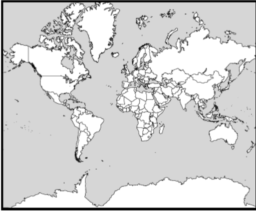

# Urban violence: a guide to the literature

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*SUMMARY: This review of literature on urban violence does not attempt to be comprehensive. Rather, its objective is to outline some of the key ideas regarding the manifestations of urban violence that have emerged from recent literature, and to explore these ideas in the context of examples from the South. The review draws on a typology that distinguishes between political, institutional, economic and social violence, and it highlights the degree to which these different categories overlap and converge in such phenomena as the drug trade, informal justice and youth gangs. It stresses the importance of macro-level structural forces and points to how various influences (including certain development models) intersect with local conditions to stimulate and shape violence.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

URBAN VIOLENCE HAS reached unprecedented levels in many cities of the South, and is increasingly seen as one of the most portentous threats to development on a local, national and international scale. While violence is not unique to urban areas, nor obviously to the South, the often challenging economic, social and political environment of many cities increases the rate, intensity and impact of violence there. The urban poor have gained unfortunate prominence as the principal victims of violence, and are also frequently held responsible for its perpetration.

There now exists a substantial amount of literature, emanating from a wide range of disciplines, on every aspect of violence. While the magnitude and diversity of work is a reflection of the multifaceted causes and effects of violence, there remain, as McIlwaine (1999) points out, few links between the different disciplinary approaches. It would be an impossible task in one short paper to catalogue this vast array of literature on various facets of violence; and it makes little sense merely to repeat existing reviews. Rather, the aim of this guide is to outline some key ideas that have emerged from recent literature concerning the various manifestations of urban violence, and to explore these ideas through particular examples from different regions of the South.(1)

1. There is somewhat of a bias towards Latin America and South Africa in this review, largely due to the prolific theoretical and empirical output of the many scholars specializing in the study of violence in these contexts.

## II. THE INCREASING MAGNITUDE OF URBAN VIOLENCE

THE PERMEATION OF violence into daily life is becoming an ever more

common reality in many countries in the South.[2] Variously referred to as "endemic", "common", or even "unbound" violence (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004), this "everyday violence" (*ibid.*) is not unique to urban areas, but escalating urban violence in particular is increasingly discussed in these terms.

This increasing violence is related to the complex social, economic, political and institutional processes that help to make violence a prevalent means of resolving conflict and gaining power. This, in turn, is related to the existence and exacerbation of so-called "cultures of violence". The trend is characterized, furthermore, by an increased blurring of the lines between different types of violence and, accordingly, between the actors involved in its perpetration (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004). The diversity and wide scope of this contemporary violence has led to it being seen as the "democratization" of violence (see Rodgers, 2003b), resulting in "endemic fear and insecurity" (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004), or "societies of fear" (see Koonings and Kruit, 1999). Most often associated with countries that have recently undergone political transformation, or with those currently in transition, increasingly arbitrary and random violence has significant effects both in terms of insecurity and in terms of the perpetuation of violence as a means of expression and defence. As Simpson (1993[3]) suggests in the case of South Africa:

"*...the immediate result of [...] violence of this sort is that it further entrenches widespread feelings of insecurity and fear, which in turn often lead to forms of violence which are rationalized as being defensive in nature.*"

Yet, while the societal effects of such a climate of insecurity reach far beyond urban areas, this "democratization" of violence is imperfect in that some sections of the population generally face greater risk than others. At a general level, it is in low-income urban areas that everyday violence is most prolific, and within these areas some social groups are more at risk from certain types of violence than others. Briceño-León and Zubillaga (2002) report, for instance, that the homicide rate is several times higher in the lower-income districts of Rio de Janeiro than in the city's middle-class and tourist areas, with respective rates of 177, 59 and 38 per 100,000. Data from El Salvador, furthermore, indicate that a young man is ten times more likely to be murdered than a young woman (Cruz and Beltrán, 2000). Yet, in South Africa, it is women who are at greater risk of being the target of violence (Vogelman and Lewis, 1993; Simpson, 1992). A useful resource that illustrates both the extent of different types of violence and the cultural views of violence, is the 1996 ACTIVA study, carried out by PAHO, which includes data from seven Latin American cities.[4]

Before exploring the proliferation of some of these specific (yet interrelated) types of violence in different contexts, it is pertinent to mention a particular form of violence that is common throughout urban areas in the South, and which is also significant in the production of urban violence in particular.

### a. Poverty, inequality and exclusion: "structural" violence as a trigger for urban violence

The now largely accepted argument that deprivation is itself a form of violence gained prominence with John Galtung's (1991) work on "structural violence", which extends understandings of violence to include psychological hurt and, in turn, alienation, repression and deprivation (see McIlwaine, 1999). In urban contexts, it is deprivation as *inequality* that

2. Even in Asia, a region with relatively low levels of violent crime (and hence little research interest to date), urban violence is increasing such that the ADB is currently undertaking a study into the link between urban violence, poverty and ineffective governance.

