals who built it. Resource dependence without protected funding is the second structural vulnerability; coordination capacity is consistently the first casualty of fiscal pressure, precisely because its value is hardest to communicate when nothing is visibly failing. Integration is a structural solution to structural fragmentation; it is not a substitute for the political and accountability conditions that make honest delivery possible in the first place. What the city experiences documented here make clear is that these fragilities are manageable, but only through deliberate design choices that anticipate them from the start.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Effective integration requires the core capacity of public problem-solving: the ability to work across institutional boundaries, assemble the right expertise for the specific problem at hand, and adapt continuously as conditions and knowledge evolve. Four priorities define this capacity in practice for urban security.

What Integration Requires: Priorities for Practice

Engage in shared problem framing. The first question is not which program to run but what problem the city actually has—and whether all key actors are looking at the same answer. Problem framing must be granular enough to identify who is driving violence, through what mechanisms, and in which specific places, and must account for the structurally distinct dynamics that shape how different social groups experience and generate violence. A large body of evidence shows that the pathways that make young men disproportionately vulnerable to criminal recruitment are not the same as those that expose women disproportionately to intimate partner violence and gender-based harm (Reeves, 2022);³⁵ nor are they uniform across age, ethnicity, or community context. Local policymakers and service providers can assess minimum viable alignment by asking whether four conditions are simultaneously present: a shared diagnostic that all key agencies accept; a coordination mechanism with authority to convene across silos; data flowing in real time to operational decision makers; and a political principal willing to defend the strategy publicly.

Build an architecture for collaborative design and implementation. Cities require coordinating structures capable of convening agencies across sectors and sustaining implementation over time. In several contexts, offices of violence prevention (OVPs) have played this role by aligning data, interventions, and operational coordination across public safety, health, education, and community actors.³⁶ Recent research on OVPs highlights the importance of politically authorized entities that can maintain continuity across administrations, align agencies around shared priorities, and translate violence-reduction strategies into operational routines. Effective coordination also depends on shared data infrastructure, regular interagency decision-making processes, and mechanisms that reduce fragmentation across institutions. Even strong individual programs often fail to sustain impact when coordination mechanisms are weak or disconnected. These structures, therefore, require both political backing and fiscal protection to maintain collaboration over time.

Iterate to adapt to progress and evolving implementation capabilities. Solution design must build in flexibility from the start, not as a contingency but as a governance function. Sequence explicitly: legitimacy-building before enforcement intensification in low-trust contexts; territorial stabilization before prevention programs in organized-crime-controlled areas. Deploy technology as integration infrastructure, evaluated by whether it strengthens the shared operating picture and enables information flow across agencies, not by whether it adds capability to a fragmented system with no one responsible for the whole. Institutionalize the feedback loop between intelligence and resource allocation so that the portfolio adjusts as violence migrates, implementation reveals new information, and capabilities evolve. A strategy that cannot learn is not a strategy—it is a program.

Anchor solutions to political narratives. Integration is technically demanding and politically exposed. Without deliberate narrative work, complexity loses to simplicity every time, and *mano dura* will always be simpler to explain than a coordinated portfolio. Make the integrated logic visible: Show what sequencing produces, document results concretely, and connect outcomes to the political priorities that decision makers must defend publicly. Use trusted voices—community leaders, officers whose working conditions have improved through legitimacy building, residents of neighborhoods where integration has produced results—rather than institutional messaging. The political sustainability of integrated approaches depends as much on the quality of the narrative infrastructure defending them as on the quality of the operational infrastructure delivering them.³⁷ Alignment between what the strategy does and what political principals can credibly claim credit for is not a communications afterthought—it is a design requirement.

Conclusion

For multilateral organizations and international networks, these city-level realities point toward a different model of engagement. The most valuable function they can perform is creating the conditions for cities to build their own integration capacity: investing in local diagnostic infrastructure, supporting governance design, and convening structured peer exchange that surfaces how portfolio logic operates in practice across different contexts. This means shifting from a prescription model to a capacity model: from certifying which interventions have worked elsewhere to supporting cities in developing the translational function that converts global knowledge into locally grounded strategy. Peace in Our Cities represents this alternative, organized around peer learning and mutual accountability rather than program replication. The compendium this chapter contributes to is an exercise in exactly that function.

The taxi driver who felt relieved when his daughter's harassers were imprisoned was not voting against democracy. He was choosing safety. He chose the ability to sleep. For the first time, the state acted in a way that made his daughter less afraid—and him less powerless. For years, he had heard about reforms: more patrols, new initiatives, revised policies. None of it changed the fact that his family remained exposed. Until suddenly, it did.

This is democracy's test. Authoritarian approaches can reduce community violence, sometimes durably. What they cannot do is build the institutional capacity that holds safety beyond the exceptional conditions that produced it. Democratic governance does something harder and more cumulative: It combines credible accountability with credible opportunity, aligns fragmented institutions around shared goals, and builds delivery capacity that compounds over time into a governing capability applicable far beyond public safety. That capability requires political authorization, intentional design, protected funding, and leadership willing to defend complexity when simplicity is more attractive.

If democratic governments fail to organize themselves to provide safety, they risk something more corrosive than electoral defeat: the gradual erosion of the belief that democracy can protect ordinary families. Citizens rarely abandon democratic values outright, but when governments persistently fail to deliver safety, the political conditions for authoritarian consolidation compound. The responsibility is practical: Build institutions capable of protecting families like the taxi driver's without surrendering the principles that make democratic governance worth preserving.

Endnotes

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About the Author

Enrique Betancourt

Enrique Betancourt is Partner and Co-Founder of Contextual, a strategic advisory firm that helps governments, multilateral organizations, and civil society bridge the gap between policy design and implementation in complex public policy challenges, particularly in citizen security, justice, and urban development across Latin America and the United States.

Previously, he served as Executive Director of Mexico's National Center for Crime Prevention and as Deputy Director in the Presidential Delivery Unit within the Office of the President of Mexico, where he led and supported major public security, social policy, and interagency coordination initiatives.

He has more than 13 years of international development experience and has supervised and directly implemented programs in Mexico, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Betancourt is a Yale World Fellow. He holds a Master's degree in Urban Design from Harvard University and a degree in Architecture from Universidad de las Américas Puebla.

He lives in Washington, D.C.

enrique@itscontextual.com.

betancourt.enrique@gmail.com





“ For city governments...enforcement can reduce certain forms of street crime while increasing incentives for criminal groups to embed themselves deeper in local life, especially around drug markets that cannot easily relocate. This risk must inform the design of policing strategies and public service interventions. ”

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
September, 2018. Photo: Adobe Stock

CHAPTER 2

ORGANIZED CRIME AS URBAN GOVERNANCE

HOW CRIMINAL GROUPS RULE CITIES AND WHAT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN DO

By Santiago Tobón

Across Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and parts of southern Europe, armed criminal groups govern neighborhoods. They settle disputes, enforce rules, collect taxes, and provide security—often alongside the state. These governance functions sustain criminal profits, embed armed actors in daily life, and complicate policy responses. Global geopolitical shifts intensify the challenge. Fragmented international drug-control cooperation sustains trafficking rents. Rapid advances in digital technology lower the cost of coordination for states and criminal organizations. A renewed enthusiasm for punitive *mano dura* (tough on crime) approaches often fragments criminal markets, increases violence, and fails to displace criminal governance. Climate-related migration and displacement generate new recruitment pools and destabilize informal settlements where criminal groups operate. This chapter explains how organized crime functions as urban governance, traces how city policies and informal bargains have shaped current equilibria in Medellín, Colombia, and other cities, and offers practical guidance for local governments facing similar dynamics.

Context: The Governance Problem

City governments across the world confront armed criminal groups that provide rule-like services. These groups regulate markets, punish theft, settle disputes, and enforce behavioral codes. They also extort residents and businesses, recruit youth, and control territory through threats and selective violence. This combination of coercion and service provision turns organized crime into a system of urban governance rather than a narrow public safety problem (Gambetta, 1993; Skaperdas, 2001; Lessing, 2021).

The pattern appears in diverse settings. In Medellín, over 350 neighborhood gangs known as *combos* govern microterritories, collecting extortive “security fees” (*vacunas*) and controlling drug retail markets (Blattman et al., 2025). In Rio de Janeiro, criminal groups such as Comando Vermelho and *milícias* (militias) regulate access, commerce, and political participation inside *favelas* (Arias, 2006, 2017; Magaloni et al., 2020). In San Salvador, the MS-13 and Barrio 18 controlled entire neighborhoods, taxing transport operators and merchants while restricting residents’ mobility (Cruz, 2010; Melnikov et al., 2025). In Mexican cities such as Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, and Culiacán, cartels regulate territory, labor markets, and local commerce (Dell, 2015; Durán-Martínez, 2018). In Cape Town, South Africa, gang networks govern informal settlements and control economic access in areas the state reaches only intermittently (Lambrechts, 2012). In southern Italy, the Camorra and ‘Ndrangheta continue to govern segments of urban economic life through extortion, dispute resolution, and political influence (Gambetta, 1993; Alesina et al., 2019). The transnational expansion of organized crime groups into new territories further diffuses these governance patterns (Varese, 2011). Criminal governance, in short, is a global urban phenomenon.

Defining Organized Crime as Governance

Urban organized crime combines three features. First, it controls territory. Groups use credible threats to regulate who can sell drugs, operate businesses, move goods, and enter or remain in a neighborhood. Second, it extracts revenue. Extortion and illicit market profits fund personnel, weapons, bribes, and social benefits for members and their families. Extortion often operates as informal taxation, with regular payment schedules and enforcement procedures (Gambetta, 1993; Moncada, 2022). Third, it provides governance services. Groups offer protection, dispute resolution, and enforcement

of social rules. They sometimes punish theft, mediate family and neighbor conflicts, and enforce restrictions on street crime to reduce police attention and maintain a predictable environment for illegal business (Lessing, 2021; Arias, 2017).

This chapter uses “criminal groups” as the general term for any armed organization exercising territorial governance. The term “gangs” in this chapter refers to locally rooted armed groups that control territory and exercise governance functions. This usage differs from other definitions in national legislation, which sometimes apply “gang” labels based on membership thresholds, criminal records, or organizational structures. The key feature here is the governance function, not the legal classification. *Milícias*, as documented in Rio de Janeiro, are armed groups often composed of former or off-duty police and military personnel that control territory and extract rents while presenting themselves as community protection against drug-trafficking factions (*façções*) (Magaloni et al., 2020; Willis, 2015). In order to preserve analytical precision, specific local terms—“combos,” “razones,” “façções,” “milícias,” “cartels”—appear when discussing particular cities.

Violence in these contexts extends beyond homicide. Criminal governance regimes produce extortion, threats, restrictions on movement, forced displacement, sexual violence, and coerced recruitment of minors. Homicide data capture only the most visible outcome. Broader forms of violence—including gender-based violence within gang-controlled communities, psychological coercion, and economic predation—often persist or increase even when homicide rates decline (Yashar, 2018; Buvinic et al., 1999). Research from Rio de Janeiro documents how drug wars disrupt education and long-term human capital accumulation (Monteiro and Rocha, 2017). Evidence from El Salvador shows that gang control reduces labor mobility, wages, and economic development in affected communities (Melnikov et al., 2025). Research from Mexico links cartel presence to increases in disappearances, forced displacement, and nonlethal violence that standard crime statistics fail to capture (Atuesta and Vargas González, 2024).

Why Organized Crime Persists As Homicide Rates Fall

Many cities that have reduced homicide rates still face entrenched criminal governance. Medellín reduced its homicide rate from around 400 per 100,000 in 1991 to approximately 12 per 100,000 in recent years. Yet, extortion, territorial control, and gang governance persisted and in some areas expanded during the same period (Blattman et al., 2022a; 2022b). This occurred for a few reasons:

First, criminal groups reach bargained orders that reduce lethal violence while preserving governance. Medellín’s criminal order shifted between violent fragmentation (2009–2012) and negotiated coordination. Criminal leaders arranged for reduced overt conflict and maintained a decade of relative stability, enforced through prison-based coordination and street-level discipline (Blattman et al., 2022b). Similar dynamics appear in Rio de Janeiro, where shifting alliances between drug-trafficking factions and *milícias* produce periods of reduced homicide alongside persistent extortion (Lessing and Denyer Willis, 2019).

Second, drug retail and extortion reinforce predictability. Wars disrupt sales, increase police attention, and generate internal defections. Governance activities—suppressing opportunistic theft, mediating disputes, enforcing rules—support stable markets and steady revenue (Blattman et al., 2025).

Third, state presence does not automatically displace criminal rule. In many cities, the state is neither absent nor fully effective. This intermediate condition—where the state can threaten criminal operations but cannot provide legitimate alternatives—creates incentives for gangs to invest in governance as a defensive strategy. Section B examines this mechanism and its policy implications in detail.

These persistence dynamics do not operate in isolation. City-level criminal orders are shaped by, and connect to, broader geopolitical forces. Four global trends—the fragmentation of international drug-control cooperation, rapid advances in digital technology, the resurgence of punitive security approaches, and climate-related displacement—directly affect

the revenue structures, enforcement environments, and political incentives that sustain criminal governance in cities. Each compounds the local conditions that allow criminal groups to persist even as homicide rates decline.

Global Shifts That Shape Local Criminal Governance

Four geopolitical trends directly affect how criminal groups operate in cities and how municipal governments can respond.

1. Fragmentation of the Multilateral System and International Drug-Control Cooperation

The postwar multilateral framework for drug control has weakened. Shifts in enforcement priorities across consumer countries, evolving harm-reduction debates, and declining cooperation on extradition and intelligence sharing affect trafficking routes and the distribution of drug rents. Organized crime adapts through diversifying markets, forging new alliances, and moving money through digital and financial channels (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023, 2024; OECD, 2016; Bewley-Taylor, 2012). Cocaine trafficking routes through West Africa toward European markets have operated since at least the mid-2000s (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2008). Recent shifts involve the scale and diversification of these flows, not their novelty. West African transit routes now carry larger volumes and a wider range of commodities, creating new governance and violence dynamics in transit cities (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023). The Europol 2025 Threat Assessment identifies the expansion of organized crime networks operating across European port cities, with governance patterns that resemble those documented in Latin American contexts (Europol, 2025). The weakening of international cooperation directly affects local governance. It sustains the rents that criminal groups use to finance territorial control.

2. Technology and the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence

The rapid advance of digital technology and artificial intelligence transforms state security capacity and criminal operations. The scale of change is exponential. Machine learning enables predictive policing, automated surveillance, and real-time data integration at speeds and scales previously unavailable. Criminal organizations exploit the same infrastructure. Encrypted communications enable coordination across prison and street networks. Digital payment platforms facilitate extortion collection with reduced physical exposure. Social media amplify territorial claims and intimidation. AI-generated content can be used for disinformation, identity fraud, and recruitment. The cost of criminal coordination has decreased, while the cost of effective state oversight has increased.

Technology also shifts what cities can measure and what they cannot. Criminal activity migrates into digitally mediated forms—extortion via mobile payments, online drug markets, digital surveillance of residents—that traditional crime statistics fail to capture. Section B discusses the specific policy implications of these tools for policing and governance.

3. The Rise of Authoritarian and Punitive Security Approaches

A renewed global appeal for punitive security policies shapes local decision-making. “Tough on crime” agendas promise rapid violence reduction through raids, mass arrests, heavy sentencing, and, in some cases, extrajudicial killings (Holland, 2013). Research from Mexico shows that crackdowns and shifts in political protection can trigger violence and fragmentation (Dell, 2015; Trejo and Ley, 2018; Calderón et al., 2015). El Salvador’s state of exception, which began in 2022 under President Nayib Bukele, led to the detention of over 80,000 people and produced significant short-term reductions in homicide. It also generated mass human rights violations, weakened due process, and concentrated incarcerated gang members in conditions that may facilitate future coordination (Lessing, 2017; Lessing and Denyer Willis, 2019).

In the Philippines, the “war on drugs” under President Rodrigo Duterte produced thousands of extrajudicial killings with limited impact on the drug-market structure. In Rio de Janeiro, large-scale police operations in *favelas* have generated high civilian casualties and deepened some distrust and mistrust of state institutions (Magaloni et al., 2020; Willis,

2015). The appeal of *mano dura* approaches often aligns with broader authoritarian tendencies that erode judicial independence, weaken oversight mechanisms, and concentrate executive power. The result reinforces cycles of coercion without displacing the governance structures that sustain criminal organizations.

4. Climate Change, Displacement, and Urban Vulnerability

Climate-related migration and environmental degradation generate new stresses in cities where criminal groups already operate. Displaced populations arriving in informal settlements often lack access to state services, formal labor markets, and legal protections. Criminal organizations fill these gaps, offering employment, informal credit, and dispute resolution in exchange for compliance and recruitment (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021). Climate shocks disrupt agricultural livelihoods and increase the supply of labor available to criminal organizations (Dube et al., 2016).

Climate-induced displacement creates recruitment pools, induces territorial competition in receiving areas, increases demand for informal governance in settlements that the state cannot serve, and produces conditions—overcrowding, absence of economic opportunity, weak social networks—associated with higher rates of interpersonal violence. Cities where environmental displacement concentrates in areas already under criminal governance face compounding risks. Rapid population growth in informal settlements outpaces state service delivery, strengthening the relative governance capacity of armed groups (Tietjen et al., 2023; Nett and Rüttinger, 2016).

Practice: How Cities Are Responding

City governments use several strategies to address organized crime as governance. These strategies rarely operate in isolation, and the same policy can produce divergent effects depending on local criminal group structure, drug-market rents, and the credibility of state service delivery. This section examines five policy domains: enforcement, negotiation and informal accommodation, public services, technology and surveillance, and prisons.

Enforcement and Its Limits

The Promise and Limits of Targeted Policing

A large body of evidence from the United States supports the effectiveness of hot-spot policing. Systematic reviews confirm that focused patrol and enforcement produce meaningful short-term reductions in crime at specific locations, including violent crime (Sherman and Weisburd, 1995; Braga et al., 2014; Weisburd et al., 2010). These findings have influenced policing strategies worldwide.

Evidence from some Latin American cities suggests that these results do not transfer uniformly. In Medellín, a randomized experiment on hot-spot policing found reductions in property crime—particularly car thefts—but no measurable effects on violent crime (Collazos et al., 2021). In Bogotá and Medellín, place-based interventions that combined policing with city services produced mixed results. Some evidence pointed to crime displacement rather than net reduction, with crime shifting to adjacent areas (Blattman et al., 2021). These findings contrast with the broader US literature, which generally finds limited displacement and net positive effects.

The divergence matters for policy. Hot-spot policing was developed in contexts where the state holds a clear monopoly on coercion, and criminal governance is marginal. In cities where armed groups govern territories, control drug markets, and provide services, the dynamics differ. Police presence may deter opportunistic street crime— theft, robbery, visible drug transactions—without affecting the governance structures that produce extortion, rule enforcement, and territorial control. Context determines which outcomes targeted policing can achieve.

Focused Deterrence

Focused deterrence strategies direct targeted communication to specific individuals or groups identified as highest-risk for violence. These strategies combine the offer of social services and economic support with a credible promise of swift enforcement consequences for continued violence. The approach originated in the United States with Operation Ceasefire and the Group Violence Intervention model (Kennedy, 2011).

Systematic reviews of US implementations find significant reductions in violence associated with focused deterrence (Braga and Weisburd, 2012). Evidence from Latin American adaptations remains limited but emerging. Focused deterrence targets the individuals and groups that sustain violence rather than entire territories. This specificity makes it potentially more compatible with contexts where criminal governance is embedded, because it avoids the broad disruption that triggers the governance-strengthening dynamic described below. Transferability to contexts with high corruption or weak prosecutorial capacity remains an open question.

Enforcement Can Strengthen Criminal Governance

Medellín's experience reveals a counterintuitive dynamic. When the state increases its presence near lucrative illicit markets, criminal groups often respond by investing more in governance to protect drug rents. There is evidence of a geographic discontinuity that was created by internal border changes in the past where state security forces were assigned closer to some city blocks than others for decades. Neighborhood gangs in closer proximity to state presence developed more governance over time—expanding rulemaking, enforcement, and service provision. The effect concentrates in neighborhoods with higher potential drug rents (Blattman et al., 2025).

Blattman et al. (2025) find that criminal groups near state presence develop stronger governance but do not necessarily produce lower violence rates. The relationship between governance strength and violence depends on whether groups face active competition or operate under bargained stability. Whether municipal authorities recognize this spatial pattern remains an open question that warrants further investigation through structured dialogue between researchers and city security officials.

This finding challenges the assumption that criminal governance results only from state absence. State presence increases the risk of seizures and arrests, which threatens the core business of drug-trafficking groups. Criminal groups respond by investing in governance. Governance makes neighborhoods orderly, reduces theft that could trigger police complaints, and builds compliance that deters residents from cooperating with authorities. Research from Rio de Janeiro identifies a parallel dynamic: Criminal groups expand governance in areas where state policing is present but insufficient to provide legitimate alternatives (Magaloni et al., 2020).

In Rio de Janeiro, *milícia* expansion depends not only on insufficient state presence but also on political alliances between *milícia* leaders and elected officials. These alliances provide protection from enforcement and access to public contracts (Magaloni et al., 2020; Willis, 2015). The *milícia* model differs from drug-trafficking factions precisely because of this political embeddedness.

For city governments, the implication is direct. Enforcement can reduce certain forms of street crime while increasing incentives for criminal groups to embed themselves deeper in local life, especially around drug markets that cannot easily relocate. This risk must inform the design of policing strategies and public service interventions (discussed below).

Broad Crackdowns Often Generate Violence and Fragmentation

Research from Mexico demonstrates that targeting cartel leaders can trigger succession conflicts, territorial fragmentation, and increases in violence (Dell, 2015; Calderón et al., 2015; Trejo and Ley, 2018). Evidence from Mexico also shows that drug-related detentions are associated with increased violence rather than a reduction (Atuesta, 2025). The “beheading” of criminal organizations disrupts existing bargained orders without eliminating the underlying economic incentives (Calderón et al., 2015). Successor factions compete for control, often with more violence than their predecessors employed.

El Salvador’s mass incarceration approach under the state of exception produced dramatic homicide reductions. The concentration of gang members in overcrowded facilities creates conditions for prison-based coordination that may generate future governance challenges (Lessing, 2017; Skarbek, 2014).

Corruption and Selective Enforcement

Criminal governance persists when criminal groups can buy protection or negotiate limits on police action. In Rio de Janeiro, research documents how police-criminal collusion regulates the distribution of violence, with police selectively targeting some groups while protecting others (Willis, 2015; Magaloni et al., 2020). In Mexican cities, the breakdown of established protection arrangements between cartels and political actors triggered escalations of violence (Trejo and Ley, 2018). In Medellín, criminal brokers have repeatedly cultivated ties to political and security actors, reducing enforcement pressure and stabilizing criminal control (Martin, 2012; Duncan, 2014).

In Rio de Janeiro, police operations disproportionately target drug-faction-controlled *favelas* while *milícia*-controlled territories face significantly less enforcement pressure (Magaloni et al., 2020; Willis, 2015). This selective enforcement reinforces *milícia* governance. Interview-based accounts from Medellín describe how some criminal groups maintained political influence through connections with local political families.

