

The Urban Penalty: New Threats, Old Fears

September 11, 2001 was a turning point for how we view the world around us. Our reality is that we can no longer presume we are protected from danger, particularly if we live in cities. Poverty, underdevelopment and politically-induced fragile or anarchic states have created fertile conditions for new and old threats to our daily security.

The world's cities - and the people who live in them - have become lightning rods for international terrorism, transnational crime and increasingly violent lawlessness. Sharpened by fear and experience, our vulnerability has forced us to change the way we think and live.

Terrorism inflicts a devastating financial, physical and psychological toll on cities. New York City lost an estimated \$110 billion in infrastructure, buildings, jobs and other assets in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks. The aftershock spread wide. Global gross domestic product (GDP) dipped by 0.8% and some 10 million more people joined the ranks of the world's poor.

- Urban residents have also become hostage to crime, often of a violent nature.
- An estimated 60% of people living in North American and European cities and 70% of city residents in Latin American and African cities have been a victim of crime over the past five years.
- Violence occurs in urban crime in about 25-30% of incidents. Women, especially in developing countries, are twice as likely to be subjected to aggression than men.

Mounting evidence suggests that crime and violence are rooted in neglect rather than the condition of being poor. Criminality flourishes in cities where there is a stark discrepancy between rich and poor and where policing, judicial and civil society systems have broken down through corrupt or weak governance. Urban landscapes, rather than rural areas, lay bare the inequalities between the well-off and the dispossessed. Homicide rates, a proxy indicator for violent crime, are high in Latin American and African cities.

The urban poor bear the brunt of the new wave of lawlessness. Expenditure for protecting cities against terrorism is being offset against programs to improve the quality of life of the urban poor. The aftermath of crime has a greater effect on them too. Slum dwellers have no safety nets such as insurance and savings to replace stolen goods. Urban poor surveyed by UN-HABITAT in Johannesburg, Nairobi and other cities cited insecurity as being of equal concern alongside hunger, unemployment and drinking from a contaminated water supply.

UN-HABITAT considers three factors in the urban mix to be key contributors to crime, lawlessness and civil unrest.

- Economic stagnation
- A high proportion of youth in the demographic profile
- Sudden bursts of population growth through urban drift

During the 1990s, countries with urban population growth rates greater than 4% a year were twice as likely to experience civil conflict than those where urban growth was more paced. Youth whose expectations are not met as a result of poorly performing national economies often express their frustration through lawless behaviour. This is compounded when cities can no longer attract investment. Crime robs cities of the competitive edge in the global marketplace. Corporations are unlikely to invest in cities where their assets run a high risk of being stolen or destroyed.

There is a clear link between unemployment amongst youth and their rate of increasingly violent delinquency. An estimated 88 million young people were without work in 2003, accounting for nearly half of the world's jobless. A young labour force that fails to be integrated into the formal economy also jeopardises political stability.

The three ingredients for violence conjoin when there is migration into cities to escape rural poverty or fighting. When people of varied ethnic, political and religious backgrounds rub shoulders in overcrowded low-income neighborhoods, animosities explode into civil riot or even, as is the case in Mogadishu, unrelieved urban warfare. When Hindu militants destroyed a 16th century mosque in the small Indian town of Ayodhya, riots ensued hundreds of kilometres away in Mumbai, Calcutta, Ahmedabad and New Delhi. Nearly all of those who were killed lived in one of those cities.

Urban insecurity compounds vulnerability and social exclusion amongst slum dwellers. The poorer neighbourhoods are isolated and stigmatised as refuges for criminals. Surveys conducted by UN-HABITAT and its partners show that slum dwellers suffer a far higher incidence of criminal attacks than higher-income residents. In cities of the developed world, discriminatory policing and draconian immigration laws to counter the terrorism threat also polarise communities.

High levels of urban insecurity change the face of a city for the worse. Around the world the wealthy have created an architecture of fear by retreating behind fortified residential enclaves. Yet gated communities run counter to the fundamental principles of sustainable urban development. They are major consumers of available land and are wasteful consumers of resources such as land, water and electricity. In Mexico's Guadalajara, enclosed communities use 10% of the land to house 2% of the population. Even if gated communities are accepted as a legitimate option for those who can afford them, it is important to recognize that they pose new urban planning problems and accentuate existing ones.

This is a UN-HABITAT Feature/Backgrounder, please feel free to publish or quote from this article provided UN-HABITAT is given credit. Suitable photographs are available on our website. For further information, please contact: Mr. Sharad Shankardass, Spokesperson, or Ms. Zahra Hassan, Press & Media Liaison, Press & Media Relations Unit, Tel: (254 2) 7623153/7623151, Fax: (254 2) 7624060, E-mail: habitat.press@unhabitat.org, Website: www.unhabitat.org. SOWC/06/07/B/Penalty7