



UN-HABITAT

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Backgrounder 1

Crime and violence in relation to youth

Crime and violence have a profound impact on human development and the economic costs, particularly for developing countries, can be very high. Violence destroys lives and livelihoods, breeds insecurity, fear and terror, and exacerbates social exclusion. It imposes enormous costs to individuals, their communities and to the State. Armed violence closes schools, empties markets, burdens health services, destroys families and weakens the rule of law. In crises situations, armed violence prevents humanitarian assistance from reaching people in need. Armed violence kills, directly and indirectly, hundreds of thousands of people each year and injures countless others, often with lifelong consequences.

Socio-economic inequality and the lack of opportunities for social advancement and employment are some of the root causes of crime and violence. Children and youth from disadvantaged families all over the world are particularly vulnerable to falling prey to criminal networks. Of the estimated 1 billion people living in slums and inner cities, more than half are comprised of youth under the age of 25, and 40 percent are estimated to be under the age of 19. They are the primary victims of social exclusion through unemployment and lack of access to health and education.

The living conditions in slums, characterized by inadequate shelter and related infrastructure and services, are further compounded by the lack of physical space and social facilities for poor urban youth to develop themselves physically, mentally and emotionally. Faced by the challenges of daily survival, the lure of the quick rewards offered by drugs and crime, ranging from petty crime to sophisticated and organised crime, often prove more attractive. Despite this potentially explosive situation, the issues of urban youth living in slums and inner cities are not only largely absent in public policies, urban youth are often perceived by public authorities as a problem rather than a part of any effective solutions.

Living free from violence is a basic human right and whilst much has been done to improve standards of policing, not enough emphasis is placed on community activism against crime, including the issues of fear and insecurity that too often result in the abandonment of the public spaces leading to a vicious cycle where perceptions of insecurity feed reality.

The international community recognises that youth have a critical and active role to play in designing safer communities and in implementing strategies that address crime and violence. Children, boys and girls, are particularly vulnerable to crime and violence both as victims and perpetrators, but they are also important resources in finding effective solutions. Government policies must involve children and youth as key stakeholders in their respective communities.

The use of popular forms of expression to engage children and youth is essential in bringing out the creativity, insights and thoughts of young people in finding solutions to violence and insecurity in their respective neighbourhoods. This creativity however is often suppressed by city policies which often refer to various forms of street art and writing as vandalism. Over the last two decades many cities have stepped up anti-graffiti hyperbole in local papers, enforced aggressive anti-graffiti policies to enhance public decency and order. Many of these policies do not work and have pushed urban youth to go further "underground" to vent their frustrations. In this respect, urban planning and management policies and strategies need to pay greater attention to the needs of youth and to providing them with an effective voice in decisions affecting their livelihoods.



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