Cities rarely control the entire enforcement apparatus. In Colombia, national police and prosecutors play primary roles. Municipal elected officials influence priorities through coordination, resource allocation, and political signals—levers that can support targeted enforcement or create incentives for informal accommodation.

Municipal authority over enforcement varies across governance structures. In federal systems such as Brazil and Mexico, mayors have even less control over police and prosecutors. In Brazil, state military police conduct most urban policing operations, while the federal civil police handle investigations. In Mexico, municipal police are limited to preventive functions, with investigative and organized-crime authority reserved for state and federal agencies. Municipal elected officials in these contexts influence security outcomes through social spending, urban planning, local service delivery, and political advocacy rather than direct operational command. This variation determines which recommendations cities can implement directly versus those requiring coordination with state or national authorities.

Negotiation and Informal Accommodation

In many cities, reductions in visible violence coincide with bargaining among criminal groups or between criminal actors and state-linked intermediaries. These bargains reduce open conflict. They also entrench the groups that reach them.

How Bargains Reduce Violence

Criminal peace agreements operate through discipline. Mid-level and senior leaders coordinate to prevent turf wars, align pricing, and resolve disputes. Prison confinement can facilitate coordination by holding leaders together and enabling communication, especially when prison governance remains porous (Lessing and Denyer Willis, 2019; Skarbek, 2014). In Medellín, the post-2012 period reflects such an arrangement. Criminal leaders, aided by prison dynamics, sustained a

reduction in open conflict for over a decade (Blattman et al., 2022b). In Rio de Janeiro, periods of reduced interfactional violence have coincided with informal truces brokered through prison networks (Lessing, 2017). In Mexican cities, local accommodations between cartels and municipal actors have sometimes reduced homicide in exchange for tacit tolerance of trafficking operations (Durán-Martínez, 2018).

How Bargains Entrench Criminal Governance

Bargains often come with enforcement boundaries. Police and political actors may reduce pressure on certain criminal leaders or territories in exchange for lower homicide rates. Criminal leaders then enforce discipline on lower-level groups and expand governance to maintain stability. This dynamic increases the capacity for extortion, normalizes illicit taxation, and strengthens territorial control.

In Medellín, interview-based accounts describe committees and brokered arrangements that linked demobilized armed actors, municipal government, and police. Interviewees described a “Mesa de Paz” (peace table) structure that functioned as a channel for coordination and, at times, for shielding illegal operations. In Rio de Janeiro, informal truces between police units and drug factions in specific *favelas* have allowed factions to consolidate extortion operations during periods of reduced lethal violence (Lessing, 2017; Arias, 2017). This accommodation reduces public accountability, promotes selective enforcement, fosters political capture, and erects barriers to entry for community organizations seeking to operate independently of criminal control.

What Cities Can Control

Municipal governments often lack direct authority to negotiate with armed groups, and legal constraints significantly limit this option. Municipal elected officials shape the environment that makes bargains more or less likely. They control social spending, local service delivery, municipal permits, and public messaging. They can support transparency and oversight to limit informal deals. They can also resist pressure to accept short-term reductions in homicide as sufficient measures of success when extortion and governance persist.

Public Services and the Governance Competition

Public Service Delivery Can Reduce Demand for Gang Services

Housing and property disputes in informal settlements constitute a major domain of criminal group governance. Where formal titling and property-resolution mechanisms are absent or slow, criminal groups fill the gap. This creates direct demand for criminal-group services that state dispute resolution could address.

Evidence from El Salvador illustrates where service delivery can target gang governance directly. Melnikov et al. (2025) show that gangs impose mobility restrictions on residents of controlled neighborhoods, preventing them from commuting to areas with larger firms and higher wages. Residents of gang territory earn lower incomes because territorial control limits their access to the broader labor market. These findings identify a specific governance function—movement restriction—that state investment in transport access, job-placement services, and formal labor market integration could address. The study preceded the 2022 state of exception and operated independently of *mano dura*-style enforcement. The implication for service delivery is that programs targeting the economic costs of territorial control—not only visible violence—can reduce the hold that gang governance exercises over residents’ daily lives.

Service Delivery and the Governance Response

The enforcement evidence discussed above has direct implications for service delivery. Because criminal groups invest in governance partly as a defensive response to state presence, expanding public services in high-rent drug markets

can produce the same dynamic: The state improves conditions while criminal groups intensify their own governance to protect illicit revenue (Blattman et al., 2025).

Blattman et al. (2025) document this response in Medellín. When the city expanded state security presence in certain neighborhoods, combos in those areas increased rule enforcement, dispute resolution, and fee collection. Residents experienced more state services alongside more active criminal governance. City elected officials should anticipate this dual dynamic. Service expansion should target the specific functions that criminal groups provide—dispute resolution, protection, economic access—rather than delivering generic programs that leave criminal governance intact alongside improved infrastructure.

Civilian Alternatives to Policing Require Sustained Capacity

Recent experimental evidence from Medellín tested civilian alternatives to policing and expanded nonpolice state presence. Additional state attention does not automatically translate into effective service delivery. Neighborhoods with higher baseline institutional capacity—including both formal state services and community-led organizations—saw improved outcomes and higher state legitimacy. Low-capacity neighborhoods experienced unmet expectations and legitimacy declines (Blattman et al., 2026). Weak implementation erodes trust and creates opportunities for criminal groups to present themselves as more responsive. The sequencing of interventions matters. Cities should start with what they can deliver reliably, then expand.

Technology, Intelligence, and the Legitimacy Challenge

Section A outlined how rapid advances in AI and digital technology reshape both state capacity and criminal operations at a structural level. At the city level, these shifts translate into specific policy decisions about surveillance, data tools, and accountability.

Evidence from Medellín indicates that surveillance cameras can reduce certain street crimes, particularly property offenses, by increasing the perceived risk of detection (Gómez et al., 2021). Similar findings appear in studies across other urban contexts. Cameras serve as a deterrent to opportunistic crime. They do not, however, address the governance structures that sustain extortion and territorial control.

Surveillance also raises governance risks. Data-driven policing can improve investigations and resource allocation. It can also deepen perceptions of biased policing, especially if algorithmic tools amplify existing targeting patterns and weaken transparency (Brayne, 2017; Ferguson, 2017). In cities where communities already distrust police—Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, Cape Town—the introduction of predictive tools without oversight mechanisms risks reinforcing existing inequities.

Criminal groups adapt to existing tools and state technological advances. In Medellín, criminal organizations provide incarcerated members with cell phones, legal representation, and financial support, maintaining cohesion and enabling governance to persist despite arrests. Encrypted messaging platforms enable coordination across prison and street networks. Criminal organizations also shift coordination to encrypted platforms in response to surveillance expansion and use countersurveillance tools to monitor police communications. Digital payment tools facilitate extortion collection. GPS and social media allow real-time monitoring of police movements and competitor activities. This constitutes an arms race dynamic, not a static advantage for either side.

Technology also changes the measurement problem. Cities evaluate security through metrics—homicide counts, arrests, reported robberies—that capture only a fraction of the harms that criminal governance produces. Extortion, coerced recruitment, restrictions on movement, and gender-based violence in criminal-group-controlled areas are forms of violence that standard metrics miss. Technology can further obscure these by moving criminal activity into digital channels.

Cities need data systems that track extortion, digital criminal activity, and resident experiences of coercion—not only crime incident counts.

Cities need governance rules for these tools. Oversight mechanisms, transparency requirements, disparity audits, and capacity building for operators form the foundation. Private technology providers, telecommunications companies, and financial institutions also play a role. Cities can partner with these actors to implement oversight standards, share threat intelligence on digital extortion, and design reporting mechanisms.

Prisons As a Pillar of Criminal Governance

Prisons shape urban criminal orders worldwide. Many criminal leaders cycle through incarceration. Prison time does not necessarily sever command. It can consolidate leadership, facilitate coordination among rival groups, and create channels for negotiation (Lessing and Denyer Willis, 2019; Skarbek, 2014). In Brazil, the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* emerged as a governance structure inside São Paulo’s prisons and extended its rule to neighborhoods across the country (Lessing, 2017). In the United States, prison gangs govern the American penal system through constitutions, courts, and enforcement mechanisms (Skarbek, 2014). In Medellín, structured support systems maintain loyalty and allow governance to persist despite arrests—legal assistance, money transfers, and communication tools flow routinely to incarcerated members.

Prison-based coordination can reduce violence when incarcerated criminal leaders enforce discipline on street-level groups. It can also generate violence when coordination breaks down—through succession disputes, betrayals, or shifts in external alliances. The policy concern is that mass incarceration without prison governance reform creates conditions for both outcomes.

Evidence from Colombia shows that prison conditions and investments affect postrelease outcomes. Improvements in prison infrastructure reduce recidivism (Tobón, 2022). Mass incarceration concentrates criminal leaders in shared facilities. Without investment in classification, communication controls, and facility governance, these conditions enable criminal leaders to coordinate more effectively than they could on the street. Municipal security strategies need a prison component, even when prisons fall under national or state authority, because prisons shape the leadership and cohesion of urban criminal groups.

Evidence from Colombia also shows that inmate releases produce immediate increases in crime near prison facilities, which demonstrates why municipalities need reentry coordination even when prisons fall under national authority (Escobar et al., 2023). US evidence shows that the availability of jobs in construction and manufacturing at the time of release significantly reduces recidivism (Schnepel, 2018). Italian evidence finds that open-cell prison regimes reduce recidivism compared to closed-cell confinement (Mastrobuoni and Terlizzese, 2022). These findings point municipal governments toward concrete levers: job placement timed to release dates, coordination with prison authorities on release notifications, and advocacy for facility conditions that reduce reoffending.

Measurement Gaps

Elected city officials often manage what they can count. Homicides, arrests, and reported robberies receive constant attention. Criminal governance, extortion, and legitimacy receive far less measurement. This gap matters because the primary challenge in many cities now sits in those hard-to-measure domains. Research on Medellín demonstrates that in some neighborhoods, the share of respondents reporting “security fee” payments reaches extremely high levels even when homicide remains low (Blattman et al., 2022b).

Similar measurement challenges apply globally. Extortion victims fear retaliation and avoid reporting. Officials lack consistent reporting systems. Gender-based violence within criminal-group-controlled communities is particularly underreported. Research emphasizes the value of combining administrative data with surveys, qualitative work, and ethical safeguards to protect respondents (Blattman et al., 2022c). A city can show improvements in homicide rates while extortion expands and criminal group legitimacy grows. Without governance-level measurement, elected officials risk declaring success while criminal authority consolidates.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The evidence from Medellín, Rio de Janeiro, San Salvador, Mexican cities, and other urban contexts yields actionable lessons for city governments that face organized crime as governance. These recommendations focus on what cities can do under constrained authority, fragmented policing and justice systems, and shifting global pressures.

1. Diagnose the Governance Problem, Not Only the Violence Problem

Recommendation 1. Build a governance and extortion dashboard. Cities need an operational picture of who governs, how they govern, and what residents experience. Measurement should include extortion incidence and payment schedules (disaggregated by sector and neighborhood), the presence and services of armed groups, citizen perceptions of legitimacy and safety, drug-market indicators (including retail locations and price proxies), police response times and complaint patterns, and municipal service delivery performance in high-risk neighborhoods. Survey tools matter because extortion victims often avoid reporting. Qualitative work matters because governance activities remain hidden. Research from Medellín shows how representative surveys and structured interviews can produce systematic indicators of both state and criminal group governance (Blattman et al., 2025). Measurement also requires ethics and security protocols to protect respondents and researchers (Blattman et al., 2022c).

Recommendation 2. Map criminal governance as a service market. Cities often map crime incidents. They should also map governance functions, identifying where criminal groups settle disputes, enforce rules, provide protection, and collect fees. This mapping helps elected officials anticipate where policy changes will trigger criminal group responses. It also guides targeted investments in state dispute resolution and social services.

2. Address the Economic Foundations of Criminal Governance

Criminal groups invest more in governance where drug rents are high and where the state threatens those rents (Blattman et al., 2025). Policies that address only the visible manifestations of violence—homicides, shootings, public disorder—leave the revenue structures that sustain governance intact.

Recommendation 3. Target the economics of drug retail markets. Most supply-side enforcement and financial investigation capacity sits at the national level. Municipal governments contribute through spatial regulation—redesigning public spaces that sustain retail markets—local harm-reduction partnerships, and coordination with national agencies. Cities can act on rents through several levers. Target retail points and wholesale supply chains rather than relying on indiscriminate raids. Use financial investigations to disrupt laundering connected to urban markets (Caulkins, 2022; Levi, Reuter, and Halliday, 2017). Expand treatment and harm-reduction services that reduce demand for illicit retail, in partnership with health agencies (Csete et al., 2016). This approach requires patience. It also requires anticipating the “terrible trade-off”: policies that reduce illicit profits can reduce criminal groups’ incentives to maintain order (Blattman et al., 2022a). Cities should pair rent-reduction strategies with violence prevention and protection for residents and witnesses.

3. Build State Capacity Where Residents Experience Governance

Many city strategies focus on police numbers and operations. Residents experience governance through daily interactions with street-level officials, dispute-resolution institutions, and public services.

Recommendation 4. Strengthen municipal dispute resolution and small-claims justice. Criminal groups fill gaps in low-level justice. Cities can compete by improving rapid-response mediation services for neighbor and family disputes, accessible municipal complaint systems with protection protocols, small claims and consumer protection mechanisms, and housing and property conflict resolution in informal settlements. These interventions reduce demand for criminal group “services” and increase the credibility of the state. Evidence from multiple cities confirms that residents rely on criminal governance partly because formal alternatives are absent, slow, or inaccessible (Lessing, 2021; Moncada, 2022).

Recommendation 5. Deliver services reliably in high-risk neighborhoods. State presence builds legitimacy when delivery meets expectations. Weak implementation reduces legitimacy (Blattman et al., 2026). Cities should avoid announcing ambitious programs without delivery capacity. Sequencing matters. Start with what can be delivered reliably, then expand. Neighborhoods with lower baseline state capacity need more intensive, sustained support before policy interventions produce expected effects.

4. Use Enforcement in Ways That Reduce Harm and Avoid Consolidation

Recommendation 6. Prioritize focused, accountable enforcement calibrated to context. Evidence from the United States supports the use of hot-spot policing to reduce crime at specific locations (Braga et al., 2014; Sherman and Weisburd, 1995). Evidence from Medellín and Bogotá shows more-limited effects, with reductions concentrated in crimes unrelated to criminal group violence and evidence of displacement (Collazos et al., 2021; Blattman et al., 2021). Focused deterrence offers a complementary approach: Targeted communication to highest-risk individuals, combined with service offers and credible enforcement consequences, has produced violence reductions in US cities (Kennedy, 2011; Braga and Weisburd, 2012). Cities adopting these strategies should assess whether the conditions that produced results in one context apply to their own.

Focused enforcement should be paired with clear limits on the use of force, strong internal affairs and external oversight, transparent performance measures beyond arrest counts, and community engagement that builds procedural justice and legitimacy (Tyler, 2006; Mazerolle et al., 2013). Procedural justice matters because legitimacy shapes cooperation and compliance. Residents who distrust police avoid reporting extortion and participating in investigations, which strengthens criminal governance.

Recommendation 7. Avoid broad crackdowns that create leadership succession crises and prison-based consolidation. Removing criminal leaders triggers competition among potential successors. Successor factions often escalate violence to establish control, especially when existing bargains depended on the removed criminal leader’s personal authority (Dell, 2015; Calderón et al., 2015). Arrest strategies that concentrate criminal leaders inside porous prison systems can strengthen collective governance. Cities should coordinate with national authorities to ensure that enforcement does not move leadership into a more effective coordination environment (Lessing, 2017; Trejo and Ley, 2018).

5. Treat Prisons As Part of the City’s Governance System

Recommendation 8. Build a city-prison coordination agenda. Cities should work with national or state/provincial prison authorities to monitor prison-based coordination among criminal groups, expand reintegration and postrelease supervision, support reentry services including housing and employment programs that reduce reliance on criminal group networks after release, and advocate for improved classification and communication controls within facilities. Evidence

from Colombia shows that prison investments affect recidivism (Tobón, 2022). Even where cities lack direct authority over prisons, they can reduce criminal governance by investing in what happens after incarceration.

6. Govern Technology to Protect Trust While Improving Effectiveness

Recommendation 9. Adopt technology with rules, oversight, and community safeguards. Evidence indicates that surveillance cameras reduce some property crime, particularly theft (Gómez et al., 2021). Their direct effect on violent crime associated with criminal governance remains undemonstrated. Big-data tools can also amplify bias and weaken transparency (Brayne, 2017; Ferguson, 2017). Cities should publish rules on data collection, retention, and access. They should create independent oversight mechanisms, audit systems for disparate impacts, and integrate technology into problem-oriented policing rather than only reactive enforcement. Capacity building for those who operate these tools is equally important. Criminal groups also use technology; cities need cyber- and financial-intelligence capacity to track extortion and money-laundering networks.

7. Protect Civic Space and Reduce Criminal Capture of Community Life

Criminal groups penetrate community organizations, co-opt community leaders, and exercise informal control over neighborhood associations and local contracting. Brokered arrangements can blur lines between state actors and criminal structures, creating risks for civil society leaders and residents who resist criminal control.

Recommendation 10. Protect community leadership and create safe reporting channels. Cities should create anonymous reporting mechanisms with protection protocols; support community leaders with legal aid and emergency relocation options; monitor and prevent criminal group capture of local contracting, permits, and neighborhood associations; and invest in witness-protection coordination with national authorities.

8. Plan for Global Shocks and Shifting Criminal Portfolios

Criminal structures connect to broader trafficking and laundering networks. Global shifts in drug markets, enforcement cooperation, digital infrastructure, and climate-related displacement will continue to reshape incentives.

Recommendation 11. Build a geopolitical risk lens into city security planning. Cities should monitor changes in trafficking routes and markets that affect local rents, shifts in national enforcement priorities and extradition patterns, digital payment adoption and laundering opportunities, and migration and labor market shocks that affect recruitment. This planning can be pragmatic. Scenario exercises and routine intelligence briefings that integrate health, economic development, and security agencies provide a starting framework. Smaller and mid-sized cities with limited analytical staff can supplement their capacity through partnerships with international networks—including Peace in Our Cities, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, and the Strong Cities Network—that track geopolitical risks and organized crime trends.

Conclusion

Organized crime governs in cities because governance sustains profits and reduces risk. From Medellín to Rio de Janeiro, from San Salvador to Cape Town, armed groups operate inside layered systems that link neighborhood control to broader trafficking and financial networks. Homicide reductions often coexist with persistent extortion, territorial control, and the erosion of civic life. Stronger state presence can, under certain conditions, raise incentives for criminal-group governance in high-rent drug markets, creating real policy dilemmas (Blattman et al., 2025).

Cities facing these dynamics need strategies that match the governance problem. They need measurement systems that capture extortion and legitimacy. They need state capacity in dispute resolution and service delivery that residents

experience directly. They need enforcement that stays focused and accountable—and calibrated to local conditions, since strategies that work in one context may produce displacement or limited effects in another. They need prison coordination that prevents incarceration from strengthening criminal networks. They need governance rules for technology that protect trust and anticipate adaptation. They need to treat organized crime as an economic and political actor whose strategies shift with global drug markets, digital tools, security politics, and climate disruption.

Institutional resilience—the capacity of public institutions to govern legitimately and effectively under pressure—requires building public authority that residents recognize as credible. The alternatives—accepting informal accommodation as long as homicide remains low, pursuing punitive crackdowns that fragment criminal markets without displacing governance, or failing to invest in the municipal institutions that residents interact with daily—each weakens the long-term capacity of cities to govern.

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About the Author

Santiago Tobón

Santiago Tobón is Professor of Economics at Universidad EAFIT in Medellín, Colombia, where he directs the Centro de Valor Público, the university's applied policy research center. He chairs AL CAPONE, the América Latina Crime and Policy Network. He studies organized crime, gang recruitment, policing, and prisons in Latin American cities, and runs field experiments with city governments and police forces. His work appears in the *Review of Economic Studies* and the *American Political Science Review*.

stobonz@eafit.edu.co.

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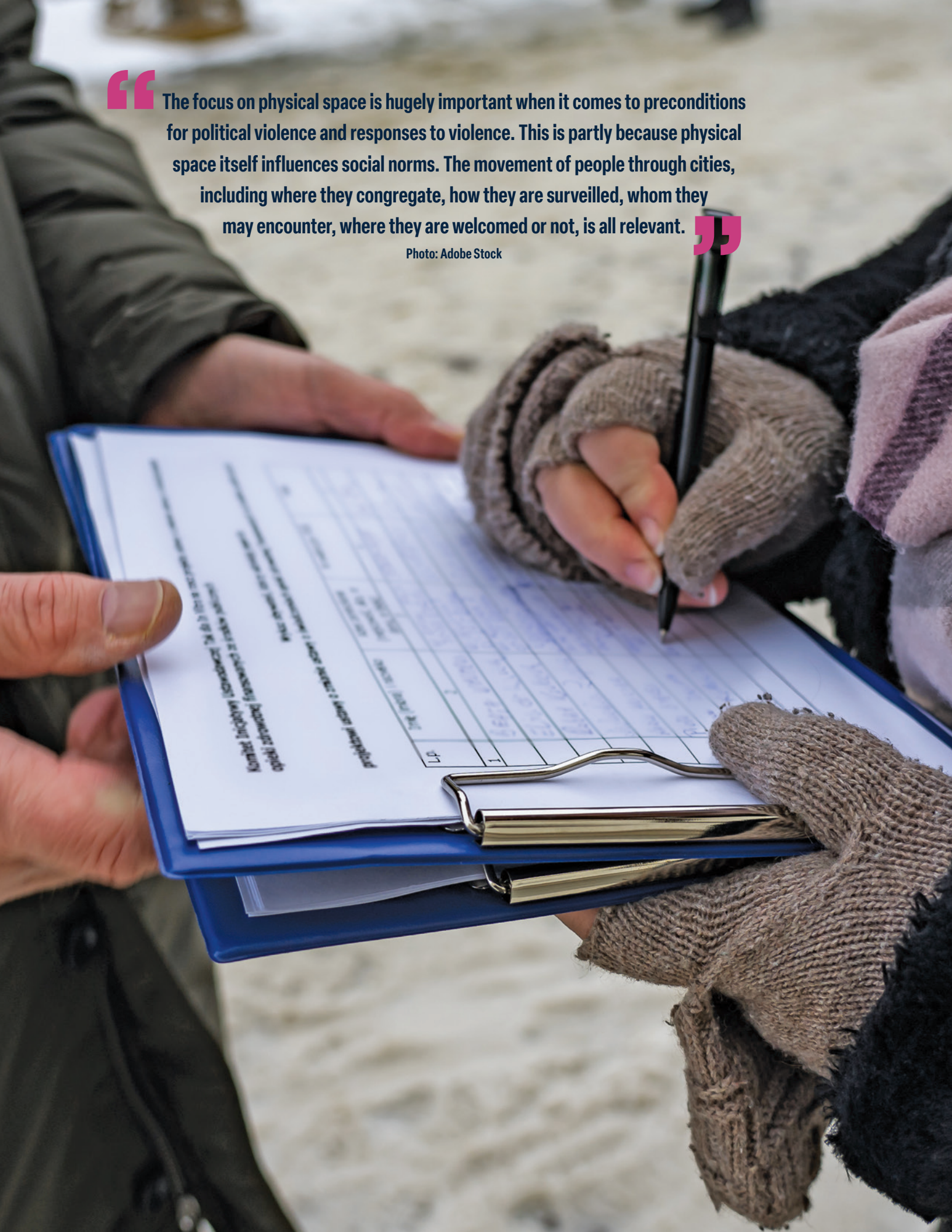




The focus on physical space is hugely important when it comes to preconditions for political violence and responses to violence. This is partly because physical space itself influences social norms. The movement of people through cities, including where they congregate, how they are surveilled, whom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



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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.

— 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 democracy¹⁸ 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.

— 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 surveil 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.”⁴⁶ 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 peaceable 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 the Author

Rachel Locke

Rachel Locke is co-founder and Principal of Peace in Our Cities, a network of 100 global cities and organizations working to prevent and reduce serious violence through evidence-informed and rights-based strategies. She previously founded and directed the Violence, Inequality and Power Lab (VIP Lab) at the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, University of San Diego. Prior to directing the VIP Lab, Rachel served as Head of Research for violence prevention at New York University's Center on International Cooperation, Director of International Interventions at the National Network for Safe Communities at John Jay College, and Senior Policy Adviser with the US Agency for International Development (USAID).



Rachel focuses intentionally on the interconnectedness across various forms of violence—from war to criminally-motivated to interpersonal to political violence—she has a solid track record in launching and sustaining initiatives that explore new approaches to complex challenges. Rachel holds an MA in international affairs from Columbia University and has published widely on prevention, political violence, conflict, and transnational organized crime.



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In the field of violence prevention, the use of technology by cities has been as widespread as it has been controversial.

The trend of cities relying on surveillance technology to support their law enforcement efforts will only become more commonplace as AI models increase the effectiveness of these systems. Those same AI algorithms, however, have the potential to reinforce biases and discrimination and stand in the way of due process if they are not regulated and implemented with meaningful community participation and proper human oversight.

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CHAPTER 4

TECHNOLOGY-EMPOWERED URBAN VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN THE ERA OF AI

By Luisa Portugal

Context and Considerations for Technology-Empowered Violence Prevention

AI and the Promise of the Smart City

Cities have always been centers of innovation, hubs where the intersection of human knowledge, material resources, and emerging challenges have led to the development of creative solutions to improve the quality of life of its residents. With the advent of the digital age and the rise of the smart city,¹ the drive to integrate new technologies into governance, decision-making, and service provision has become an imperative. It has also brought on a series of new challenges related to the digital divide, privacy and environmental concerns, representativeness, and the emphasis on efficiency over trustworthiness.

Now, the accelerated development and proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) have added a new dimension to this phenomenon. While AI has the potential to help governments live up to the promise of smart cities, it also amplifies concerns related to the use of technology, and it brings new sets of ethical considerations to the core of urban governance. On one hand, the speed with which AI can process large amounts of data and its aptitude to translate complex information into simple terms creates opportunities for policymakers to have a deeper understanding of city dynamics and formulate policies that get to the root causes of issues and integrate community insight. On the other hand, it can create a dangerous loop in which policymakers overrely on biased algorithms, overlook human input, and create opaque systems that replicate discriminatory and unjust power dynamics and erode trust among the population.

Honing in on the topic of violence prevention, technology—including in this definition of technology both more-traditional digital tools and the recent advancements in AI—can be particularly helpful in letting policymakers collect and analyze data at the sublocal level, allowing them to better understand the hyperlocalized dynamics that shape violence and crime trends in the city as a whole. It is also often associated with the surveillance technology that has become a prominent feature in many cities around the world. In either case, there are opportunities and concerns related to its use. What will become particularly important for the cities of the future will be to understand how to make these technologies work for the public good and how to put safeguards in place to prevent the ethical and practical issues that come along with them.

Data, Technology, and Artificial Intelligence

Three key concepts will appear throughout this chapter: data, technology, and AI. At some points, the distinction between them will be clear, at other times, less so. This is a function of their interrelated nature: At its broadest definition, AI is any type of technology that can simulate intelligence and perform tasks that simulate reasoning and problem solving. Much of this perceived reasoning comes from systems using large sets of data to predict the probabilities of an outcome.² Chatbots are a good example to explain how the line between what can be considered AI or not becomes blurry when discussing emerging and evolving technology. The first chatbots date back to the 1960s and used rules-based systems with preprogrammed scripts and decision trees, which were exponentially simpler than today's large-language models (LLM).³ Only after 2023 did LLM-empowered chatbots using deep neural networks trained on large datasets become the norm.⁴ Singapore's Ask Jamie is one of the first documented examples of chatbots being used

in official government websites. Launched in 2014, the chatbot was based on a rules-based system until the transition to an LLM-powered engine in 2023.⁵ Thus, if at any point this chapter refers to a government chatbot, it might not be immediately clear if the technology behind the chatbot should be considered AI—and it is likely that the answer itself is not clear-cut.

Similarly, at some points in this chapter, data and data analysis will be used as examples of technology use. In its simplest definition, data refers to any observation or measurement that is collected and stored, typically for the purpose of analysis. In its most rudimentary form, it requires no technology more advanced than a pencil and paper. Nonetheless, the vast majority of researchers nowadays use technology much more advanced than that to collect, store, and analyze their data. The same is true of governments: Discussing how they use technology to improve their policymaking often means showing how they are turning to increasingly advanced tools to collect and analyze large volumes of high-quality data. In that sense, the conversation on how cities use technology and how cities use data often becomes the same, and the difference between the two concepts might become blurry at times.

Technology and the Current Geopolitical Challenges

Understanding how these technologies can work for the public good is especially important when observing the broader geopolitical context cities are having to contend with. The rise of authoritarian governments, empowered by a hyperrepressive discourse on public safety, can be a dangerous set up for the unrestricted advancement of technologies that are used for surveillance and population control. Close-circuit TV systems (CCTV) with facial recognition technology (FRT) and gunshot-detection radars are examples of the types of tools that have by many been seen as foolproof and are used to justify repressive and unchecked action from law enforcement. And it is important to note that even governments that are outwardly liberal and democratic have been called out for using surveillance technology to support repressive and discriminatory policies.⁶ While these technologies can have a role in supporting police action and prosecutorial investigations, a human-centered violence-prevention strategy needs to ensure that there are regulations and guardrails to mitigate the inherent bias and unreliability of these systems (as will be explored farther down in this chapter), as well as accountability mechanisms that recognize that the technology is there to support the human element behind it and not to substitute it.

The current weakened multilateral system gives leeway for authoritarian governments at all levels to forgo human rights considerations in order to consolidate power and pursue quick wins through unregulated technology. In this context, it is crucial that cities committed to building safer communities for all take a proactive stance to ensure that the use of these tools is only one element of a holistic violence-prevention strategy that does not have the primary goal of persecuting and criminalizing specific sectors of the population.

Another point of consideration for cities is how taxing some of this technology, particularly AI, can be on the environment, with large data centers consuming upwards of 5 million gallons of water per day, which is the equivalent consumption of a town of 50,000 people.⁷ In a context where the climate crisis already has severe impacts in communities across the world,⁸ city officials need to consider the broader consequences of the technology they are procuring, which can exacerbate the risk factors for violence in their communities and beyond. Even when the direct effects of these technologies lead to a positive result in the community, it is possible that their indirect effects will have more severe negative impacts related to the acceleration of the climate crisis, which tend to disproportionately impact the most vulnerable populations.⁹

Data-Informed, Not Data-Driven

For the cities committed to using technology in an ethical and responsible way, there is an important distinction to be made between putting technology at the center of their violence-prevention efforts and using technology to support day-to-day action and decision-making while keeping the human element at the

core of its governance. A way to exemplify this is to analyze how cities use data to inform their decision-making, since one of the most common use cases of technology for violence prevention is in cities turning to these tools to support and enhance their data collection and analysis.

Cities should aim to be data informed when formulating their violence-prevention strategies, referencing data when making decisions, and combining that information with evidence from other sources, including community insights. Policymakers should prioritize the quality and strength of the evidence when making decisions. City officials and all of those making use of the data also need to be mindful of the context in which the data and evidence is collected, and always be aware of the potential of biases and distortions that reflect broader political dynamics. Ultimately, data is an instrument to translate the human lived experience into a quantifiable and standardized form. While this is immensely useful in understanding how certain human phenomena manifest and can be countered, it is also inherently reductive, and this reductive nature needs to be balanced by human oversight and interpretation. This data-informed approach stands in contrast to a data-driven one, which takes data as an absolute truth and lets it guide all decision-making without questioning issues related to biases, representativeness, and power structure that might exist in the data, even when it is high quality.¹⁰

This is an important distinction, and one that becomes even more relevant when entering the realm of predictive models and algorithm-based policymaking (as in, using AI systems to analyze large datasets and predict potential outcomes that can then be used to influence policymaking). While these systems can process and analyze data with unprecedented efficiency, policymakers must understand that their outputs will only be as precise and equitable as the data they are based on, with the added concern that the algorithms themselves can be biased in their formulations and reinforce preexisting biases in the data. This means that these algorithms have the potential to replicate and exacerbate existing inequalities if left unexamined, and that human judgment needs to be an integral part of any policy. Furthermore, as will be explored later in this chapter, it is crucial that the communities most directly impacted by these technologies, and particularly those most often misrepresented in data and subjected to biased outputs, have a central voice in decisions about the adoption and implementation of these systems.

With all these considerations in mind, there is still a case to be made for cities to integrate technology, and specifically AI, in their violence-prevention strategies, since it opens up the potential for more-effective, targeted, and responsive policies, as will be discussed in the rest of this chapter. Integrating these emerging technologies into policymaking should, however, be a well-thought-out decision, and one that results from an open dialogue with the affected communities. It needs to include safeguards and regulation from the start, and it needs to always keep the human element at its center. The section below features examples of cities that have integrated technology into their violence-prevention strategies, discusses how they have succeeded or failed in keeping their strategies human centered, and presents lessons for cities seeking to follow their examples.

Technology in Urban Violence Prevention: Lessons Learned and Opportunities for Ethical Deployment

Three Stages of Technology-Supported Violence Prevention

There are many ways technology can be an asset in policymaking, and more specifically for violence prevention. AI's potential for compiling and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data in a more efficient manner, allowing cities to seamlessly blend community insight with administrative data, adds many possibilities in terms of understanding how violence affects communities beyond homicide and robbery rates.

When analyzing how violence manifests in cities, it is helpful to think of a city not as a solid and cohesive unit but instead as a combination of microdots that come together to make a full picture, as if it were a pointillistic painting.¹¹ Urban violence is a hyperlocalized phenomenon, with criminology studies consistently showing that the majority of crimes happen in just a few of a city's street segments.¹² Moreover, analysis of risk factors for violence can narrow down specific segments of the population with high potential for violent victimization or offending.¹³ With that in mind, to understand violence in a given urban context it is not enough to look at city-level trends. Policymakers and practitioners need to zoom in to these microdots to understand how they differ from one another and how they interact to create reverberating dynamics that impact the whole city. Only by considering each neighborhood or street segment as its own entity, with its own sets of needs and priorities, can policymakers design policies that target the areas most in need and efficiently allocate resources.

This is where technology appears as a fundamental tool for violence prevention. It helps cities to collect, process, and analyze large amounts of data from a variety of sources, with enough specificity and geospatial precision to let policymakers and practitioners visualize the violence and crime taking place in all its complexity. This data can show where violence is taking place, who are the people most at risk, and how it manifests in that specific local or sublocal context. This information allows for the design and implementation of policies that can efficiently and effectively target and allocate resources to the areas and groups that need the most, and where action will have the most widespread impact. Broadly speaking, cities—including both local governments and civil society—use data and technology to empower their violence-prevention efforts in three stages:¹⁴

- **Preparation:** used to diagnose a problem and to anticipate crises. This happens when cities set up violence observatories or otherwise collect and analyze data to identify trends, risk factors, and hot spots for violence to help guide efforts and improve resource allocation for violence prevention. The violence observatory in Santiago de Cali, Colombia, is one of the first in Latin America and an example for many cities in the region. The observatory is part of a broader strategy from the city that sees violence as a public health crisis that can be analyzed and treated as such.¹⁵ Dorchester, a neighborhood in Boston in the United States, is an example of a city where academics and community organizations are collaborating to create innovative ways to understand violence. They are creating a local language model combining years of community meeting notes and interviews with traditional crime data to provide a more holistic understanding of crime in the area to both policymakers and its residents.¹⁶ With innovations in AI, cities are also using data to forecast the impact of new policies and prepare for future crises, simulating scenarios to let decision-makers spot critical gaps and refine their responses.¹⁷ For example, Seoul, South Korea, as will be discussed later in this chapter, has built a complete virtual replica of the city which can be used to simulate different scenarios.
- **Performance:** used to align efforts and monitor progress. This use is most clear in real-time crime centers, where police forces and other departments gather to monitor real-time data from incidents to support field action, improve cross-sector collaboration, and formulate longer-term action plans for crime prevention. Chicago, Illinois, is a pioneer in implementing this type of real-time multidisciplinary control center. Initially implemented in 2017, the Strategic Decision Support Centers (SDSCs) consist of conference rooms equipped with video feeds from a CCTV system, incident-mapping tools, and other policing software, where a multisectoral team meets to coordinate action across sectors, support day-to-day decision-making and field operation, and review previous events.¹⁸ The city of Godoy Cruz, Argentina, by its turn, has developed a way to better integrate community input into police operations. It has developed a community-alert system that utilizes mobile apps and cellular networks to georeference emergencies instantly, while also creating a direct channel of communication between citizens, the city's Observatory of Citizen Security, and emergency services.¹⁹ Finally, AI and digital tools can also be used to expedite bureaucratic processes and allow for faster law-enforcement response and to free up staff time for tasks that

require human intervention. An example of such is the digital platform developed in Los Angeles, California, that automatically flags when individuals under domestic violence restraining orders fail to relinquish firearms, replacing a long, multistep manual process that involved multiple departments with an automated alert system that notifies the correct agency within minutes of a violation being reported.²⁰

- **Reflection:** used to evaluate the success of interventions and to learn lessons. This happens when cities put their initiatives through evaluation processes to measure their impact and inform future decisions based on the results. While emerging technologies and new methodologies are used in this stage to improve the scope of these studies and the accuracy of the results, the focus here is more on how cities are using data to improve their policies, not the technology itself. Pelotas, Brazil, for example, used the results of a full impact evaluation of their violence prevention strategy, Pacto Pelotas Pela Paz (Pelotas Peace Pact), to inform how to improve their policies. The evaluation used a synthetic control methodology to estimate what would have happened if the pact had never been implemented, which is an innovative way to overcome the challenge that many evaluations of citywide interventions face—of not being able to find one suitable control group—by using a weighted average from a pool of potential control units. The evaluation showed that focused deterrence had been a particularly effective element of the strategy, being directly linked to 38 percent of the 80 percent reduction in homicides that the city experienced in that period.²¹ Based on these results, the city expanded its investment in focused deterrence, and as of the end of 2025, it had reported a 90 percent reduction in homicide rates since the start of the pact implementation.²²

Surveillance Technology, Marginalized Communities, and Community Participation

When discussing the topic of technology and AI for violence prevention, it is unavoidable to mention the use of surveillance technology, and it is necessary to reflect on what cities can accomplish by using this technology and its important drawbacks. Over the last couple of decades, cities have made extensive use of CCTV, audio-based gunshot-detection systems, and license plate readers to monitor their territory. Over time, these systems have been updated with AI-enhanced detection capabilities, such as FRT, and capability to detect and flag crime and violent incidents.

The aforementioned case of the SDSCs in Chicago is one example of a city making use of such tools. While the SDSCs can generally be considered a successful initiative, being responsible for a reduction of 26 percent in shootings in certain districts with no increase in arrests,²³ the technology employed by the centers, as described above, has also brought on its fair share of criticism. The gunshot-detection system in particular has been the cause of contention. Although some studies have found that the system led to faster responses to gunfire,²⁴ it has been widely criticized for its unreliability, and for leading to the overpolicing of communities of color.²⁵ In 2024, the city decided to not renew its contract with the system provider, noting that it was going to assess other technologies that could serve the same function while also increasing trust within the community.²⁶ To date, the city has not deployed a new gunshot-detection system, but it is piloting a camera-based firearm-detection system—which has also drawn its own set of criticisms for the lack of community consultation.²⁷ While the interruption of the previous contract signals good will by the city to listen and adapt to community feedback, the lack of consultation is a serious misstep for a city that claims to be committed to building trust in its technology governance.

In the same vein, cities in Latin America have drawn criticism for implementing FRT through obscure procurement processes and relying on already biased police databases, with poorly defined standards in data use.²⁸ In these terms, the deployment of FRT technology raises questions about its legality, with serious concerns surrounding the right for privacy and nondiscrimination and its potential to disrupt due process procedures. This is a particularly contentious issue in a region where the public debate regarding public safety is divided by a false dichotomy of either being too lenient on crime or foregoing basic human rights in order to achieve fast results to reduce violence, as can be seen by

the growing popularity of the *mano dura* or “tough on crime” narratives and policy trajectories.²⁹ But even beyond any faults in the deployment of this technology, it is important to consider if there is an ethical way to make use of such and if the potential gains to violence and crime prevention are worth the risks of infringing on human rights and amplifying discriminatory practices.

As cities are faced with this question, response from decision makers around the world has varied, from outright banning the use of FRT to allowing its deployment under specific circumstances to allowing it without any restrictions.³⁰ While many government officials and police forces argue for the need of such tools to help tackle the public safety crisis, civil society raises serious concerns about the infringement of individuals’ rights to privacy and the documented biases of the technology. Ample research supports this claim and shows that these systems misidentify female-presenting people and people with darker skin tones at a concerning rate, with error rates of up to 35 percent for female-presenting individuals with darker skin tones (compared to less than 1 percent for male-presenting individuals with lighter skin tones),³¹ but other studies support the idea that FRT can contribute to a reduction in serious crimes without an increase in overpolicing and disparities across racial groups.³² This disparity in findings shows that caution with this technology is merited, but it may be that the benefits to public safety make it worth considering its deployment if it is done with clear guardrails, proper oversight, and consistent monitoring to spot and prevent biases.

Anywhere this discussion lands, the way for cities to implement FRT in an ethical and responsible way starts with ensuring meaningful community participation, particularly of marginalized communities that have been excluded or underrepresented in the earlier stages of AI development, from the earliest possible stages of development or implementation. It is not a mere coincidence or an accident that time and time again, surveillance technology is shown to have a negative bias toward people of color, women, and other minorities. It is a function of the data they are based on, which is overwhelmingly composed of individuals with lighter skin tones,³³ and of the internal biases of the people who have led their development.

To offset this imbalance, cities need to create space for the directly affected communities, particularly when marginalized, to have a central role in the discussions about new systems or tools. The communities most directly impacted by them need to be the ones leading the conversations to understand if and how they would address their needs, assess their potential benefits and drawbacks, and identify alternative solutions. The Community, Advocacy, Resilience, and Evidence (CARE) model, developed by the nongovernmental organization Measures, is an example of a system created by women of color that offers a concrete pathway to ensure representation of marginalized communities into technology and AI governance. The model proposes the establishment of “councils of voices” within communities to help guide the development of new technology.³⁴ The American Civil Liberties Union’s Community Control Over Police Surveillance (CCOPS) initiative is a more specific example of ensuring community oversight over the adoption of surveillance technology. The initiative advocates for laws that give local residents the right to decide on the adoption of such tools. Since its launch, CCOPS laws have been enacted in 26 jurisdictions across the United States.³⁵

These examples demonstrate that communities are already organizing themselves and demanding their inclusion in these conversations. Cities that do not prioritize community participation risk exacerbating racial, gender, and other structural inequalities. There needs to be ample and meaningful public debate involving lawmakers, civil society, and the affected communities to decide on the future of these technologies, and such dialogue can only happen with transparency and access to information on both their effectiveness and downsides, including instances of inaccuracy and potential threats to human rights.

AI itself opens up new possibilities for integrating communities into policymaking. While AI’s processing power lets cities accelerate the speed at which they develop and deploy new projects, it also creates the conditions for governments to make

more of their data available to the public and to let them examine in detail the output of these new systems. For example, Buenos Aires, Argentina, was the first city in the world to implement a WhatsApp chatbot to let city residents have easy access to data and information related to safety, health, public spaces, regulations, and more. First launched in 2019, and having made the shift from a rules-based model to an LLM-powered engine in 2024, Boti logs more than 3 million conversations every month.³⁶ In that sense, one of the most powerful ways technology can bring value to cities is by cutting down on the barriers between the government and the public and creating models for increased community participation. In turn, this can ensure that new technologies are subject to meaningful public debate before being implemented.

Algorithmic Risk Assessment and the Importance of Human Oversight

Another case that highlights some of the pitfalls that cities need to avoid when employing new technology to support prevention efforts is VioGén, an algorithm-based intimate partner violence risk assessment used by the Spanish police. Through this program, a woman who believes she is at risk of experiencing domestic violence contacts a hotline and answers a 35-question survey to assess her risk of experiencing violence in the near future.³⁷ After collecting the answers, the system will flag the severity of the case from negligible to severe, and this will inform the police response, or lack thereof. On a first examination, this seems like a useful tool to let police allocate constrained resources to address the cases where there is the most risk for imminent harm. According to many metrics, the system has been successful, with official data showing that since its implementation, repeat attacks have fallen to 15 percent in cases of gender-based violence, compared to the previous 40 percent rate.³⁸

However, 8 percent of the cases that were considered of negligible risk and 14 percent of the cases that were considered low risk led to further harm to the reporting individual, with at least 247 women being killed by their partners after being assessed by the system since its implementation in 2007. Further examination showed that the initial system assessment was rarely reviewed by an officer and that a significant number of women who contacted the hotline were deemed no risk, neglecting the fact that the mere fact that they had been motivated to seek help should already flag their cases as worthy of attention. The lack of human interaction or oversight led to a heightened sense of mistrust by the population, and the system received widespread criticism from global news outlets.³⁹

The Spanish government responded to the criticism by acknowledging VioGén's shortcomings and pledging to update the system and its protocols, including by not categorizing women as "no risk" once they have contacted the line and demanding a closer look by police officers of every entry.⁴⁰ This case demonstrates that financial investment in technologies such as this needs to be accompanied by a sufficient investment in human capacity and training to ensure that the technology is being used as an important prioritization tool but not as a sole determinant of action. While further evaluation will be needed to determine if the changes have been appropriately implemented and if they have led to an overall improvement of the system, these measures are a step in the right direction in creating a culture of accountability, ensuring human supervision, and trying to increase trust among the public.

In this case and beyond, to ensure that AI and technology are working to improve public good and increase public safety, it is critical that governments avoid the pitfalls of overly focusing on efficiency and that they also focus on building infrastructures that include safeguards, deepen public trust, and enable community participation. One important step to take is to ensure that government staff are trained and empowered to exercise their human judgment at all times, recognizing the instance where human intervention is required beyond AI processing. In addition to that, AI systems often operate as black boxes, making it difficult for government staff and the general public to understand how a given output or decision was reached. To overcome this, governments need to ensure that innovations are transparent in terms of their output and their internal processes, and they need to embed trustworthiness, not just efficiency, as a benchmark for success. Whenever possible, this means providing clear direction on how tools are set in place, how they are operating, and the results they provide.⁴¹

Human-Centered, Technology-Empowered Violence Prevention

Niterói, Brazil, is an example of a city that has put a strong emphasis on enhancing trust with the community and improving human capacity as it integrates new technologies in its violence-prevention strategy. The city started to implement Pacto Niterói Contra a Violência (Pact Niterói Against Violence) in 2018, and since then it has obtained a 64 percent reduction in the rates of homicide and over 80 percent reduction in the rates of other types of violent crime.⁴² The strategy relies on a combination of technology-enhanced precise policing with professional training and the delivery of social services to the population, with the ultimate goal of not only preventing violence but building a culture of peace.

In terms of the technology in place supporting and advancing its violence-prevention strategies, Niterói has set up an integrated public safety center following the example of Chicago's SDSCs, which receives and analyzes real-time footage and data from the comprehensive CCTV, gunshot-detection sensors, and vehicle-monitoring systems that are installed across the city. The strategy also puts great emphasis on the use of data and evidence, being initially designed based on a detailed household-victimization survey. The city has since set up a comprehensive violence observatory that collects and analyzes police data and broader socioeconomic data to inform its goals, action, and policies.⁴³

However, to complement and improve the results obtained from the investment in technology, Niterói has equally invested in the professional training and development of its security forces, with a focus on prevention over reaction. It created a training center that offers continued education to members of its municipal guard that offers continued education to its members, including in conflict mediation, so they can make residents feel safer through positive engagement with the community. It is significant that activities related to the training and development of the guard are placed under the "Coexistence and Citizen Engagement" rubric of Niterói's strategy, and not under the policing axis. An example of this commitment is that the city let a public consultation decide if the guard should be armed and has since followed the public decision of keeping it unarmed.⁴⁴

Furthermore, the pact has a strong emphasis in the provision of social services to mitigate social and economic risk factors for violence, using data and technology, as explained above, to help identify where there is most need for these services. They offer professional development opportunities to youth, reentry programs for the formerly incarcerated population, parenting courses to teach healthy parenting techniques, financial support to children enrolled in the public education system, and more. Niterói's success demonstrates that an effective violence-prevention strategy needs to consider the human element to be as integral to its goals as the implementation and use of technology, and that violence-prevention efforts will only succeed when the technology is used to support legitimate, integrated, and holistic policies, not to replace it.

Seoul, South Korea, meanwhile, is an example of a city that is pushing the limits of technology innovation for crime prevention. It has built a 3D replica of the city in cyberspace that integrates spatial information on housing, traffic, environment, and other related factors. It uses this replica, the S-MAP, to simulate scenarios and analyze in detail how the city would react to them and apply these insights to inform its responses and protocols.⁴⁵ Its newest project is a crime-forecasting model in which it divides the city into 100-meter grids and uses AI to identify areas most likely to experience crime in order to eliminate any blind spots in its crime-prevention system. The AI model has been trained on past crime data to assess how factors such as foot traffic, streetlights, and the purposes of buildings can make an area more or less susceptible to crime, and it uses this to calculate the level of crime vulnerability in each spot on the grid.⁴⁶

No information was available as of the writing of this report to determine how this project is being implemented or how effective it is in reducing crime in the city. The city says it plans to use the information obtained through the predictive model to decide if it needs to allocate more patrols to specific neighborhoods or install security equipment such as lights and emergency alarms.⁴⁷ This points to a willingness from the city to use this predictive model not as a tool to profile

and repress but to be proactive in preventing violence and crime, which is a positive step in using technology to support public safety. However, if there is anything Seoul can learn from some of the other cities mentioned in this chapter, it is that technology is most effective when combined with comprehensive violence- and crime-prevention strategies that seek to address the root causes of the issue and are equipped with human safeguards. A system like the crime-forecasting model can give information not only on how likely an area is to experience crime but on exactly what factors are increasing that area's vulnerability. While increasing security forces and equipment is one way to decrease the likelihood of crime, what will have the most long-lasting impact is if the city uses this information to address the deeper structural issues that are exacerbating vulnerabilities in that specific area.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Throughout the last couple of decades, cities have been experimenting with how to integrate new technologies into their policymaking arsenal. This has led to much positive innovation, but it has equally led to questions about the ethics and practical applications of some of these tools. The current decade brought a new dimension to this puzzle with the rise of AI. While many cities jump to understand how they can best leverage these systems and tools to improve their policymaking and governance, it is important that they do not lose sight of their ultimate goal, which should always be to build safe, just, and inclusive societies for their residents with policies that are, at their core, human centered and rights based.

In the field of violence prevention, the use of technology by cities has been as widespread as it has been controversial. The trend of cities relying on surveillance technology to support their law enforcement efforts will only become more commonplace as AI models increase the effectiveness of these systems. Those same AI algorithms, however, have the potential to reinforce biases and discrimination and stand in the way of due process if they are not regulated and implemented with meaningful community participation and proper human oversight. In a geopolitical context where authoritarian governments, both at city and national levels, are only becoming more prevalent, and a weakened multilateral system struggles to hold them accountable and limit their overreach, the untapped potential of these technologies becomes a threat to democracy and human rights.

On the other hand, AI's ability to process large amounts of data and translate complex information into simple terms can be extremely useful in giving policymakers a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of violence and crime in their cities, including integrating community insights into the policymaking process. In an environment where there are clear accountability mechanisms for public officials--where these technologies are implemented alongside broader holistic prevention strategies and with equivalent investment in human capacity--these new tools can empower local governments and civil society actors to effectively address the root causes of violence and build long-lasting change.

It is clear, then, that cities have the opportunity to build the foundation of a future in which technology is used to enhance public good and in which regulations and safeguards are put in place to ensure that policies remain human centered even when they are technology enhanced. For the cities that are committed to leveraging technology in a responsible way to build safer, more-inclusive, and more-just communities, here are a few recommendations:

- Leverage AI and technology to analyze your city at the hyperlocal level and understand the microdynamics that have reverberating impacts in the city as a whole.
- Be data informed instead of data driven. Use data to prepare, perform, and reflect, but consider the broader social, political, and economic context in which the data was produced, and be guided by social values and ethical boundaries.
- Meaningfully include communities—particularly the historically marginalized—in debates about technology governance and prioritize building trustworthiness. AI should be used to increase community participation, including

by incorporating community insights and creating open channels of communication between government, civil society, and the general public.

- Ensure that there are clear and transparent protocols, accountability systems, and proper human oversight. Government staff must be trained and empowered to exercise their human judgment at all times, recognizing that human intervention is required beyond AI processing.
- Use technology to support legitimate, integrated, and holistic violence-prevention strategies, not to replace them. Keep in mind that the human element is as integral to the success of policies as are these new tools.

With these points in mind, policymakers can be bold in their ideas for how to best integrate and leverage technology to improve their violence-prevention efforts. From cities that are just starting to set up violence observatories to those that already have a robust technological infrastructure, there is momentum everywhere to live up to the ambitions and promises of the smart cities, and to start building now the safe, just, and inclusive cities of the future.

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About the Author

Luisa Portugal

Luisa Portugal is a Senior Program Officer at New York University’s Center on International Cooperation (CIC). At CIC, her primary focus is working with the Halving Global Violence (HGV) program and its flagship initiatives, including the HGV Task Force, Peace in Our Cities, and Data for Peace. She focuses on how cities and other policymakers use data, technology, and artificial intelligence to build more effective, human-centered public safety and violence prevention strategies. Portugal is an Adjunct Professor of Data Visualization and Storytelling at NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. She holds an MA in public policy with a specialization in international development from New York University, as well as an MA in constitutional law and a BA in law from Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio).





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Local governments can take many steps to ensure that their populations have adequate and fair access to services and can develop mechanisms that act early to solve problems so they do not require the intervention of the formal justice system to redress wrongdoing.

The fair allocation of services, accessibility, adequate administrative responses to complaints, and the provision of information, advice, and conflict-resolution alternatives are all actions local governments can take to prevent issues from reaching the formal justice system.”

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CHAPTER 5

HARNESSING THE JUSTICE SYSTEM TO REDUCE VIOLENCE IN CITIES IN TIMES OF GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

By Juan Camilo Cock Misas¹

The justice system plays a key role in violence-reduction efforts in cities. Given its complexity in fulfilling various functions from different institutions, it does so directly and indirectly.

In this chapter we look at the criminal justice system—the set of official institutions that deal with crimes and those who commit them as well as their victims—and at the wider justice system, here understood as the institutions and mechanisms, not necessarily provided by the state, that solve conflicts between individuals, organizations, and the state. When we refer to access to justice, we are talking about people being able to solve conflicts within the law, having their rights upheld, and the possibility to redress wrongdoings.

The criminal justice system plays a large role in addressing violence because, generally, interpersonal violence and its use for other purposes constitute criminal offences. However, access to justice in its broader sense can also help prevent and avoid violence by solving potentially violent conflicts in a timely manner, providing pathways to address grievances without breaking the law, strengthening the legitimacy of state institutions, and making people feel they are treated fairly.

The justice system should also ensure that citizens are able to exercise their rights and have access to state services in a fair and equitable manner. An effective system helps individuals solve conflicts and resolve disputes in a peaceful manner and, when necessary, addresses violence and crime by investigating, prosecuting, sentencing, and delivering sanctions against offenders. Performing these duties responsibly, effectively, and fairly reduces violent conflict and builds legitimacy and reduces tensions between citizens and the state.

When the justice system does not work effectively and is hard to access, that impairs violence-reduction efforts. Without faith in the system or capacity for constructive conflict management, conflicts can escalate, and people can turn to violent means to protect their property and their rights and/or to impart their own version of justice.² Chronically ineffective, unresponsive, or corrupt justice systems can allow criminal groups to flourish, increasingly using violence against each other to exact their own forms of justice.³ Furthermore, without proper checks on institutional authority, the state can end up exerting violence on its own citizens.

For all these reasons, developing an effective, fair, trusted, accessible, and solutions-focused justice system is essential to achieve peaceful societies that sustain over time.

Cities, Local Government and Access to Justice

Formal justice systems in many countries may operate at different levels, with criminal justice often imparted by national or state institutions. Justice systems often have a hierarchy where the national or state level has precedent over local laws and institutions. Cities are in an intermediate place in these efforts, but they still have significant levers to develop parts of the justice system and justice-based approaches that better contribute to violence-reduction efforts. To do so effectively, they must work in close partnership with state, federal, and national institutions.

As the key operators at the local level, city governments are the primary service providers for citizens, making them more capable than higher levels of government of establishing a strong presence in local, vulnerable areas. Even when they are not the main justice service providers, local governments can take actions and work in collaboration with other institutions to make justice services accessible, user friendly, and responsive to local needs. Furthermore, this does not require that such services are only performed by justice authorities; there exist informal or nonjustice mechanisms, such as community mediation or advice and support services, that are crucially complementary to the formal justice system (and in some cases are recognized as part of it) that can be supported, designed, and delivered by local governments.

Cities and local governments, given their economic and political weight, also have considerable influence over national policies. This is especially true when they pursue their agendas collectively and can therefore help shape national and international justice frameworks.

Impact of Global Trends on Justice and Access to Justice

Some of the trends explored in this compendium are having a significant impact on justice and access to justice and consequently have implications for violence-prevention efforts.

The rise of authoritarian regimes are, in many countries, undermining independent oversight and the ability to limit abuse by those in power. The World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index for 2025 reports that the rule of law weakened in a majority of countries (68 percent), continuing a trend over the past few years. One of its conclusions is that "rising authoritarianism—defined by weakening checks and balances and shrinking civic space—has been a primary force in this year's rule of law downturn, driven by widespread declines in factors measuring Constraints on Government Powers, Open Government, and Fundamental Rights. Additionally, falling scores in the indicators measuring the judiciary's checks on executive power and judicial independence indicate that judiciaries are losing ground to executive overreach, with rising political interference across justice systems."⁴

In several countries, cities have to work with national leaders who are suspending or weakening the balance of powers and the capacity of the justice system to check government action. City leaders can also be prone to support or even call for authoritarian and tough-on-crime measures when faced with increasing violence and criminality. In some cases, these approaches are supported by significant parts of the population.

Many city governments are, therefore, working in an environment that has weakened judicial oversight and less space for consensually built policies and is vulnerable to arbitrary measures by national governments. Furthermore, popular backlash against increased levels of crime puts pressure on decision makers to adopt tough-on-crime measures that can in extreme cases go against the rule of law. The weakening of multilateral institutions in charge of overseeing the implementation of international treaties limits the possibility of checking abuses by authoritarian leaders and the credible threat of consequences for those who act against internationally agreed on standards.

Against this backdrop, cities can take measures to make the justice system more accessible and responsive locally and to provide nonlegal alternatives to solving many of the problems that end up in the formal justice system. Networks of city governments and other institutions that promote common agendas and multilateral cooperation can push back against the weakening of the multilateral system.

The rapid development and widespread use of digital technologies and the incorporation of algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) in all walks of life, including the justice system, create significant opportunities. But they also carry significant risks. While AI and other digital tools can make justice easier to access and navigate and institutions more efficient, they can also make mistakes with serious juridical implications. These tools can reproduce biases and inequalities against

certain groups and individuals. As a result, the challenge around digital technology for cities is twofold. They must (1) stay abreast of developments in technology to understand their implications in justice provision and (2) make use of it wisely to improve services and outcomes while avoiding injustices and discrimination. In this process, cities will have to work closely with agencies and institutions at other government levels.

Improving the Justice System to Achieve More-Peaceful Cities

As stated in the introduction, the justice system makes important contributions to violence-reduction efforts in cities in a variety of ways. The rest of this chapter highlights interventions and initiatives based on four ways access to justice and the operation of the justice system can contribute to reducing violence in cities:

1. Shaping frameworks that define and enforce duties and limits to state action in the pursuit of security and peace.
2. Helping individuals access rights and services provided by the state.
3. Offering individuals mechanisms to solve conflicts.
4. Using investigative, prosecutorial, and sanctioning powers against violent offenders.

1. Preventing Violence by Defining and Enforcing Duties and Limits of State Action

The justice system is responsible for ensuring that state and local institutions act within the law and, when relevant, international law. A judicial power independent from the executive power should be able to limit state actions to prevent excesses, especially when violating rights or exercising violence on the citizens and noncitizens within its borders.

The oversight of the justice system on state action should be a safeguard against extreme measures that can be part of *mano dura*, or tough-on-crime, approaches. These state-imposed strategies can be effective in achieving some results, but they often do so at the cost of violating rights or exercising unlawful violence against all or part of society, and the results are not sustained over time. Independent and effective justice systems put an effective limit to state action and require policy makers to think about solutions that are respectful of national laws, the constitutional order, and international standards.

Organized crime is rising in many parts of the world, putting security at the top of people's concerns.⁵ Because organized crime has the capacity to challenge the state through direct violence or corruption, some local and national governments have chosen to invoke exceptional measures that suspend legal safeguards or to override the legal order to achieve visible results.

In recent years, El Salvador has received much attention for this kind of action, where the state of exception has suspended many constitutional rights since 2022. This has allowed state forces to take measures that are against the country's legal order to reduce violence. The notable decrease in violence and rise in perception of safety have made these measures popular, despite the fact that now up to 80,000 young people have been detained without due process.⁶

In other countries, states of exception have also been used to address security and violence problems. In the past four years, Honduras (2022–2026), Perú (2025), and Ecuador (2024–2026) have used this approach to tackle security crises.⁷ How recurring and permanent these states of exception become in a context of increased transnational organized crime is an open question. While they can be effective in the short term at reducing violence, they can often be the first step in a process of increasingly authoritarian measures.

The growing use of authoritarian measures to tackle security issues and violence, in some cases with popular citizen support, combined with weakened multilateralism, is presenting a significant global challenge to peace and security.

International justice frameworks are essential for regulating state behaviors to ensure they are fair, rules based, and legitimate. Yet the weakening of the multilateral system, especially around international human rights frameworks and courts, makes it more difficult to limit national governments by applying international standards and mechanisms. This is especially true when national justice systems do not act effectively or when they are co-opted, dissolved, or ignored by the government.

In summary, authoritarian measures are often put forward as necessary to address out-of-control crime and violence. In some cases, harsh measures without judicial guarantees are implemented temporarily through states of emergency or exception. But in many cases these can be extended for many years, which further erodes justice systems and trust in them. The implementation of heavy-handed measures by authoritarian-leaning leaders can arouse popular support if they make people feel safe or perceive that something is being done about crime even if they overstep legal constraints and democratic oversight.⁸ This is especially the case if there is a perception that crime is out of control and that the justice system is too soft on criminals.

Cities have three primary mechanisms to counter rising authoritarianism:

A. Cities can work preventively to avoid situations where crime feels out of control, the type of context in which authoritarian measures usually take hold.

Security and violence need to be taken seriously before they get to levels where addressing them becomes difficult and collective fear rises. Cities should focus on implementing evidence-based, balanced, and fair policies to control crime and violence⁹ and work on improving communication and people's perceptions of safety when there is a gap between trends and perceptions, thus reducing the support or attractiveness of extreme solutions.¹⁰

B. Cities and local governments can challenge in court states of exception and other measures that overstep the legal order, provided there is an independent judicial power.

Legal challenges and interventions by high courts have held back security actions that do not comply with legal frameworks or have investigated specific operations. This has been the case with measures that the federal and state governments have taken in the United States and in Brazil.

In the United States, the federal government in 2025 deployed National Guard troops in several cities, partly arguing that it aimed to tackle crime and lawlessness and that there was a risk of rebellion, despite no evidence having been presented to support these claims. These actions have put the federal government at odds with state governors and city mayors.¹¹ In Brazil, the Supreme Federal Court is looking into the police operation carried out in Rio in October 2025 that resulted in more than 120 deaths. This hearing is part of a wider case that claims human rights violations in police operations in Rio.¹²

Mayors in cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis have spoken out against heavy-handed operations by federal authorities and in some cases started legal challenges. A group of 80 local leaders and cities filed an amicus brief supporting the request by the state of Minnesota and the cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis for a restraining order against the federal deployment in Minnesota, arguing it is unlawful.¹³

Some legal challenges have been successful. For example, an injunction was granted to 50 local US governments to stop the federal government from withholding funding for cities it considers "sanctuary jurisdictions."¹⁴ Additionally, a federal judge blocked the deployment of National Guard troops in Chicago in October 2025, and in February 2026, a judge issued an injunction against Immigration and Customs Enforcement making detentions without warrants in Oregon.¹⁵

C. Cities can work together through networking to build a collective global voice that can push back against the drift toward the weakening of the multilateral system and rising authoritarianism.

Strengthening the voice of cities globally can help counterbalance national governments with an authoritarian inclination. Peace in Our Cities is an example of a network of cities that works to promote balanced approaches to violence reduction.¹⁶ The European Forum for Urban Security is another network that brings together nearly 250 cities and regions from 17 European countries to promote cooperation and support on crime prevention and security issues.¹⁷ The recently launched Latin American and Caribbean Group on Security and Democracy, a “regional platform focused on strengthening evidence-based public security policies, multilevel cooperation and respect for the rule of law,” is not exclusively city based, but cities and former city mayors are expected to play a significant role in it.¹⁸

There is growing interest in multilateral organizations in strengthening justice systems and making them more accessible and people centered, as is the case with the OECD’s work on access to justice¹⁹ and the Justice Action Coalition that is part of the Pathfinders initiative.²⁰ City-centered perspectives can be put forward through networks such as the World Organization of United Cities and Local Government, a network of cities across the globe that amplifies the voices of local governments and serves as an advocacy platform. In other areas of global concern such as climate action, networks of cities have managed to achieve a meaningful collective voice by networking and taking action together.²¹ Against a potential crisis in the rules-based global order and rising authoritarianism, cities could also build together a vision of a different path.

2. Preventing Violence by Helping Individuals Access Rights and Services Provided by the State

The justice system plays a key role in ensuring citizens can access and exercise their rights and services that states have a duty to provide. It also participates in solving and adjudicating disputes between private parties and between citizens and the state. When laws, rules, and their enforcement are perceived as legitimate, individuals are more likely to comply and accept them.²²

Local governments can take many steps to ensure that their populations have adequate and fair access to services and can develop mechanisms that act early to solve problems so they do not require the intervention of the formal justice system to redress wrongdoing. The fair allocation of services, accessibility, adequate administrative responses to complaints, and the provision of information, advice, and conflict-resolution alternatives are all actions local governments can take to prevent issues from reaching the formal justice system.

When the justice system needs to act, a system that solves problems and is a universal and fair guarantor of rights reinforces confidence in the state and strengthens its legitimacy. Trust between the state and citizenry around judicial matters has important implications for violence prevention and public safety.

Unfortunately, legal systems are often difficult to access and navigate for ordinary citizens, making them seem distant, complicated, and unable to solve everyday needs. Additionally, the state can be perceived as inaccessible, corrupt, or not impartial, and as a result, people are less likely to comply with its laws and rules. These obstacles generate mistrust and a lack of confidence in the capacity of the justice system. Consequently, in many cases where people cannot access and exercise rights, they will find ways of solving disputes, which can lead to parallel authorities (criminal governance) and the escalation of conflict into violence.²³

In summary, improving access services, strengthening the credibility of the justice system, and ensuring justice services solve people’s problems contribute to the reduction of violence in important ways:

- When the justice system is perceived as accessible, reliable and fair people are more likely to comply with laws that maintain peace.

- People can exercise their rights and solve their problems within institutional frameworks, reducing the pressure to solve problems outside the law, including through criminal groups or the use of mob justice.²⁴

Recent reports have reinforced these shortcomings of the justice system, and they recommend making justice more people centered, accessible, and solutions oriented.²⁵ One such report is Justice for All, published in 2019 by the Task Force on Justice. It estimated that 5.1 billion people are deprived of justice worldwide, with 1.5 billion having criminal, civil, or administrative problems they are unable to solve and 4.5 billion being excluded from the social, economic, and political opportunities that the law provides.²⁶ The report recommends addressing structural issues within society that lead to justice problems as a key prevention approach, solving problems before they reach the justice system.

The report invites the reader to think about the “justice journey,” the steps someone takes to resolve a justice problem, with the aim of achieving a satisfactory resolution through a process that is perceived as fair. It is important to note that a justice journey may be done outside the formal justice sector. The Justice for All report breaks down the justice journey into three stages: (1) empowering communities so that they can act when they need to solve a problem within the justice system, (2) improving access to people-centered justice services that respond to people’s needs, and (3) helping people achieve a fair resolution to their problems. In each of these stages, the report sets out a set of actions, which are summarized in table 1.

Table 1: The Justice Journey and Actions to Promote It

Empower people and communities	Access to people-centered justice services	Fair outcomes
Help people understand the law	Accelerate and simplify processes	Meet standards in human rights
Support people to seek solutions	Support alternative pathways to justice	Offer the right remedy
Invest in legal aid for the vulnerable	Provide one-stop services	Collect and disseminate data on outcomes
Increase participation in justice	Tailor services to justice needs	Establish effective grievance mechanisms

Similarly, the OECD in 2025 published the report Making Justice Systems More Effective and People Centered, which also emphasizes preventive and accessible justice. Its key proposals include clarifying points of entry and triaging in one-stop-shop or embedded settings, providing self-help and guided assistance, offering nonlawyer legal services, building community-based models, and emphasizing postresolution support to enforce outcomes and build resilience.²⁷

A number of initiatives have helped facilitate access to justice for more people, especially vulnerable populations. Some of these initiatives are national in scope but can be replicated or harnessed by cities within those countries or in other places.

One-stop local justice centers. Some countries have set up one-stop-shops where citizens can access a variety of justice services in one place. These centers can be built in areas where vulnerable communities live and where people generally have more difficulty accessing centralized justice services.²⁸

One such program, the Casas de Justicia (Houses of Justice), has been implemented in major cities across Colombia. The casas are located in areas where vulnerable populations can reach them easily. They house different justice services (and in some cases other services as well) under one roof, such as police inspectors, family courts, and conciliation services.²⁹

Casas de Justicia deal with a variety of cases. One impact study that looked at their operation in three cities found that 33 percent of the cases they dealt with were family conflicts, around 25 percent were related to criminal law, about 15 percent were conflicts between neighbors, and 12 percent were debt related.³⁰ The same study found that for people who accessed Casas de Justicia, 50 percent of cases were effectively solved and that this is significantly higher than the resolution rate for a control group that did not use the services of Casas de Justicia.³¹

Although Casas de Justicia is a national program, the centers are set up by request from cities that have to fulfil certain criteria: catchment populations larger than 100,000 inhabitants, a physical space for the casa to operate, and local budget investment in infrastructure and maintenance. This is a good example of how cities can take the initiative in improving access to justice in partnership with national-level institutions. In this case, cities provide infrastructure and funds for operating costs, while institutions from different levels (local, national) provide services, all within operating guidelines that are articulated at the national level.

There is evidence that timely and effective access to justice services can reduce violence. A recent analysis of factors related to homicides in the city of Cali found that proximity to a Casa de Justicia constituted a protective factor against homicides and had a statistically significant effect in reducing homicides in adjacent areas.³² Similar one-stop-shop initiatives to access justice services have been implemented elsewhere. In Ontario, Canada, for example, justice centers have been set up in several urban areas to bring together justice, health, and social services.³³

Another approach is to place justice services within wider state-service provision centers that citizens already use, such as libraries, schools, health facilities, or domestic violence shelters. Some interventions, such as the Centros de Acceso a Justicia in Argentina, do not just house different services in one place but also have multidisciplinary teams that support people in solving their problems, using an integrated approach.³⁴

Advice and nonlegal solutions to problems. The OECD and Justice for All reports also emphasize the need for identifying out-of-court solutions to legal problems. These include mediation and conciliation services to solve disputes (to which we will come back later), providing plain-language information, and regulating and promoting the use of paralegal services. Another important recommendation is for civil society organizations to offer support and advice to vulnerable populations for whom the legal system may be complicated and difficult to understand. The network of citizen advice centers in the United Kingdom is a good example of this form of support. Citizens Advice is a nonprofit organization that gives free advice to people on a variety of issues, including debt, access to state benefits, housing, consumer issues, and legal matters. The centers use different channels, such as telephone and online advice. Citizens Advice also has advisers in health centers throughout the country. Though independent, it is funded by a mix of public resources and other contributions. Citizens Advice reported that in 2024–2025, it had 1,900 advice centers and helped 2.7 million people.³⁵

In the United States, some district courts have set up community justice centers, often in urban areas, that are an example of an integrated approach and problem-focused justice. These justice centers connect courts with wraparound services that are deeply tied to community, reinforcing strong connections to local communities and community-based organizations.³⁶

Using technology to make services more accessible. AI and other kinds of technology are increasingly being harnessed to make access to justice easier. Their uses range from translating legal documents into different languages to providing advice on particular issues to using chatbots and apps to guide users through legal processes. For example, the OECD

report highlights the I-ACCESS My Rights Project, a chatbot that uses AI to provide age-appropriate and easy-to-understand legal information to children in Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania. It is designed for children 13 to 18, especially for those who have experienced abuse or crime. It provides information on rights and procedures and gives guidance on how to access support services.³⁷

Another example, the Recovery and Resilience Plan, part of the Justiça+ program in Portugal, invested in new technologies to improve people's experience with the justice system. Technology was used to make judges work more efficiently and to process, manage, and store judicial information. The technology also improves the user experience by providing more alternatives to solve problems and access to services. A report on its implementation states that between 2022 and 2024, there were four million online consultations of court cases by citizens, and 410,000 services were accessed in 2022 through Balcão+, a single repository for different court services.³⁸

Clearly, AI and other new technologies can support the process of making justice more accessible. They can facilitate more points of access by connecting systems and permitting online access to services and procedures. Chatbots and other apps can guide citizens and provide accessible information and simplify procedures. Some of these measures will require coordination with national jurisdiction institutions, but cities can take a proactive role in promoting new approaches that facilitate access to services. However, initiatives that improve access to services using new technologies should always be aware that some people do not have access to the latest technology or may not know how to use it. Even though the availability of different types of communication (voice, camera, chatbots) and AI can make technology easier to use, some people may still have access problems.

Based on these examples, there are several ways cities can improve access to justice system services and make the justice system more people centered:

- Provide guidance and support to vulnerable people and those most often excluded so they can more easily access justice services. This can be done directly by city staff or in partnership with community or civil society organizations such as Citizens Advice.
- Set up one-stop-shop facilities in vulnerable areas for citizens to access a variety of services in one place that is user friendly and easy to reach. This can be done through models such as the Casas de Justicia or Centros de Acceso a Justicia.
- Provide entry points to justice services in other accessible, community-focused locations (e.g., community centers and libraries).
- Provide plain-language, easy-to-understand guides and information on rights, procedures, and services. This can be done using new technology, some of which incorporates AI, such as chatbots.

3. Offering Individuals Mechanisms to Solve Conflicts

Another way the justice system can help reduce violence is by solving disputes and conflicts through processes that are perceived as legitimate, fair, and timely. This may be done within the legal and courts systems or outside of them.³⁹

Some of the measures outlined above have aimed at making it easier for people to solve their legal problems by making justice services more accessible and friendlier. Still, solving disputes through the court or legal system can be cumbersome, resource intensive, and slow. Many people either do not reach out to the formal justice system to solve their problems or do not find their problems adequately addressed when they do so. An analysis of access to justice in Ibero-American countries found that only 34 percent of people with nontrivial legal needs know where to find good information

and advice, only 50 percent of those who want help with solving a dispute access an authority or organization for help, and only half of them have a resolution to their issue. Even then, a significant proportion of those who achieve a “resolution,” 22 percent, do not feel it solved their problem.⁴⁰ So, most people do not manage to access support to solve disputes, and only a fraction of them have a resolution they feel has solved their problem.

An alternative to formal processes of dispute resolution is the use of mediation. Some state-run justice centers and courts can offer mediation as an alternative to a formal process. In other cases, mediation is offered by community organizations. Community mediation can solve many conflicts at an early stage without the need to go through a formal legal process and can be facilitated by trusted organizations or persons. By some estimates there might be 400 mediation centers in the United States that can mediate 400,000 disputes annually. Three quarters of them provide mediation for small claims courts and half for civil courts.⁴¹

In Cali, Colombia, community mediation has been used in excluded areas to help people where there is a low trust in formal justice institutions to solve community conflicts by reaching agreements with the help of local leaders trained as mediators. Most of the conflicts attended by community mediators have a positive resolution, thus solving many conflicts before they escalate and doing so quickly and on the spot. Community mediators are trained in how to refer more-complicated cases to local courts and Casas de Justicia. They also refer community members to other support services that may not be the legal justice system. In this way, community mediators act as a local form of problem-solving justice, focusing on addressing the root causes of a situation. A recent evaluation of this program concluded that community mediation and the formal justice system work hand in hand and complement each other, strengthening access to justice in areas with high levels of exclusion.⁴²

A review of evaluations of conflict resolution and restorative justice interventions found that the evidence suggests these programs help reduce further community violence, which is reflected in lower recidivism rates and a decrease in gun violence in neighborhoods where they have been implemented.⁴³ The evidence therefore suggests that well-implemented mediation programs can contribute to reducing violence.

There are examples of mediation services that have used technology to make them more accessible for some people, for example, by carrying out mediations online. An evaluation of an online dispute resolution service for family cases in Ottawa County, Michigan, found that those who accessed online mediations had higher satisfaction levels with process fairness and were more likely to reach agreements than those who accessed nononline services. It also found that both types of mediations had similar levels of satisfaction with the outcome among users.⁴⁴

In areas with high levels of violence where accessing formal justice services can be difficult or where people do not trust authorities, mediation can address many conflicts that could potentially turn violent. Cities can promote and support mediation either through their own service provision or through community-based organizations that often are trusted within communities with high levels of conflict.

As with other community-based approaches, mediation can be perceived as more legitimate and trusted than actions taken through law enforcement agencies or in formal legal settings. There is a parallel here with the way some cities are experimenting with health and social services teams acting as first responders to emergency calls involving people in distress or with mental health issues, with a view of trying to prevent a situation from escalating.⁴⁵ Community mediation can seem less aggressive and intimidating than solving a dispute with the intervention of a law officer or a judge. As with emergency responses, law enforcement and courts can be called in in case mediation does not reach a satisfactory solution.

Where there is a vexed history of relationship between communities and law enforcement agencies, where abuse in the use of force or corruption have been common, alternative conflict-resolution mechanisms can play an important role

in solving problems. Facing a rise in authoritarian measures in some parts of the world, cities can promote alternative community-based conflict-resolution mechanisms to reduce levels of conflict even within a context of harsh approaches taken by other levels of government.

4. Preventing Violence by Addressing Violent Crime and Criminal Offenders

The previous sections looked at ways the justice system can contribute to put limits on state abuse and help people exercise their rights and access services, helping build legitimacy and confidence in institutions. They also showed how justice systems can help solve disputes over a wide variety of issues, reducing the likelihood that conflict is settled through violence.

We now turn to the area of justice that intersects most directly with violence, especially violent crime: the criminal justice system and how offenders are dealt with.

Homicides and most cases of physical violence fall within the remit of criminal justice because of the harm they cause to other individuals and to communities. The criminal justice system tends to operate in primarily reactive ways, that is, responding to crime that has already happened, including punishing people who have broken the law. However, the system should also be considered one of the most powerful parts of any strategy that aims to prevent future crime and violence. This requires strategies that don't just focus on individual outcomes but rather on orienting criminal justice systems around effective deterrence and broader ecosystem approaches to violence and crime prevention.⁴⁶

In some cases, criminal justice systems can reproduce harm, not only failing to prevent crime from happening but contributing to generating more violence. The criminal justice system, and especially the prison system when it doesn't work, can be, as criminologists put it, "criminogenic."⁴⁷

Impunity, especially if coupled with opportunities for illegal activities that generate high profits, can become fertile ground for high levels of violent crime. Identifying, bringing to trial, sentencing, and sanctioning offenders appropriately and fairly not only reinforces the law and punishes the offender but, when done impartially and efficiently, communicates something to potential offenders and to communities.

In this way, a criminal justice system that is effective can act as a deterrent to potential generators of violence. Focused deterrence, one of the most consistently well evaluated violence-reduction strategies,⁴⁸ relies to a great extent on the ability to deliver on the threat of sanctioning individuals and/or groups through the criminal justice system.

Focused deterrence strategies, when delivered with quality, must be credible and have swift and certain sanctions; indeed, the swiftness and certainty matter more when it comes to deterring crime than does the severity of punishment.⁴⁹ Delivering a message that those who continue to behave in a violent way will be prosecuted and sanctioned, and following up on that message, is a core part of focused deterrence. Not having the capacity to do so will compromise the ability to properly implement such a strategy. As Anthony Braga and Philip Cook note, "Deterrent impacts are ultimately determined by offender perceptions of sanction risk and certainty."⁵⁰ This is an example of harnessing the justice system in a targeted manner to obtain the best results in reducing violence.

The inability to identify and prosecute violent crime can contribute to the normalization of crime and criminal careers that overburden justice systems and can compromise national security. This is what Marcelo Bergman calls high-crime equilibriums, to which the failure of the criminal justice system has contributed.⁵¹ He argues that reforms to criminal justice systems in Latin America in the past decades have not resulted in a more effective deterrence of crime. Part of the problem, in his view, is that the justice system does not perceive itself as a part of a crime-deterrence apparatus.⁵² Places that have managed to significantly reduce violence from high-crime equilibriums have required a strong law

enforcement strategy focused on disrupting illegal economies and criminal groups. The challenge is doing it while respecting the rules-based order, without resorting to authoritarian measures, and making it legitimate.

An effective criminal justice system includes the capacity of law enforcement agencies to identify and apprehend offenders, building sound cases in court to determine responsibility, and delivering proportionate sentences aimed at reducing the likelihood of future crime, alongside its targeted deployment to disarticulate criminal organizations and disrupt illegal economies (alongside other administrative measures).

The remainder of this section will be divided in two parts, one on improving the work of prosecution and criminal courts, especially with the use of new technologies, and the other on how offenders are dealt with, thinking about preventing further violence.

Using AI and Other Technologies to Improve Criminal Justice Outcomes

The capacity and effectiveness of criminal justice and its contribution to reducing urban violence can be enhanced with the use of new technologies. This has been a field of rapid development, and how much it will change the playing field remains to be seen. It is also an area where there are concerns about some of the implications of new technologies in terms of rights, biases, accuracy, and opaqueness of the programs used.⁵³

As technology evolves, allowing the capture of more information, and the analysis of different types of digital footprints increases massively, new technologies are being used to gather, review, and analyze evidence for criminal cases. These technologies include ballistics imaging, cell phone location and contact information, analysis of social media, analysis of myriad surveillance cameras now found in cities, body-worn cameras, license-plate-reading imaging, facial recognition software, and DNA analysis.⁵⁴ The capacity to collect and process more information is greatly enhanced by new technologies, but the information collected still needs to be reviewed and pieced together by detectives and prosecutors. In combination, the use of technology along with more and better detective teams can produce solid results.

For example, the Boston Police Department homicide-clearance project strengthened the homicides unit and brought in new techniques and protocols between 2012 and 2014 and managed to raise clearance rates from 47 percent in 2007–2011 to 66 percent when the intervention was made.⁵⁵ Additionally, the Oxford Institute of Technology and Justice has developed an AI Justice Atlas to map examples of how AI is being used and regulated in criminal justice systems in different countries. It serves as reference for cities and countries seeking to understand how this technology is being used in this field.⁵⁶ The atlas categorizes examples by roles: law enforcement, prosecutors, courts, defense.

Many jurisdictions have incorporated AI technology to improve their efficiency in managing cases as they are prepared to be brought to court and during proceedings. These include the use of software to prioritize urgent cases when there is a large caseload; tools for summarizing precedents, drafting motions, and generating legal research outlines; and technology to transcribe and analyze interviews and other information. These technologies have enabled prosecutors and courts to be more efficient at building cases and processing them in court.

In Buenos Aires, it is reported that the Prometea case-management system has automated 50 percent of the prosecutor's office workload and increased its productivity by 300 percent.⁵⁷ A similar case-management system is being used in Colombia.

Other technologies that aid decisions based on AI analysis have proven to be more controversial, and some examples bring attention to the challenges posed by the rapid incorporation of emerging technologies into criminal justice. These especially include technologies that assess the risk posed by people based on their previous history and personal characteristics. Some jurisdictions allow the use of such technology but with a human review and final decision-making

by people. In these cases, there is also fear that a lot of the data and programs that analyze it are owned by private companies, which makes it more difficult to regulate, access, and reinforce legal protections and privacy standards.⁵⁸

Most US courts in all states now use some form of AI-based risk-assessment tools in the pretrial and sentencing stages of criminal litigation, though there are documented cases where these technologies have proven to be ineffective or have biases. One case was the smart policing initiative LASER (Los Angeles Strategic Extraction and Restoration Program) implemented by the Los Angeles Police Department: a predictive policing tool used to identify chronic offenders and crime hotspots. An audit revealed that half of the offenders identified had zero or one arrest for violent crime and 10 percent had no noteworthy interactions with police. After this audit, the police department abandoned the use of the technology. In Chicago, the use of a similar person-based risk assessment program by its police force also led to poor results.⁵⁹

In Colombia, the prosecutor's office developed a program called PRISMA (Perfil de Riesgo de Reincidencia para Solicitud de Medidas de Aseguramiento) to help decide whether to request preventive detention of someone under investigation, based on their risk of recidivism. Using data from the police and the prosecutor's office, the algorithm predicts whether there is a high risk the person will commit a crime while awaiting trial and thereby helps inform decisions on whether to employ preventive detention. The system was implemented in 2016 but was later dropped because of its high risk of bias.⁶⁰

Two big questions arise from the incorporation of these new technologies into criminal justice, especially AI, to analyze data and prioritize actions: How accurate, precise, and actionable is the information produced and how is this information used and followed up on?

AI and other advanced technologies are already being leveraged in many parts of the world, and their use will rapidly become more ubiquitous. Their application in administrative support tasks and in analyzing large amounts of data will significantly speed up many processes and can help make the justice system more efficient. City governments can provide police forces, prosecutors' offices, and judges access to these technologies and training and support to use them appropriately. Even in government arrangements where local authorities do not have direct control over justice sector institutions controlled at the national or state level, they can often support the work of these institutions with technology, training, and other facilities.

Improving the efficiency of the criminal justice system is necessary to reduce violence in areas with high levels of violent crime and impunity where the caseload overwhelms the system. Incorporating new technologies to help focus efforts, speed up processes, and deal with a larger number of cases is a promising area of development. On the other hand, the use of algorithms and more recently AI to aid decision-making in law enforcement, prosecution, and sentencing, and in deciding measures for offenders, is a field still riddled with uncertainty and dilemmas. Its deployment, especially the use of person-based prediction, raises questions about accuracy, biases, and infringement of individual rights.

Cities should pay careful attention to this field because of its rapid development, its potential impact on improving justice outcomes, and the dangers it poses in harming confidence and trust in the system and hurting community relations. Cities should review guidelines and recommendations on the use of technology and develop their own standards, protocols, and guidelines.⁶¹ Cities can also consider carrying out pilots of promising technologies, with oversight and evaluation to monitor and control for potential biases and conflicts with individual rights.⁶² Rolling out the use of technologies that could generate poor results and unfairly treat individuals and communities can undermine trust in authorities.

On balance, cities, in partnership with other levels of government and other institutional actors, should aim to use technology to improve the outcomes of the criminal justice system in helping deter violent crime, but they should do so carefully, monitoring its deployment and with oversight to reduce potential undesirable effects.

Preventing Violence by Working with Offenders

The sanctioning role of the justice system (either through sentences, fines, or other penalties) is intended to reinforce justice by holding offenders accountable in accordance with the law, but it can also contribute to improving safety and preventing further violence.

In some countries (the United States and many parts of Latin America), prison populations have become very large as justice systems have introduced harsher penalties to a larger number of offenses. In theory, incarceration can have several overlapping functions:

- **As punishment.** Restricting the freedom of movement of offenders is a way to make them pay for the harm they have done.
- **As incapacitation.** When behind bars, someone who might otherwise continue to commit crimes will not be able to do so, protecting the community.
- **As a period for rehabilitation.** Even though rehabilitation does not require being in prison, an emphasis on rehabilitation shifts the way an offender is treated during the period behind bars. The emphasis is on building up skills to avoid recidivism postincarceration.
- **As a deterrent.** Harsh custodial sentences are proposed as a message to other potential offenders of the consequences of committing a crime, which should deter them from doing so. However, several authors suggest that the deterrence effect of long, harsh sentences is overstated.⁶³

The effectiveness of mass incarceration and severe sentences in reducing levels of crime has come under question because these measures can also inflict much harm on parts of the population and whole communities.⁶⁴ At the same time, reducing prisoner numbers in the United States has been possible without an increase in crime.

Marcelo Bergman has argued that in Latin America, the increase in the prison population not only has not helped to reduce criminality but has been a factor in the growth of criminality. This is due in part to the high rotation of people in prisons. According to Bergman, criminals in Latin America perceive periods in prison as a normal part of their life trajectory, so there is little deterrence effect.⁶⁵ Prisons in many countries are violent environments where convicted people connect to other criminals and criminal groups and often learn from them. In many places, prisons do not rehabilitate. Furthermore, there is often little support for formerly incarcerated individuals who are released and have to return to harsh living conditions where crime is one option for surviving.⁶⁶

For many crimes there are alternatives to custodial sentences that can be more effective at preventing future crime and violence. Decriminalization of offenses that can be addressed in other ways can help reduce prison populations. So can diversion programs where offenders are given the opportunity to agree to commit to carrying out certain actions instead of going through a trial. Sentences can be noncustodial and focus on repairing the harm caused and rehabilitating offenders. There are many examples of the application of these measures to decrease numbers of people who serve custodial sentences.⁶⁷

It is important that sentences respond to victims' desires and needs. Lenore Anderson has documented that many victims do not feel that the harm they have received is redressed by court trials and harsh sentences and that they would prefer that sentencing focus on working with offenders so they have opportunities and skills that allow them to find options outside of crime.⁶⁸

As with criminal justice more broadly, technology can also play a role in offering alternatives to imprisonment for some types of crime. For example, some countries use electronic monitoring as an alternative to imprisonment. In Sweden, where it has been widely adopted since the 1990s, studies suggest that electronic monitoring reduces criminal recidivism and improves labor outcomes of offenders.⁶⁹

Technology can also help reduce prison populations, but doing so without negative safety impacts requires accurate data, including on a range of variables beyond just incarceration levels. The MacArthur Foundation, through its Justice + Reform program, has been working with a group of cities since 2015 to reduce prison populations. By 2024, these cities had managed to reduce jail populations by 18.6 percent.⁷⁰ Collecting and processing data on the jail population allowed these sites to design and monitor their prison-population-reduction plans.

New technologies and the use of data can therefore support efforts to reduce levels of imprisonment and pretrial detention without significantly affecting crime levels. Prison sentences should be reserved for the most serious types of crimes and for those who pose the highest risk to society. This could avoid the criminogenic effects of imprisonment that generate more crime rather than reduce it. Efforts to reduce the prison population should be accompanied by other measures that make sure there is accountability by offenders, victims feel they are heard, and justice is made. Authorities must include measures to monitor those who are completing nonprison sanctions, especially by programs that support offenders, so they can reintegrate into society in a meaningful way away from crime.

Recommendations for Cities to Respond to Current Challenges With Regard to the Justice Systems

A fair, accessible, and effective justice system can contribute to efforts to reduce violence in cities in multiple ways, some more direct than others. The justice system deals with issues that range from effective access to basic rights for everybody and addressing everyday conflicts to fighting organized criminal groups that use violence in a systematic way. There is no silver bullet to reduce violence, but an effective justice system will put checks on state violence; ensure rights and fair treatment for everybody; be easy to understand, access, and navigate; effectively solve problems and conflicts; and sanction offenders who commit serious crimes in ways that prevent further violence.

In many cases, city-level leaders and actors will be able to directly implement justice-related measures to help reduce violence. However, because the justice system spans institutions in various sectors and at different government levels, city-level authorities will also need to collaborate with other actors to harness the justice system for violence-reduction efforts.

As with other issues, the global shifts this compendium covers are bringing about big changes and challenges to the justice system. The rise in authoritarian regimes and the weakening of the multilateral system challenge the role of international and national justice systems in defining a fair framework for state action and limiting its use of arbitrary force and violence. Rapid developments in technology open up the possibility of making justice systems easier to access and more efficient in managing large caseloads and solving criminal cases. However, the speed of developments and the opaqueness of AI and large-language models also carry risks, including making mistakes in identifying offenders and reproducing biases against individuals in certain social groups.

Based on this review of how cities and actors at other levels have responded to current challenges and opportunities, the following are some recommendations on actions cities can take to help in their violence-reduction efforts with interventions in the justice system.

Timely, balanced, evidence-based, and effective violence-prevention strategies that are perceived as fair and legitimate should be implemented before escalations of violence. This is especially true for crime-related violence and will help reduce the popular demand for tough actions that often lend support to exceptional and authoritarian measures.

When exceptional measures that suspend constitutional guarantees and the normal rule of law are taken, or when heavy-handed interventions are proposed at the national level against legal safeguards, city governments and other city-based actors should challenge them by legal means. As we have seen, some cities have been successful in challenging states of exception and measures that overstep national and international legal frameworks through high courts and international jurisdictions. To do so, however, cities should have strong legal counsel and legal departments to push forward such challenges when there is a risk of authoritarian measures.

Coalitions, networks, and associations of cities and local governments, within countries and across national boundaries, should push back against an authoritarian agenda by promoting rules-based and fair violence-reduction strategies. Multiple existing platforms play or could play that role. If multilateralism among nation-states is weakened, international cooperation and developing common agendas between cities can counterbalance this trend, promoting rules-based approaches to violence and crime reduction.

Cities should work to make justice systems and procedures easier to access and navigate. Many legal problems can be solved outside the formal judicial system, in community settings, with good advice provided, for example, by paralegal services. Cities can build spaces in excluded neighborhoods where a range of legal and justice services are provided in a welcoming atmosphere to support those who need it. Technology can be harnessed to make justice services more accessible, and cities can invest in such technology. This ranges from chatbots that provide advice and apps that translate laws and guides to online mediation services. Technology, including AI, can make justice services easier to access and navigate and make them more responsive if they can address legal problems more efficiently.

Cities should also work with law enforcement agencies, detective and attorney offices, and the court system to progressively adopt, with safeguards, new technologies that can improve the agility and capability to manage high caseloads and solve cases. A criminal justice system that is swift, can handle larger caseloads, and produces better outcomes that are perceived as fair and legitimate can contribute to reducing violence. Technology, including AI, can help achieve this, and cities can incorporate it in the areas under their responsibility or support other agencies in adopting them. This includes case-management software, software to analyze documents and legislation, technology to collect and analyze evidence (license plate recognition, body worn cameras, facial recognition, telephone data), and technology to help assess risks posed by certain individuals or places (e.g., person- and place-based predictive policing).

Cities should, however, act with caution when adopting new technologies. They must dedicate efforts to understand the way predictive technology and learning models operate and test for errors and biases to avoid discrimination against specific populations. Cities should have mechanisms for training staff, and understanding, testing, and piloting technologies—including the capacity to research, oversee, and potentially limit their use—before rollout rather than jump to wholesale adoption of emerging technologies.

Ultimately, cities have to find balance between adopting new technologies that could help them improve the operation of the justice system and implementing their use at a pace that allows for an understanding of potential biases and errors they may reproduce with serious consequences on imparting fair justice and potentially damaging trust in the system.

Endnotes

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About the Author

Juan Camilo Cock Misas

Juan Camilo Cock Misas is an anthropologist and human geographer based in Cali, Colombia with extensive work on community development and violence prevention. From 2016 to 2019 he helped develop and coordinated the city of Cali’s “Territories of Inclusion and Opportunities” strategy to improve livelihoods in the city’s most violent and precarious areas. He was a co-designer of the Pazos violence prevention strategy for Palmira that won the UCLG Peace Prize for that city in 2022. For the past six years he has been the director of the local NGO Alvarallice, where he led the development and evolution of Abriendo Caminos, a violence prevention strategy based on the Cure Violence model that branched out into working on inclusive justice and gender based-violences. He has been a contributor to work with Peace in Our Cities, the Resilience Fund of the Global Initiative on Transnational Organized Crime and other networks.



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Rather than assuming that community policing inherently produces trust, it examines the conditions under which it strengthens legitimacy and those under which it may instead function as a vehicle for expanded surveillance or the consolidation of territorial control.

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CHAPTER 6

POLICE AND COMMUNITY TRUST IN CONTESTED URBAN SPACES

PITFALLS AND POLICY LESSONS

By Patrick Mutahi

Cities across the world are experiencing profound political, social, and security transformations. Urban centers have become frontline arenas in which global geopolitical shifts—declining democratic norms, rising authoritarian governance, shrinking civic space, and expanding securitized public-order practices—are most visibly felt. Over the last decade, global democracy indices have documented a sustained regression in civil liberties, political rights, and the rule of law. According to Freedom House, 2024 marked the nineteenth consecutive year of global democratic decline, while the V-Dem Institute describes this moment as part of a broader “third wave of autocratisation.”¹ In these settings, police have become central actors in managing social unrest, migration, and political dissent, reshaping everyday policing, public safety in urban spaces, and police-community relations. As a result, the relationship between the police and the communities is evolving and expanding in scope and visibility. This has created opportunities for enhanced public safety, and in contexts where this expanded role is exercised through coercive or unaccountable practices, it often remains contested and fragile.

While police are formally mandated to provide safety and enforce the law, their authority is often experienced unevenly—protective in some neighborhoods, coercive in others. These divergences are not accidental. As this chapter notes, they are rooted in histories of colonial governance, racial control, political surveillance, and social regulation that continue to shape contemporary policing practices in the Global South and the North. Heavy-handed police responses in Kenya, Mozambique, Georgia, and Tanzania, for example, demonstrate how urban security governance continues to be framed through coercive rather than participatory logic.² Similar dynamics have emerged in the United Kingdom, which has expanded police powers over protests, and in the United States, where securitized policing has disproportionately affected minority communities.³

This chapter also situates policing within a contested terrain. In most of the cities, such as Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, Nairobi, and Butuan City in the Philippines, police both compete and collaborate with other actors—including municipal authorities, community actors, private security providers, and, at times, criminal or vigilante networks—for authority. Legitimacy is thus contested and fragmented; trust in state institutions, particularly the police, is conditional and often shaped by everyday experiences rather than long-standing confidence.

Policing in these settings can oscillate between engagement and enforcement, dialogue and intimidation. Allegations of corruption, excessive force, or selective enforcement may coexist with formal participatory structures such as community forums or neighborhood committees. As a result, official mechanisms for collaboration do not automatically translate into meaningful trust. Global democratic decline, characterized by shrinking civic space, politicized security institutions, and expanded coercive public-order practices, further intensifies the fragility of police-community relationships in these urban settings.

In response to strained relationships between police and communities, many cities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Africa, and Latin America have adopted a community policing approach to shift from reactive, enforcement-driven models toward partnership, problem-solving, and local engagement. Community policing seeks to embed police within neighborhoods through structured forums, patrol strategies, and information-sharing mechanisms. It promises greater police visibility, shared identification of safety priorities, and improved trust through regular interaction with the communities.

This chapter discusses community policing within the broader question of police-community relationships. Rather than assuming that community policing inherently produces trust, it examines the conditions under which it strengthens legitimacy and those under which it may instead function as a vehicle for expanded surveillance or the consolidation of territorial control. It approaches community policing as one pathway of addressing community-police mistrust, but its outcomes depend on accountability, democratic safeguards, and better everyday police practices. By doing this, the analysis aims to clarify the promise and limits of community policing in contemporary urban governance.

The community policing approach traveled from England (in the early 19th century) to the United States in the 1970s, and later into other countries.⁴ In the Philippines, community policing is domiciled within the Philippine National Police and is mandated under Republic Act No. 6975.⁵ In South Africa, the concept of community policing was imported from Western countries and introduced into the South African Police Service Act (SAPS Act) in 1995,⁶ with core principles including service orientation, partnership, problem-solving, empowerment, and accountability. In Kenya, community policing is formally embedded in the National Police Service Act (2011), policies, and operational guidance.⁷ Mutuma Ruteere and M. Pommerolle note that community policing was introduced in Kenya in 1999 by the Vera Institute of Justice, which worked with the Kenya Human Rights Commission and the Nairobi Central Business District Association on two projects.⁸

The global diffusion of the policing strategies within the community policing approach was framed as providing “promising models or successful public policies.”⁹ It is neither purely imposed nor a local innovation but a hybrid of the two. Where municipal authorities have the mandate to do so, they adopt community policing policy approaches and adapt them to local contexts, dynamics, and the nuances of insecurity. There are, however, various debates regarding community policing initiatives aimed at building relations, mostly related to the very idea of community and its lack of a uniform definition.¹⁰ Scholars have questioned the applicability of concepts from the United States and the United Kingdom to the contexts of South Africa and Kenya, which are markedly different.¹¹ Their conclusions question the tendency to fail to incorporate community policing initiatives into local ideas and understandings. This is because countries have different political orientations, historical backgrounds, and local cultural and knowledge-producing systems. For instance, Ruteere and Pommerolle discuss how Kenya’s community policing initiatives were unsuccessful because they largely “fail[ed] to address or deliberately ignore[d] the wider political context...[a]nd did not fully embrace the ‘meaning of democratization in policing matters.’”¹² Despite this, the community policing approach has subsequently been adapted and translated by Kenyan policy actors.

Community policing is not a neutral or uniform intervention. As the chapter notes, in some cities, such as Rio de Janeiro, localized initiatives have contributed to improved communication, modest increases in crime reporting, or reductions in certain forms of violence. In other countries, for instance, Kenya, South Africa, and the Philippines, among others, community policing structures have coexisted with persistent extra-judicial killings, discriminatory police enforcement, or the politicization of security institutions. In highly securitized environments like Eastleigh in Kenya, Butuan, and Johannesburg, community policing forums risk functioning less as platforms for the coproduction of safety and more as infrastructures of territorial control. Ultimately, the same mechanisms designed to enhance trust—neighborhood committees, patrol visibility, local reporting systems—can also expand state surveillance into everyday social life, particularly in marginalized communities of refugees and internally displaced persons.

This tension shows that community policing does not operate on neutral institutional terrain. Its effectiveness is mediated by preexisting levels of trust, the consistency of procedural fairness, the presence or absence of accountability, and the broader political context within which police authority is exercised. Efforts to strengthen community-police relationships thus cannot be understated or understood as purely technical reforms. They are embedded in deeper struggles over legitimacy, accountability, and the boundaries of state power.

Drawing on empirical research from different cities, this chapter explores how community policing practices are shaped, what undermines them, and which practices have shown potential to rebuild trust and improve safety outcomes. By

analyzing the challenges, the chapter provides policymakers with a clearer understanding of why community policing initiatives often fail to deliver the promised outcomes of better community-police relations and how they can unintentionally reinforce the very inequalities they aim to address. It concludes by identifying practical measures, such as strengthening accountability mechanisms, embedding democratic safeguards, and improving everyday policing practices to enhance the effectiveness of community policing.

Police-Community Relations

Community-police relationships are shaped by the historical and political foundations of policing institutions, which in many contexts originated as mechanisms for governing populations and enforcing social order rather than providing equitable public safety. In the United States, modern policing institutions emerged partly from slave patrols and systems designed to control enslaved and later freed Black populations.¹³ In the United Kingdom, policing was developed to protect property, manage urban unrest, and enforce colonial rule.¹⁴ In France, it was closely tied to political surveillance and regime security, with early police institutions tasked not only with crime control but with monitoring dissent, regulating mobility, and protecting state authority.¹⁵ These origins continue to shape patterns of policing and public trust, particularly among racialized and economically marginalized communities in the United States, United Kingdom, and France.

In the Global South, police practices are shaped by colonial legacies. The colonial police were established to govern populations, protect state authority, and manage dissent, rather than to provide accountable public safety services. These institutional origins continue to influence police behavior and public perceptions. In Kenya and Bangladesh, for example, police institutions remain widely associated with coercion, extraction, and political control, perceptions rooted in colonial-era policing practices.¹⁶ In the informal settlements of Kaptombwo and Karagita in Nakuru, Kenya, police continue to be widely perceived not primarily as providers of protection but as actors exercising discretionary authority, often associated with harassment, extortion, profiling of young men, and selective enforcement. These practices undermine institutional legitimacy and create strong disincentives for communities to report crime or cooperate with police.¹⁷ Likewise, the South African Police Service is implicated in corruption scandals, neglect of reported cases, and the use of heavy-handed tactics against protestors.¹⁸ These practices undermine the credibility of police engagement and reinforce perceptions of police as coercive actors rather than providers of protection.

The experience of Rio de Janeiro during the “pacification” program implemented from 2008 to 2015 demonstrates how efforts to improve community-police relationships can be undermined when coercive practices persist. The Pacifying Police Units (UPPs) were introduced with the stated aim of rebuilding police legitimacy and improving relations with favela communities.¹⁹ Their interventions aimed at reclaiming territory from criminal gangs in more than 160 favelas.²⁰ While the program achieved notable short-term gains, including a reduction of police fatal shootings by more than 40 percent and significant declines in common crime in many areas during the 2008–2015 implementation period, these successes were uneven. In approximately 40 percent of targeted territories, the militarized character of “pacification” generated negative spillover effects, eroding trust and legitimacy and, in some cases, reducing public safety.²¹ Initially, the program led to an increase in perception of safety and trust in law enforcement, including an overall positive reaction from the majority of residents, positive perceptions of favelas, and increased crime reporting in the territories. However, old policing practices prevailed with the expansion of UPPs into more territories. UPP police brutality cases were recorded, and there was a disconnect between policing and the social or community component of the program.²² Moreover, there were no strong police accountability mechanisms for the police violence.

Research from Sargodha City, Pakistan, presents a similar pattern. In some local areas, police engagement efforts have contributed to modest improvements in trust and responsiveness. Yet these localized gains coexist with persistent national-level patterns of arbitrary killings, enforced disappearances, and the continuation of “kill and dump” practices by state agents.²³ Human Rights Watch has documented the disproportionate targeting of marginalized ethnic communities

in Baluchistan Province, while the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has highlighted systemic shortcomings in investigations and due process.²⁴ In such environments, police risk being instrumentalized as extensions of state control rather than platforms for rights-based collaboration.

Nigeria's experience with the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) reinforces this dynamic. Between 2017 and 2020, SARS units were implicated in torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances, abuses that sparked nationwide #EndSARS protests.²⁵ The subsequent attempt to rebuild community trust illustrates how difficult reform becomes once policing institutions are associated with systemic violence. Even where community-oriented reforms are introduced after a crisis, deeply damaged legitimacy constrains their effectiveness.

Community-police relationships are fundamentally shaped by legitimacy, which emerges through consistent institutional behavior over time. Procedural fairness, restraint in the use of force, responsiveness to community concerns, and accountability for misconduct all influence whether communities view police authority as justified. In Nakuru, trust in police-community relations are often incremental, conditional, and reversible, shaped by recent experiences and the behavior of individual officers rather than stable institutional confidence.²⁶ These dynamics highlight that police-community relations are fundamentally relational and contingent, reflecting broader issues of legitimacy, accountability, and the everyday exercise of state authority. Where these conditions are absent, engagement efforts risk being perceived as symbolic rather than substantive. Public meetings, liaison committees, or outreach activities may occur, but they do not necessarily alter how communities experience policing in practice. This creates a situation in which formal engagement coexists with persistent mistrust.

Community policing is an institutional approach to reconfiguring police-community relations, centered on structured interaction, information exchange, and responsiveness to locally defined safety concerns. Moving beyond reactive enforcement, it seeks to embed policing within community contexts and enable greater community influence over policing practices. How are these practices reflected in different cities? This is a discussion we turn to now.

Urban Governance Lens—What Does Community Policing Do Inside the City?

Community policing establishes governance pathways and participatory infrastructures in security governance, enhancing police visibility and making community members more reachable. Implementation, however, is shaped by the level at which policing authority is exercised (municipal, state, or national), which determines how much influence communities can realistically have over policing decisions. In Butuan City, the implementation of community policing is primarily expressed through patrol activities, organizational work, and community interaction, increasing police visibility and collaboration.²⁷

In Johannesburg, community policing operates through multiple channels. These include community partnership avenues and subforums focused on businesses, private security, youth, taxi and hawkers, and street patrols. They use social media and communication tools such as WhatsApp, the Zello app, radio shows, and printed materials.²⁸

In Lamu and Nakuru, Kenya, community policing governance sits with the community policing committee.²⁹ In Kogi State, Nigeria, community policing has been experienced through neighborhood security groups and multistakeholder dialogue platforms.³⁰ At the same time, beat and town hall meetings, problem-oriented community policing practices, patrol routines (foot and night), door-to-door visits, and complaint and reporting pathways have been implemented in Munyega, Uganda; Sorsogon Province, Philippines; Sheikhpura and Nankana Sahib districts, Punjab Province, Pakistan; Monrovia, Liberia; and Santa Catarina State, Brazil.³¹

In England and Wales, the Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee program, adopted as part of the Safer Street Mission, frames neighborhood policing teams as the basic units of local safety in every local area, with each having known and named contactable officers, dedicated antisocial behavior leads, police community support officers, special constables,

residents and businesses whose voices will shape their local police priorities.³² These elements are designed to increase police visibility, familiarity, and accessibility, and to shift policing from reactive enforcement toward preventive, locally informed problem-solving.

Challenges and Constraints of Community Policing Programs

Outputs Versus Impact: The way community policing programs are monitored and evaluated often reveals a narrower administrative logic. In practice, many community policing initiatives are assessed using output-based performance indicators, such as the number of patrols conducted, meetings convened, committees formed, or trainings delivered.³³ The research literature increasingly recommends assessing community policing through legitimacy-centered and accountability-sensitive metrics. These include independent surveys of trust and procedural justice.³⁴

Territorialization, Exclusion, and Surveillance: Community policing can facilitate local surveillance of nonlocal residents and create divisions across neighborhoods, thereby risking unfair treatment and identity-based discrimination. In Kenya, the institutionalized and legalized neighborhood-level surveillance requires residents to monitor and report to the police, local elders, local Chief, and community policing actors on those living around them, embedding intelligence functions within local social structures. In areas such as Eastleigh, security operations and community-based reporting systems were used to identify and screen nonlocal residents, particularly Somali migrants and refugees, reinforcing the territorialization of security and the monitoring of perceived outsiders.³⁵ This has blurred the line between community safety and social surveillance, with local belonging becoming an informal criterion for determining the legitimacy of presence.

In South Africa, community-based policing and neighborhood security structures have been associated with spatial exclusion and discrimination, reinforcing boundaries between insiders and outsiders.³⁶ Migrants and foreign nationals are frequently treated as security threats and excluded from local governance and security decision-making processes, illustrating how territorialized policing structures can reproduce exclusionary and discriminatory dynamics. Similar dynamics have been observed in Butuan, Philippines, where police adopted intensified surveillance and control measures, including physical inspections, identity checks, coordinated field operations, and checkpoint screening, particularly targeting internally displaced persons.³⁷ While these measures were justified as necessary for security, these more-coercive practices illustrate how community policing is embedded within broader policing institutions whose strategies and priorities may differ. Measures justified as necessary for security, when applied disproportionately to vulnerable populations, can intensify community tensions and erode public confidence, demonstrating how policing practices that prioritize surveillance and containment can undermine the relational foundations necessary for trust and cooperation.

Limits to Effective Intelligence Gathering: Within cities, community policing can serve as an information pipeline and knowledge system, integral to collecting local information on insecurity and converting it into actionable knowledge and intelligence. Mapped security issues in neighborhoods, community members' perceptions, hot spots, social networks, and informal intelligence are used to inform and enable early warning systems and to support proactive crime prevention and problem-solving. For instance, women in Bangladesh were found to be more-effective informants than men, providing valuable insights into various crimes and risks that intersect with violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism. However, women have been disregarded, excluded, and underrepresented in community leadership positions.³⁸ This exclusion was attributed to the embedded patriarchal systems, cultural barriers, Bangladesh being predominantly a Muslim-majority nation, less economic empowerment, limited awareness of community policing forums among community women, and low leadership motivation for volunteerism.

In Lamu, Kenya, there still exists mistrust between police officers and community members, leading to reduced crime reporting and information sharing with police out of fear of retaliation and revictimization. Community members and members of community policing committees have accused police officers of disclosing information entrusted to them

for policing intelligence. Moreover, as in Bangladesh, sociocultural factors were cited as barriers to crime reporting. Lamu has a close-knit Muslim community whose sociocultural norms prohibit them from reporting incidents to police officers, as they believe in the effectiveness of traditional dispute resolution mechanisms.

Resource Gaps: In Johannesburg, challenges were noted with police-community-oriented initiatives, but they varied across settlement areas. Street patrolling was challenging in informal settlements with no proper roads or street lighting, and where dwellings were built so close together. Challenges of limited resources, including human resources and police vehicles, were also cited.³⁹ Likewise, a study conducted in the Global South, encompassing Brazil, Colombia, Liberia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Uganda, found uneven and incomplete implementation of community policing practices. Moreover, it was noted that there was a lack of sustained buy-in from police leadership, frequent rotation of police leadership and officers, and inadequate resources to sustainably implement community policing strategies.⁴⁰

Operational Constraints: In Rio de Janeiro, the UPP program's survival was strained by coordination difficulties among relevant state authorities, community members, and other partners; a lack of permanent partnerships; and constant threats of discontinuity. As Ribeiro and Vilarouca note, the UPP program did not change the issues it was meant to address, as the police failed to improve police-community relations. Cases of excessive police brutality and abuse of young, Black, and pardo (mixed race/multiethnic) citizens continued, and procedural fairness was not respected as cases of police practice outside the expected parameters were noted.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, community-oriented policing has been associated with reduced homicides in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, as well as successes in some Colombian cities in the nonaggression and disarmament interventions. However, obstacles like cultural violence and social disorganization causing high crime rates have been identified to contribute to the failure of community policing initiatives in the region.⁴¹

Absence of Neutrality: Community policing frameworks may reproduce existing inequalities in police legitimacy. For instance, in New York City, a RAND study investigating the impact of the police department's neighborhood policing framework found that respondents living in lower-violence areas reported more positive attitudes toward police in their neighborhoods than those residing in higher-violence areas. The study found that in neighborhoods with high rates of violent crimes, most residents reported police officers did not address problems concerning people in their neighborhood, they did not think police could be trusted, and they felt police allowed racial biases to affect their responses.⁴² These cases raise a broader policy concern: Where policing is already perceived as fair and effective, relational engagement can strengthen trust. However, where policing is experienced as coercive or discriminatory, the same framework may have limited impact unless accompanied by substantive changes in enforcement practices.

Similar to New York's higher-violence neighborhoods, community engagement structures in Nakuru, Kenya, operate within environments where police presence is often associated with enforcement and control rather than protection. Under such conditions, community policing frameworks alone are unlikely to transform police-community relations unless accompanied by credible changes in police behavior, accountability, and responsiveness. This reinforces the broader point that community policing does not operate on a neutral institutional terrain; its effects are mediated by preexisting levels of trust, patterns of police conduct, and the structural conditions that shape how police authority is experienced.

Taken together, these cases reveal a broader pattern: Where coercive policing practices, impunity, and political repression persist, efforts to improve police-community relationships can be instrumentalized in ways that extend surveillance and control rather than build trust. Engagement mechanisms presented as participatory or partnership-based may function less as spaces for genuine dialogue and coproduction of safety and more as channels through which state authority is normalized and dissent is monitored. In such contexts, initiatives to strengthen police-community relations risk becoming symbolic gestures that legitimize securitized governance rather than transforming it. This underscores that sometimes the quality and outcomes of police-community relationships may reproduce rather than resolve the underlying drivers of mistrust.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Comparative cases in this chapter from Brazil, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, the Philippines, and the United States show that police-community relations remain fragile, conditional, and shaped by everyday experiences of policing. Community policing initiatives may facilitate communication, improve information flows, and produce localized improvements in safety and cooperation. However, they can also be undermined by coercive practices, weak accountability, and political instrumentalization of the police. In some cases, territorialized community policing structures extend state visibility into communities and facilitate surveillance and social control, particularly of racialized, migrant, or economically marginalized populations. The result is a growing gap between the promise of community policing as a vehicle for trust-building and its practical use as a mechanism for surveillance and control. The central challenge for urban policymakers is therefore not simply how to expand community policing programs but how to protect their democratic integrity in increasingly authoritarian contexts.

Across the diverse urban experiences reviewed in this chapter, from Nairobi to Johannesburg to Rio de Janeiro, several common principles emerge that cities should factor into policy, planning, and implementing community policing approaches to enhance police-community relations.

Accountability must be treated as the foundation of community policing: No amount of community engagement can compensate for abusive or unaccountable policing. Cities that have attempted to promote community policing while ignoring police misconduct have consistently seen trust erode. Johannesburg offers a clear example: Despite the existence of community police forums and structured participation mechanisms, persistent allegations of corruption and heavy-handed responses by the South African Police Service have undermined public confidence in these forums. Similarly, in Nairobi and other Kenyan cities, the community policing framework coexists with documented extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. In such contexts, community meetings and neighborhood committees risk becoming symbolic exercises rather than genuine partnerships. People expect protection without harm, fairness without discrimination, and consequences when police abuse their authority. Without these, community policing cannot function credibly.

Effective community policing requires genuine community ownership and autonomy: Participation cannot be meaningful if it is tightly controlled by police institutions. Rio de Janeiro's UPPs provide a cautionary lesson: Although presented as community-oriented initiatives, they were often perceived by residents as militarized projects of territorial control. By contrast, more-successful experiences, such as neighborhood safety forums in Belo Horizonte and Porto Alegre, Brazil, and in Monrovia, Liberia, have allowed communities to set priorities, lead local initiatives, and hold police to account. Cities seeking to revitalize community policing should therefore provide legal recognition and protection for community safety forums, decentralize decision-making, and ensure that meetings and structures are not dominated by local political elites.

Cities must adopt transparent and ethical information governance: Community policing objectives such as problem solving, early warning, and crime prevention depend on voluntary information sharing between residents and police. In many settings, however, communication channels are undermined by mistrust, fear of reprisal, and entrenched social hierarchies. This causes information to be selectively shared or withheld, limiting the police ability to respond effectively to local safety concerns. Crucially, trust often precedes the flow of information rather than emerging from it. Urban authorities should therefore develop clear, publicly articulated rules governing the collection, storage, and use of community-provided information. Community forums must not be repurposed as covert platforms for intelligence-gathering. Robust protections for whistleblowers and informants are essential, alongside sanctions for officers who compromise confidentiality. Ethical information governance is not only a technical safeguard, it is a precondition for sustaining voluntary cooperation in environments where mistrust is historically grounded.

Cities need to invest in relational policing rather than simply creating new structures: Many governments have focused on establishing committees, hotlines, and reporting channels without addressing the everyday relationships that make these mechanisms meaningful. Trust grows not from the number of meetings held but from consistent, fair, and respectful daily interactions. Practical reforms should therefore prioritize continuity of neighborhood officers, training in mediation and conflict resolution, and performance metrics that reward trust-building rather than arrests.

Community policing must be understood as part of a broader urban governance system: Safety in cities is shaped as much by lighting, housing, transport, youth employment, and social services as by police patrols. Experiences from cities such as Butuan in the Philippines and Sargodha in Pakistan show that community policing delivers better outcomes when it is integrated with social programs and multiagency problem-solving. Urban planners, social services, schools, and health agencies must therefore be treated as partners in community safety rather than peripheral actors.

Approaches must be tailored to the realities of informal settlements and marginalized neighborhoods: Many community policing models imported from the Global North assume orderly streets, reliable lighting, and stable addresses—conditions that do not exist in large parts of Johannesburg, Nairobi, Lagos, and similar cities. More-flexible, community-led safety arrangements that work with existing local structures—such as elders’ councils, women’s groups, and youth networks—are likely to be more effective than standardized templates.

Cities must ensure that community policing is genuinely inclusive and protective of vulnerable groups: Women, young people, migrants, and racial and ethnic minorities are frequently those most affected by both crime and police abuse. Yet they are often underrepresented in safety forums. As this chapter shows, cultural and gender barriers can limit women’s participation. Urban authorities should design participation mechanisms that deliberately amplify marginalized voices and create safe reporting pathways for victims of police misconduct.

Cities must rethink how they measure success: Too many community policing programs are evaluated by counting meetings, patrols, or committees formed. These indicators reveal little about whether residents feel safer or more respected. Effective evaluation should focus on outcomes rather than outputs, including whether residents feel safer, whether they trust and engage with police, and whether community priorities are reflected in policing practices. By adopting evaluation frameworks that capture relational and participatory dimensions, cities can better understand what works, adapt programs to local contexts, and ensure that community policing fulfils its promise of building both safety and trust.

Taken together, these principles point to a clear conclusion. Community policing can only function where certain minimum conditions are met: respect for human rights, protection of civic space, independent oversight, and genuine community autonomy. Where these foundations are absent, as seen in several of the cities examined, expanding community policing may inadvertently legitimize coercive governance rather than challenge it.

The lesson for policymakers is that urban security in the coming decade will be shaped by whether cities choose to govern through trust or through fear. The recommendations outlined above offer practical pathways for ensuring that community policing remains on the side of trust.

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About the Author

Patrick Mutahi

Patrick Mutahi is a Kenyan researcher working at the intersection of security, human rights, and governance, with particular expertise in policing and security-sector governance. His work combines academic research, policy engagement, and practical programme development, with a strong focus on translating evidence into policy and institutional change.



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Predatory urbanization is sustained action by organized groups to grab land, evict (or threaten) residents, seize houses, illegally build, or corrupt planning processes in cities through the use or threat of violence.

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CHAPTER 7

PREDATORY URBANIZATION

URBAN LAND AND HOUSING AS TARGETS FOR ARMED GROUPS AND MAFIAS

By Antônio Sampaio

Urbanization is a powerful global trend affecting societies in ways that are still underappreciated by governments, development practitioners, and the general public. Urban expansion into peripheral lands and growing demand for land and housing inside cities leads to increased competition, with potentially destabilizing and violent consequences for states, people, and the climate.

The global urban area has been expanding steadily, and not always in ways people expect—such as around large cities. The global land area of towns and “semi-dense areas” (surrounding or suburban areas)¹ doubled between 1975 and 2020.² Urban area growth tends to be particularly rapid in low-income countries that are insufficiently prepared or resourced to face additional pressures on land governance and housing; UN-Habitat estimates city land in such countries will more than double between 2020 and 2070.³ This growing demand for (and occupation—formal or informal—of) urban land is reshaping rural areas too. For instance, a global study of cropland area between 2003 and 2019 showed that the building of residences, industries, and infrastructure was the second-largest driver of global cropland loss, responsible for 16 percent of total global cropland area loss—with urban sprawl accounting for 35 percent of the cropland loss in South Asia.⁴

Climate change increases pressure on urban land and housing markets, as one of its most well-documented effects is pushing rural populations to migrate to cities as their agricultural lifestyles are disrupted by droughts, floods or storms.⁵

Urban population growth amid poorly managed land-tenure systems leads to increased competition, price speculation, and severe housing shortages—turning urbanization into a source of intercommunity tensions and crime rather than a driver of development. In countries undergoing armed conflict, seizure of land and houses by armed groups is a revenue source and a tool for strengthening political control over cities and civilians. This was the case with the Islamic State during its control of several Iraqi and Syrian cities between 2013 and 2017, with property confiscation playing an important role in financing and rewarding its fighters as loot.⁶ After armed conflicts, governments’ inability—or unwillingness—to address land disputes can have cascading effects on other political and peacebuilding domains, such as reconciliation, electoral violence, and grievances that stoke the fires of renewed conflict.

A related—if lower intensity—type of conflict is linked to intercommunal tensions arising as cities expand rapidly and communities’ traditional claims or informal tenure over land are challenged.⁷ In areas with preexisting ethnic or social rifts, this can lead aggrieved groups resorting to finding militias or gangs for protection—such as in Nairobi, where land-lord-tenant grievances along ethnic lines have led to the involvement of violent organized gangs such as the Mungiki, a group that emerged as a youth militia and later morphed more into a violent criminal gang.⁸ Organized crime in real estate, illegal construction, and urban land grabs and corruption are even more widespread issues. As we will see in this chapter, this type of crime is a major source of insecurity even in some of the world’s largest democracies, such as Brazil and Kenya.

The impact of these urban land dynamics on communities is accompanied by local authoritarian behavior of mafias and violent actors, which impose rules and stifle civil society in the areas they seize. Vast urban areas, even inside large

cities of democratic countries, have populations whose claims to house and land are tied to mafias, gangs, or militias that impose exploitative conditions and threaten to evict or force residents to depend on their (often substandard) services and security.

Most of the cases in this chapter fit within these three broad types of armed groups: gangs, mafias, and militias. Definitions for these different groups vary, but broadly the chapter considers the following: gangs and mafias are both criminal organizations, but the latter tends to be less visible and operate behind the scenes with corrupt contacts among politicians and state agencies, whereas gangs tend to have a more visible presence with weapons and local illegal drug sales. The term “militia” contains many different definitions, from auxiliary forces linked to regular state militaries to local defense forces.⁹ Here, the term refers to nonstate armed groups claiming to provide protection to a certain community or to fight on behalf of a group, such as an ethnic group, clan or political party.

Toward a Common Conceptual Framework: Predatory Urbanization

Mafias, gangs, and militias are frequent features in media reports of urban violence, and a small but growing community of urban-violence experts has also devoted some attention to land and housing issues. But perhaps because the term “land” tends to evoke rural-agricultural issues, the role of armed groups in seizing or exploiting land has been more frequently studied in rural contexts than in urban ones.¹⁰ The vast evidence base available on the “global land rush”¹¹—large-scale land acquisitions for business purposes in agriculture, mining, or tourism—“has been largely blind to the fact that large-scale land investments will often trigger urbanization,” or, perhaps even more problematic, urbanization itself will take place at the expense of cities’ green or agricultural surroundings.¹²

When predatory actors such as militias, gangs, or mafias are documented in urban land and housing, there is also confusion about what to call the problem. One author has complained that Indian media portray a country beset by land and sand mafias but argue that these groups are “less criminal organizations than informal networks of public and private elites that use coercion to capture land rents.”¹³ A similar debate occurs in Brazil, where armed groups aggressively occupying urban land are widely called militias because the investigative journalist who first reported on it thought that was the word that best described its paramilitary ties to Rio de Janeiro’s military police forces.¹⁴ So what to call this problem, and is it even one coherent problem?

This chapter has been motivated by this confusion—the sense that despite abundant evidence of armed actors’ violent strategies to acquire urban land or build urban areas, the academic and policy worlds lack a common language to discuss and address it. An equally important confusion relates to policy responses, since policy communities are not always clear about who is responsible, if anyone, for preventing or tackling conflict and crime around urban land.

This policy ambiguity further exposes urban communities to human rights violations, threats, and actual violence by armed groups. It also occurs at a moment of increased pressures linked to global trends discussed in this compendium. Climate change has the most direct and urgent impact, especially through processes such as sea level rise and disruption of rural livelihoods, causing migration or displacement, either intraurban or rural to urban dislocation. C40, a city network focused on climate change, estimated that 8 million people will move to 10 of its member cities by 2050 because of climate change.¹⁵ This trend is already under way: In Bangladesh, climatic changes and increased storm activities have driven many rural residents to migrate, either temporarily or permanently, to large cities like Dhaka, where they are placed in situations of modern slavery, many women are forced into sex work, and almost all low-income migrants live in precarious accommodations.¹⁶ Conversely, the voracious appetite for urban land also drives climate change, as experts warn that “globally, urban land expansion is one of the primary drivers of habitat and biodiversity loss,” while “urbanisation’s role in the climate crisis is being overlooked.”¹⁷

The linkage of the urban land issue with authoritarianism is also impactful. Political controversy has been at the center of many European and North American cities when it comes to the reception of foreign migrants and refugees. Large cities with longstanding presence of international business, tourism, and trade often have more liberal views toward immigrants than national governments, leading to tensions. This has led to such moves by the US federal government, perceived by many urban residents as authoritarian, as the deployment of National Guard troops and threats to cut funding to cities that do not cooperate with federal anti-immigration crackdowns.¹⁸ In the United Kingdom, cities such as London have thrived largely due to their role as global hubs for business, tourism and a diverse workforce from all over the world, but right-wing parties have significantly increased their voting shares in less liberal corners of the country. The anti-immigration discourse affects refugees in temporary accommodations, who have been threatened and sometimes physically attacked. This shows how housing and land can be emotionally—and violently—tied to narratives of nativist belonging and exclusion of certain groups – often emerging outside of large liberal hubs but affecting those living there.¹⁹ These antiliberal views of urban spaces as exclusive to certain groups depending on immigration status is a historical contradiction, as cities—from the early Mesopotamian centers to multiple current US municipalities—have been shaped by external population flows. The anti-immigration narrative comes at a time when immigrants and low-income residents are also affected by waves of gentrification that favor economic elites and lead to pressures to relocate. These global trends risk imposing a divisive view of the urban space that clashes with large cities’ roles as meeting points and cosmopolitan centers.

In Global South settings, urban communities affected by the armed groups discussed in this chapter face another type of authoritarianism: gangs or militias exerting control over vital services (water, electricity, land) and enforcing rules over local—usually low-income—communities. This local power achieved by nonstate armed groups has been methodically documented by scholars in Latin America focused on “criminal governance,” which is the imposition of rules on urban communities by criminal groups.²⁰ Urban scholar Diane Davis has described a pattern of “fragmented sovereignty” in cities, with nonstate armed groups forming “alternative networks of coercion, allegiance, and reciprocity” that challenge traditional state-centered political organization.²¹ It is this local form of authoritarianism that we discuss here.

This chapter aims to connect the accounts and policy discussions on violent exploitation of urban land and housing occurring within individual cities and weave them into a public discussion. Although I am wary of adding a new concept for busy municipal officials and other policymakers to understand, it is vital to simplify the language around these violent practices so evidence can be collected in a systematic way and responses can be discussed across cities, countries, and regions. This chapter argues that groups such as Brazil’s militias, India’s and Italy’s land mafias, the Islamic State in Mosul, and ethnic militias or gangs in Nairobi, although vastly different in many of their goals and practices, engage in a specific category of action when it comes to exploiting urban land and housing in ways that deliberately harm communities—including threatening, evicting, using corruption to grab public or private land, and arbitrarily seizing properties.

I propose calling this behavior by armed groups and corrupt actors predatory urbanization, which conveys the deliberate use or threat of violence (coercion) to shape urban land and housing practices in exploitative ways that harm communities. This phenomenon is clearly separate from community-driven actions to settle on unoccupied urban space, for example, squatting or building informally in peripheries or slums due to lack of housing among the poor.

I define predatory urbanization as sustained action by organized groups to grab land, evict (or threaten) residents, seize houses, illegally build, or corrupt planning processes in cities through the use or threat of violence. The use of the word “sustained” restricts the definition to cases of repeated or systematic action over a period of time, as opposed to one-off episodes. The definition also refers to actions by “organized groups,” which separates this phenomenon from disputes between individuals fighting over property. This includes the actions of governments, such as now-deposed

Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and its land and housing policies that punished groups seen as sympathetic to opposition armed groups.²²

Starting with this important clarification on why we need to group certain urban land-related challenges into a policy-friendly concept, the chapter will proceed as follows: Part one surveys the evidence on conflicts and crime in urban land and housing, showing how the global urbanization process has exacerbated urban land challenges in various contexts. Part two will briefly survey the disparate responses from local and national governments and civil society, with an overarching—and slightly disheartening—finding that international debate on urban land challenges has almost universally sidelined issues of armed violence and organized crime. On a more positive note, the chapter will map some (nonexhaustive) promising policies and projects drawn from related practice areas and highlight how they can help reduce predatory practices in urban land.

The Many Faces of Predatory Urbanization

That the hunger for urban land and housing can encourage aggressive business practices among real estate entrepreneurs was abundantly illustrated in the global financial crisis of 2008, linked to financial bets on risky mortgages in the United States.²³ But in contexts of weak institutional structures and oversight mechanisms over urban expansion and construction—which tends to be the case in low-income settings affected by organized crime or transitioning from armed conflict—that hunger can combine aggressive market behavior with actual physical aggression, that is, armed violence by organized groups.

Urban land has become a “scarce and expensive commodity.”²⁴ Whereas rural land also faces increased demand for use related to food production, energy generation (through wind farms for example), mineral extraction, and more—to a great extent to supply growing urban populations—cities face specific challenges because of the concentration of that demand in compact areas and its highly informal aspect. This paves the way for conflicts and profiteering by illicit actors, including through the use of violence. In other words, the global rush for city land and housing has also been a violent process for many urban communities, affected by evictions, corruption, threats, extortion, and insecure tenure.

Predatory urbanization refers to a particular process of “production” of urban space—the process through which the built and social environments of cities take shape. Often this production is organized and directed by powerful actors, though their power often derives from sources other than the state's—usually weapons, coercion, and corruption. The latter method, corruption, indicates that the state is not removed from these practices but often participates either through the help of corrupt individuals or institutionalized practices of bribery and collusion between state agencies and mafias (as the chapter will explore in detail). This corruption underlines the pervasive impact of local authoritarianism, since it reduces the recourse residents have to report land grabs or reverse evictions by predatory actors, thereby strengthening armed groups' local power.

Armed Conflict

The value of urban land and housing for armed groups has been increasingly studied under the category of housing, land, and property (HLP), which one prominent article has described as a recent “innovation” in conflict financing, as armed groups after the Cold War have explored a variety of illegal pathways to self-fund.²⁵ More policy attention is advised in this area, as HLP significantly differs from more “famous” conflict-financing commodities such as minerals, in ways that make them even more attractive for conflict actors. For instance, whereas a batch of diamonds can be sold only once, land and housing continuously generate revenue for armed groups over time—for instance, through rent—and can be resold multiple times.²⁶

This has been particularly important for the Islamic State during its control of cities like Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, roughly between 2013 and 2017. The terrorist and insurgent group confiscated properties and profited from renting it or selling it, including through auctions. Renting in particular seems to have been an important recurrent source of revenue that chimed with the group's strategy to separate itself from foreign sources of funding vulnerable to sanctions or seizures in the international banking system, with one prominent Islamist extremist writer encouraging violent extremist groups to occupy facilities or land with economic value.²⁷ In Mosul alone, the estimated annual revenue from state-owned property that passed to the Islamic State when it conquered the city was \$15 million; this excludes private properties or land confiscated by the group.²⁸

Urban land and housing also have a nonmonetary value for armed groups, as they can be used to hand out property as in-kind benefits to fighters. The Islamic State granted houses confiscated from alleged "disbelievers" or "apostates" to fighters to live in with their families rent-free but not as owners.²⁹

In Somalia, the insurgent group al-Shabaab uses urban land in a different way that is also linked to the dual emotional and monetary value of property in cities. The group sets up mobile courts to resolve disputes between residents of the capital Mogadishu as a way of shoring up its claim to be a better administrator than the government, whose normal courts in the city are considered slow and prone to corruption. One of the most frequent issues heard by the mobile courts is land disputes in the city, where prices have risen considerably amid rural-to-urban migration and displacement flows as well as incomplete land registries, laying the ground for disputes, land grabs by powerful individuals, and unfair evictions.³⁰ Al-Shabaab courts are considered highly efficient on this, as the group threatens to kill those it judges to have occupied land or houses unlawfully, even in the capital, where its intelligence and terrorist cells operate despite the proximity to government and international armed forces.³¹ The group also "taxes" property construction in Mogadishu, sometimes up to 25 percent of the final value of the property.³²

Whereas armed conflict challenges such as these might seem far from the remit of urban development, planning, and regulation professionals, armed groups' ability to exploit land and housing is related to land tenure conflicts and insecurity over who owns which part of urban land. Ownership over valuable land, "especially in cities and towns," has been "at the heart" of the armed conflict in Somalia since the country's descent into anarchy in the early 1990s.³³ Insecurity of tenure and destroyed or incomplete land registries have formed the background for this contention, with clans and powerful individuals exploiting this urban (in)governance issue to lay competing claims over land in rapidly growing cities like Mogadishu, turning urban land into "flashpoints for violence."³⁴ More broadly, as Melanie Lombart argues, "the state's lack of ability to guarantee secure tenure at the household level may translate into a more generalised inability to address wider questions of urban conflict and violence," and conversely, land-tenure reform can be a powerful tool to promote reconciliation and trust in public institutions after conflict.³⁵

Intercommunal Conflict over Urban Land and Housing

Whereas armed conflicts place urban land and housing in the middle of clashes between rival actors, certain conflicts arise inside cities (or in its peripheries) because of disputes over valuable urban plots. Expansion of built-up urban areas increasingly encroaches on ancestral homes of certain communities, and when groups resort to evictions or political leverage to acquire control over land, conflict can turn violent.³⁶ Whereas intercommunal conflicts can involve long-standing legal claims to land, armed groups such as militias or gangs can intervene on the side of certain groups while also escalating the conflict for monetary or political control over urban areas.

This has been a pervasive problem in Nairobi, where some politicians have developed a tradition of stoking ethnic rivalries over land and favoring certain groups in exchange for votes from certain communities. In Mathare North, one of the city's major informal settlements, groups have resorted to using armed groups recruited from ethnic networks of

young men to intimidate and prevail over opposing groups. Landlords' use of force against tenants have also been seen as attacks by one ethnic group over another, especially as certain tribes tend to be more prevalent than others in land ownership.³⁷ In Kibera, another informal settlement, Nubians and members of the Kikuyu tribe have historically dominated ownership of land and rented it out to migrants, with the Luo community having become particularly numerous in the area. This inequality in land ownership and the power held by landlords over tenants has led to tensions, which in election times has been leveraged by politicians for votes and led to ethnic clashes.³⁸

A similar dynamic of land contestation leveraged by armed groups took place in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, during the height of intercommunal tensions in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The growth of the Pashtun community has increased competition for land with Urdu-speaking communities, with militias on each side supporting encroachment over unoccupied land and the conflicts that inevitably arise along ethnic lines.³⁹ Land grabbers have stoked those tensions by planting flags of ethnic political parties to strengthen one group's claim over areas, further stoking ethnic tensions.⁴⁰ Militias were also allied with land mafias to evict residents belonging to a rival group, which in turn resorted to their own militias, leading to a vicious cycle of violence with urban land and housing at its center. In a remarkable similarity to the Mogadishu example above, in Karachi, the Pakistani Taliban (which was strong at that time) capitalized on the issue to establish courts in nearby towns to hear complaints and pass judgement over urban land disputes.⁴¹

The case of Karachi is particularly illustrative of the ways political violence by militias, greed by land mafias, and ethnic conflicts can intertwine and reinforce cycles of armed violence. Community claims and need for land are not the source of predation; what is the source is the exploitation of such needs by armed groups for political or economic benefit, especially when such groups find weak institutions and regulations incapable of establishing secure tenure or cater to popular needs for housing and services.

Organized Crime

The role of organized crime in urban land and housing is even more pervasive and widespread than the previous two categories, potentially affecting a much wider set of cities. It is also more commonly studied, though unevenly. For example, due in part to media attention on the issue in both countries, Italy and India have well-documented evidence of mafias involved in grabbing land and illegal construction, while much less evidence is available for entire continents—the case of Africa. What is also less well understood when it comes to land and housing crime is that it goes beyond pure greed and places criminal groups in positions of power at the local level, be it through corrupt linkages to politics or through their role as local authoritarian figures governing many aspects of life in marginalized communities.

The example of Rio de Janeiro's feared militias shows the convergence of security and housing problems usually considered in isolation by policymaking departments. Militias emerged out of the demand for security and housing among low-income communities, especially recent migrants seeking jobs in Brazil's second-largest city. Between 1950 and 2000, for example, the population of the towns surrounding Rio's north and northwest areas expanded by 688 percent, much of it informal.⁴² The precarious conditions led to demand for informal or corrupt political actors to provide solutions by offering urban infrastructure and public transportation (such as unlicensed vans) in exchange for votes.⁴³ One such service in high demand was security, as this urban expansion took place at the same time as the drug gangs tied to cocaine trafficking were taking off. The militias evolved from local security rackets and evolved into profitable criminal businesses, especially land grabbing and illegal construction, leading to local authoritarian regimes and precarious living, including building collapses that killed dozens.⁴⁴ Such is the level of militias' involvement in the entire chain of urban development in poorly regulated areas of Rio—from grabbing of protected forested areas to illegal construction, sale of property, and control of service delivery to the population—that scholars have coined the term "militia-authored urbanism" to describe it.⁴⁵

Assessments of organized crime in land and property in Africa, for instance, estimate that these issues are “probably the principal founts of power (economic, political and social) for organized criminal networks.” On top of the significant impact on urban dwellers that are evicted or sold substandard housing and on lost state tax revenue, criminal land grabs are “welded together” to criminal involvement in urban infrastructure for water, sewage, and transportation, to mention just a few.⁴⁶ Although the evidence base varies wildly from country to country, in Kenya this has led to widespread practices of land grabbing in cities by shadowy networks with corrupt ties to powerful individuals, aided by exclusionary and opaque land governance and housing shortfall.⁴⁷ The resulting housing stock created by these corrupt mafia-like structures is low-quality, leading (similarly to the Brazil case) to multiple building collapses.⁴⁸ Kenya’s National Crime Research Centre has documented several modalities of land and housing crimes, including bribery of local officials, false advertisements to lure clients, pollution by dumping waste, and illegal and corrupt arrangements to provide water, sewage, and rubbish collection.⁴⁹

These examples from Africa and Latin America just scratch the surface of how organized crime lodges itself into urban land and housing markets in ways that defy siloed policy responses. This is also more than a single-market criminality, as control over urban land paves the way for ecosystems of illegal economies and local authority over the population. Residents who buy houses through mafia or militia groups end up dependent on them for service provision and security, as they are usually left out of formal government and legal processes. In Rio, for instance, residents who found out their houses had been built in flood-prone areas had limited options to sell and could not complain to local authorities, who were aligned with the militias.⁵⁰ These types of conundrums illustrate the intertwining of urban security and governance issues, requiring new ways of collaborating between policymakers and civil society. The options to respond to such challenges are the topic of the next section.

Incomplete Responses and Promising Approaches

The urban development community is well aware of the existence of conflicts around urban land tenure, expansion, or renewal, but the lack of specific mention of armed actors such as gangs, mafias, militias, or rebel groups by urban-focused policymakers, planners, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicates these issues are considered someone else’s problem. This is not to say that these complex challenges should fall entirely on the lap of local governments, planners, and urban development NGOs. Rather, the examples above indicate that the problem is multidimensional, with solutions involving land and housing policies alongside security policies, peacebuilding, governance reforms, and violence-prevention interventions.

The danger of treating housing as completely separate from security issues is illustrated by an episode that happened with me: Members of the Brazilian Ministry of Cities approached me during the 2010s, when I was working on violence prevention in Latin American cities, to seek advice for one of the Workers Party’s flagship policies at the time, the housing program called My House, My Life (Minha Casa Minha Vida). The program was successful in many senses, delivering houses or apartments for 10 million low-income Brazilians between 2009 and 2016.⁵¹ Despite being carefully planned in structural, financial, and social development terms, the program soon discovered it had overlooked the role of organized crime. Whereas low-income urban areas were also the ones most in need of housing investment, they were also the areas where criminal organizations were most active, and they quickly stepped in to expel the legitimate owners to resell the properties. By 2015, there were reports of similar situations in 16 Brazilian states.⁵²

This example shows the importance of considering matters of public security alongside planning and housing policies, but currently the two are siloed. As an article in *Land Use Policy* journal has stated, the political economy of land dispossession is much more complex than neoliberal capitalist forces and state-led evictions (which are analyzed much more frequently by urban experts) and includes corruption, land mafias, and other powerful actors.⁵³ Many studies cover

dispossession and displacement in urban areas, but these tend to be examined in terms of gentrification, neoliberal market processes, and major development projects. In the words of one author writing on militias in Medellín, Colombia, “the commodification of popular living spaces are not confined to urban renewal or integration policies, and include actors acting outside formal circuits.”⁵⁴ Two leading scholars on Italian mafia involvement in urban land markets echo this sense, observing that approaches to urban governance adopt a “positivistic view” that quietly dismisses criminal and violent practices as “insignificant anomalies.”⁵⁵ These apparently petty biases and preferences of bureaucratic agencies and technical professionals have a massive impact on likely millions of vulnerable urban dwellers worldwide and therefore should concern housing and land policies alongside the security and criminal justice sectors, preferably together.

An exception to the siloed-approaches problem greatly strengthens the point that urban development and governance can be and indeed have been applied in conjunction with peace and security programs. In postconflict settings, UN-Habitat and humanitarian agencies have increasingly encountered the problem of weakened land tenure, fragile urban governance institutions, and the urgency of addressing conflicted claims to land and housing among internally displaced persons, returnees, and rival socio-ethnic groups. The Syria conflict, part of a recent trend toward increasing overlap between armed conflict and cities,⁵⁶ has led multilateral agencies to publish best practices for urban infrastructure and housing recovery as part of an “Urban Recovery Framework.” The document recognizes, for instance, that “resolving HLP grievances and addressing HLP risks will be decisive for return and reintegration prospects,” which lead to approaches such as conducting conflict-sensitivity and risk-analysis assessments to embed housing and land-conflict concerns into reconstruction.⁵⁷ This is important because, as Alhakam Shaar argues in the case of Aleppo, the Syrian regime over the years used housing permits as political tools by withholding permits for certain groups and rewarding regime supporters, thus weaving urban housing into the structural issues that postconflict peacebuilding cannot afford to ignore.⁵⁸

This has been part of a shift in humanitarian practice in the past ten years that increasingly recognizes the link between urbanization and armed conflict, with agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) calling on responders to acknowledge the interconnected character of urban services. For instance, damage to houses or linked services such as water or electricity leads to “brain drain” as people seek shelter elsewhere, leading to shortages of doctors in hospitals and other essential services.⁵⁹ UN agencies have also used urban profiling to provide “holistic documentation” of needs for urban populations, including recently displaced communities, to identify opportunities for multisectorial interventions.⁶⁰

The humanitarian community’s growing attention to housing came as a gradual recognition by agencies responding on the ground, and the ICRC had a prominent role in that with its War in Cities campaign launched in 2016.⁶¹ But the responses framework is relatively underdeveloped in contexts outside of armed conflict or postconflict displacement settings. For instance, in Latin America there is recognition of the role of organized crime in evictions and land grab among displacement experts, but the availability of documented policy solutions and best practices is thin.⁶² Part of the problem is that approaches to organized crime (not just in Latin America but across the Global South) have been traditionally considered a police problem, and in recent years government responses have become increasingly militarized and incarceration-based in places such as El Salvador (which has inspired supporters in other Latin American countries). Despite this, there is still a strong sense among experts and practitioners in the violence-prevention field that institutional and governance improvements are key to promote public security in a holistic way—and housing and land are key components of any peaceful society.⁶³

Whereas the humanitarian and postconflict-recovery communities of practice have pioneered specific solutions, broader evidence applicable to a wider set of cities and countries affected by organized crime or more slow-burning community conflicts are still lacking. The lack of a common pool of lessons, evidence, best practices, and policy debate hampers

collaboration and cross-country (and cross-city) learning and innovation in policies to prevent or reduce crime and conflict around urban land and housing.

Further evidence could also help to unveil the specific vulnerabilities of historically vulnerable groups, such as women and the LGBTQ+ community. Households led by single mothers, for example, may face additional and urgent risks in cases of forced eviction, as homelessness comes with additional vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation and abuse by male-dominated state structures.

Land-conflict debates in general lack not only the focus on violent actors but also on cities. The International Land Coalition, for example, has produced a wonderful, 40-page toolkit on “effective actions against land grabbing” that nevertheless does not once mention the words “urban,” “city,” or even “town.” The latter is particularly surprising given that towns serve important roles as market hubs for agricultural economies.⁶⁴ The coalition’s interactive “land matrix,” comprising “7,117 concluded deals, covering over 50 million hectares of land,” has already been criticized for not even mentioning urban land acquisitions.⁶⁵ In summary, the policy challenge of violent actors disrupting urban land and housing markets has been severely lacking in international collaboration, learning, and even data collection. The following section lays out promising approaches inspired by existing policies that are sector-specific and usually lack reference to the actors behind predatory urbanization but that can be adapted to move the debate forward.

Promising Approaches

Although specific approaches targeting armed groups, mafias, or other predatory actors (in conjunction with urban land and housing governance and development) are rare, various policy or civil-society initiatives have addressed closely related issues, such as illegal construction, land registration, transparency in land deals, prevention of land grabs, and corruption. A table with specific examples of practices is included below, though many cases lack explicit reference to the contexts with armed groups or mafias (which the table addresses partially with suggested adaptations).

Oversight and accountability measures against illegal construction

The experience of Italy has illustrated the many challenges in preventing or reducing widespread corruption and *laissez-faire* approaches to illegal building practices. The policy of *condono*, or pardons for illegally constructed buildings, was implemented in 1985 as an extraordinary measure, but “tacit agreement” between building firms and local officials led to continued practices to circumvent regulations.⁶⁶ This led to more pardons in following decades. One of the flaws with this approach is that the pardons were supposed to be followed up by municipal programs to rehabilitate and provide infrastructure to affected areas, but financial incentives fell short of the costs involved, and smaller municipalities lacked qualified technical staff.⁶⁷

Experts have suggested that a potential way to address the problem of tacit agreement—or simply corruption—is for prosecutors at national and regional levels to increase their oversight over local building practices,⁶⁸ which would probably work best if done in partnership with local planning authorities. The lack of qualified technical professionals in smaller municipalities points to the need for partnerships—either between municipalities or between them and national government and potentially NGOs with technical expertise through, for example, task forces to identify and map areas most affected by illegal construction and “urban upgrading” policies—to address them. Another potential solution cited in the literature focuses on civil society: In the small town of Sarno, in Campania, residents set up festivals to promote community spirit while joining forces to renovate some public spaces such as farmsteads and children’s playgrounds.⁶⁹

Electronic imagery and machine learning techniques

The availability of data is obviously an important element to designing solutions to illegal buildings. One technique being discussed is the use of satellite imagery to observe construction activity over time, which planners and other local

authorities can use to identify unauthorized construction.⁷⁰ A potentially even more accurate technique involves aerial drones equipped with high-resolution cameras, which can identify patterns such as roofs used by illegal builders, though such patterns vary according to social contexts and need to be adapted to new localities. In Taiwan, this approach has been tested alongside deep learning algorithms known as convolutional neural networks to speed up image evaluation for signs of illegal roofing practices, leading to 96 percent accuracy in a test.⁷¹

Such technology-based approaches, while promising for aiding with the technical challenges of acquiring concrete evidence, have the drawback of not being able to do much against the deep-rooted political dynamics on the ground. In many Global South (and some northern settings such as Italy), responses to illegal building are not so much hampered by lack of knowledge of where they take place but by the sheer power or violence wielded by armed groups or mafias, or by corrupt tacit agreement as discussed above. But machine learning and high-resolution aerial or satellite imagery can be a powerful aide for acquiring evidence that supports deeper interventions that address urban governance and institutional approaches.

Community-based organizations and residents have had a demonstrated role in helping build data in informal settlements, where simple maps can be challenging to come by given the areas' informal and constantly evolving character. Kibera, in Nairobi, is one such community. There a group of young residents initiated the Map Kibera project, based on community-led data collection that was later recognized as having increased trust among members of a historically marginalized community.⁷² NGOs in Brazil have also developed guidelines for informal settlement residents across the country to conduct "popular mapping," described as a "political act" that furthers the fight for better policies and protection of rights.⁷³

Tackling corruption in land markets

Although not always addressing issues of mafia and organized criminal groups explicitly, think tanks such as Transparency International (TI) have collected best practices to tackle corruption in urban land and housing. As implied in its name, TI emphasizes transparency and accountability in land registries and municipal administration of land regulations and practices. Local and national governments should work to close regulatory gaps in case of old or complex laws governing land acquisition, including harmonizing them with environmental regulations to avoid contradictions. Another recommendation is making information widely accessible, especially for civil society groups to monitor decision-making and planning processes, accompanied by integrity risk assessment of the land sector that can reveal compliance loopholes where further anticorruption controls can be built specifically with land markets in sight.⁷⁴

Addressing land issues, whether related to corruption or broader disputes, also intertwines with justice and dispute-resolution mechanisms. The case of Somalia's al-Shabaab courts above illustrates how important land-dispute resolution and perceived corruption are for political stability. In fact, land disputes tend to "constitute a disproportionately high percentage of court cases" in low-income countries.⁷⁵ Recommendations to solve slow or inefficient land justice systems involve better training judges and prosecutors in land-tenure matters, establishing specialized courts for land cases, and forming task forces by hiring retired judges to clear cases backlog.⁷⁶

Addressing housing, land, and property rights in situations of displacement

As mentioned above, multilateral organizations such as the ICRC and UN-Habitat have greatly increased their focus on HLP rights issues in situations of displacement, especially those transitioning from armed conflict. Although these examples tend to be tailored to a specific set of contexts affected by civil or interstate wars, many lessons and programs carry potential applicability for other contexts.

One overarching finding is that local governments are crucial actors to map urban land and housing issues and to coordinate solutions—but they are sometimes left out of humanitarian or aid projects designed with national authorities in mind. Therefore, "local governments and traditional authorities should be capacitated and supported in their role"

of mediating land disputes, enforcing property laws, and providing associated public services.⁷⁷ This finding logically indicates the potential for nonstatutory mediation processes—dispute-resolution mechanisms mediated by a neutral third party without having to resort to the formal justice system—supported by local governments and operationalized by civil society organizations.

More-specific recommendations include facilitating access of displaced populations to services that tend to be difficult for those without formal or permanent housing, including legal advice, credit, and protection against eviction—especially for women, who are particularly vulnerable to exclusionary practices in male-dominated bureaucracies.⁷⁸

H2 Policy Options to Address Predatory Urbanization

Promising approach	Originating policy area	Application for predatory urbanization contexts	Further adaptation needed
Forming transitional justice mechanisms or specialized courts to clear backlog of HLP cases (an example is the UN-facilitated property restitution agencies in Kosovo after the 1998–99 war). ⁷⁹	Land dispute resolution	Can help provide legal clarity for those evicted or deceived by predatory groups.	Addressing obstacles to enforcement (armed groups or mafias likely to resist).
Simplifying laws and closing regulatory loopholes in land markets. ⁸⁰	Anticorruption	Can dissuade and reduce leeway for corrupt manipulation of legal loopholes.	Approach can be highly effective in tackling elite corruption, but requires political will; implies problems in enforcement in areas affected by violent mafias.
Reform or creation of well-funded public institutions responsible for formalizing property ownership (such as the commission for the formalization of informal properties in Peru). ⁸¹	Insecurity of tenure	Strong institutions dedicated to HLP can have the technical knowledge and political capital to galvanize cooperation between departments, including policing, justice, and other security mechanisms in HLP policies.	Strong local institutions should be accompanied by a more explicit focus on reducing or preventing predatory actors such as mafias or militias from undermining HLP in marginalized urban areas.

Providing collective land titles to communities (instead of individuals), informed by traditional land uses (such as the Baan Mankong program in Thailand, which issued collective land titles in consultation with communities, leading to increased homeowner investment). ⁸²	Insecurity of tenure	Can provide land titles in contexts where informal land ownership is difficult to reconcile with modern legal tenure.	Collective ownership may still be vulnerable to land grab or evictions by violent actors.
Area-based assessments and urban profiles of needs of specific neighborhoods or towns (implemented by UN-Habitat in several Syrian cities given the civil war's comprehensive damage across the urban system). ⁸³	Urban displacement	Can reveal complex interlinkages of urban governance and security needs in specific areas.	Without collaboration between urban experts and security authorities, urban profiles may lack solutions to predatory actors' presence.
Planning (and building) urban extensions to cities to accommodate inflows of migrants or displaced populations (as done by local and international partners in Somaliland). ⁸⁴	Urban displacement	Building essentially new (if small) settlements close to large cities can take communities away from areas under control of armed groups or mafias while keeping communities within commuting distance to jobs in cities.	Building "extensions" or new areas may be more feasible in situations of (temporary) displacement than in massive informal settlements; rule of law and institutions in new areas are essential to guarantee predatory actors don't migrate alongside residents.
Consultations among community leaders, NGOs, and residents' associations to discuss alternatives to eviction from informal housing, potentially including government actors. ⁸⁵	Insecurity of tenure	Civil society actors contain a wealth of granular information on predatory groups' activities and may help governments develop feasible policies to formalize tenure, avoid evictions, and—if done in collaboration with security authorities—weaken armed groups' territorial control.	Governments have adopted siloed approaches, especially because agencies responsible for public security and land tenure rarely talk to each other; discretion during dialogues is necessary to protect participants from retaliation.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued for a more consistent approach and unified language to identify deliberate action by organized groups to evict, grab land, illegally build, and conduct violence related to housing or land in cities. The current approach by governments, civil society, NGOs, and the expert communities is extremely fragmented, with similar challenges being addressed in completely separate ways—and with potentially useful solutions being completely ignored because of policy siloes. The chapter has suggested the conceptual framework of predatory urbanization to designate varied instances of predatory actors in contexts affected by armed conflict, intercommunal conflict, and organized crime. It has defined it as sustained action by organized groups to grab land, evict residents, seize houses, illegally build, or corrupt planning processes in cities, through use or threat of violence. This derives from a concrete sense of policy confusion and oversight, illustrated above by examples such as naming confusion of India's land "mafias" or lack of security-development collaboration in Brazil's housing program.

The scarcity of research on these issues hampers progress on solutions. As the chapter has frequently emphasized, communities of practice and policymakers lack a common language to discuss issues such as intercommunal conflicts around land, illegal construction, corruption, and gang-driven evictions alongside urban planning and development. More research on predatory urbanization through academia, think tanks, and NGOs can highlight points in common between different policy areas and geographies that currently work separately.

The chapter has also highlighted the effect of predatory urbanization in local shifts toward authoritarianism, in which militias, mafias, gangs, or corrupt political figures undermine the urbanity or plurality of cities. Militias in Rio de Janeiro or Nairobi have strengthened their control by using grievances around land tenure or housing scarcity to claim to be community protectors. Writing on Karachi, Laurent Gayer describes how the desire among some sectors for a cosmopolitan spirit for Pakistan's largest city was marred by ethnic militias and mafias clashing over land, drugs, and arms.⁸⁶ In the Global North, economically developed countries such as Italy see mafias and corrupt networks influence urban development and public spaces that are on paper the remit of public democratic processes. Tackling predatory urbanization is therefore a critical step to achieve not only safer but more politically stable and responsive cities.

The chapter's second part identified challenges and approaches to tackle predatory urbanization. Some of the most promising approaches are:

- Simplifying laws and closing regulatory loopholes in land markets.
- Reforming or creating public agencies tasked with formalizing property ownership.
- Issuing collective land titles to communities, which can increase residents' tenure security and investment in their buildings and communities.
- Developing area-based assessments and urban profiles that integrate housing needs with other areas, such as infrastructure bottlenecks, basic service provision, and public security issues like criminal violence.
- Establishing regular and institutionalized community consultation mechanisms on land tenure and codevelopment of alternatives to eviction between governments, civil society, and law enforcement.

One overarching challenge is the strongly different cultures of urban development (broadly conceived) and public security communities of practice. For instance, security policies have often defaulted to incarceration- and eviction-based approaches, with repressive antigang policies in Central America currently gaining particular momentum following mass incarceration policies in El Salvador.⁸⁷ It is certainly a challenge in some contexts to bring these two massively different

worlds together into a cooperative approach. Hence the importance of increasing the evidence base and harmonizing definitions for civil society, journalists, national policymakers, and local authorities to monitor, discuss, and devise solutions through global or regional cooperation frameworks. City networks can help break these silos.

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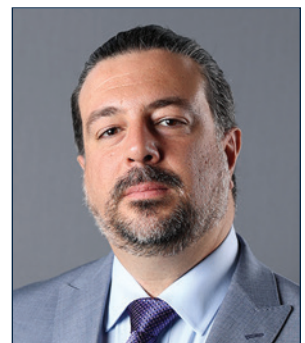
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About the Author

Antônio Sampaio

Antônio Sampaio is a researcher with over 15 years’ experience on urban violence, violence prevention, and security policies. He worked for close to a decade at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and was Thematic Lead for Cities & Illicit Economies at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). He has also consulted on peace, security, conflict prevention and climate issues for the United Nations’ Climate Security Mechanism, Open Society Foundations, NATO and other international organisations. Antônio has published widely in peer-reviewed journals and popular outlets such as *Foreign Policy* and *The Washington Post*. He has conducted field research in Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Brazil. He is currently pursuing a PhD at the School of Security Studies at King’s College London.



“ 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. (Rouleau 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.

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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>.



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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.