3. For this and other references where the author has not included page numbers, this is because the documents were accessed online.

4. See the articles in *Pan American Journal of Public Health: Special Issue on Violence*, Vol 5, No 4/5 (1999), especially Cruz (1999a and b).

is the most important form of structural violence, and also that which relates most significantly to the emergence of everyday reactionary violence.[5] Deprivation in this sense includes not only differences in income but also the lack of access to basic social services, the lack of universal state security protection, along with the severe corruption, inefficiency and brutality that generally hit the poor hardest, and the lack of social cohesion (Vanderschueren, 1996). It is argued that this "structural violence" creates "reactive violence" – be it criminal or political – in response (Briceño-León and Zubillaga, 2002). As Vanderschueren (1996) argues, in situations of widespread and severe inequality, the urban poor are undervalued and marginalized, and their daily living conditions heighten the potential for the emergence of conflict, crime or violence. Simpson (1993) also notes, in the context of South Africa, that poor social and economic conditions provide the foundation for pervasive social, political and economic violence. Various manifestations of this "reactive" violence are explored in following sections. In particular, youth gangs could be seen as an example of the potential effects of multi-level structural violence (see below).

5. Thus, poverty itself is *not* a cause of urban violence. Rather, the exclusionary processes active in the *unequal* distribution of resources in urban contexts throughout the South have a strong impact on violence levels (see Fajnzylber et al., 2002; Vanderschueren, 1996). More specifically, some qualitative work points to a lack of work as being a significant trigger for violence (see, for example, Moser and Holland, 1997 on Jamaica; Moser and McIlwaine, 2004 on Colombia and Guatemala), although the causal relationship is contested (see, for example, Tedesco, 2000, 2002; Hojman, 2002).

## III. EXPLORING URBAN VIOLENCE

THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS discuss the most significant manifestations of urban violence to have emerged from recent research literature, structured loosely according to the categorization developed by Moser and McIlwaine (2004), and outlined in the introduction to this special issue. This typology distinguishes between political/institutional, economic and social violence, identified according to the main motivation behind the use of violence, while also noting the links between different types of violence (see also Moser et al., 2000; Moser and Winton, 2002). Thus, the issues described here are by no means isolated, but are strongly connected in the perpetration of violence in urban areas.

### a. The state and the normalization of political violence

#### The legacy of political repression

Over recent decades, many developing countries have been subject to intense political conflict and/or authoritarian political regimes. Notwithstanding significant contextual differences, it is possible to identify some major repercussions of sustained state repression.

First, the state has an important influence on cultural constructions of violence. Much has been written on the so-called "normalization" of violence, particularly in the Latin American context. Especially useful and insightful in this regard are the comprehensive accounts of violent legacies throughout the region in the book *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America* (Koonings and Kruijt, 1999), which trace the roots of violence in different contexts, and question the problematic co-existence of violence and democracy. Cruz (1999a) discusses the psychosocial impacts of violence in San Salvador, suggesting that the normalization of violence requires a system of norms, values or attitudes which allow, or even stimulate, the use of violence to resolve any conflict or relation with another person. This value system may pervade behaviour in all spheres of life. Similarly, it is argued that the legacy of apartheid has bequeathed to South Africa a violence which has "…*become normative rather than deviant*",

and which is "...*quite easily visible across the entire political spectrum*" (Simpson, 1993; see also Chabedi, 2003).

Second, many newly democratic states have not successfully managed to reform the police and judiciary (see Pereira, 2001). As Rodgers (2003b: 113) argues in the context of Latin America, there has been no systematic dismantling of past institutional structures of terror and oppression, and so no "...*renewal of the institutional base of Latin American social life*." So we see a continuation of the fear and insecurity of the past, but in the context of a new era of "post-authoritarian violence". With states lacking the institutional means to resolve social conflicts democratically, urban violence threatens governability and democratic consolidation. In such a situation, violence is no longer the preserve of the traditionally powerful, but increasingly appears "...*as an option for a multitude of actors in pursuit of all kinds of goals*" (Kruijt and Koonings, 1999: 11). Overall, sustained political violence significantly contributes to the normalization of violence, as does the related inability of the state to provide legitimate institutional control of violence.

Armed conflict in particular has further impacts in relation to continuing violence. Demobilized ex-combatants, for instance, have in some cases formed armed bands which have been identified as key actors in armed organized crime across, for example, South Africa and many countries in Latin America. As Simpson (1997) argues in the case of South Africa, "...*demobilization does not equal demilitarization*", and unless viable alternatives are offered, these groups are not likely to abandon their militarized interventions.

Armed conflict also releases a wealth of firearms into general circulation. For example, World Vision states in the 2002 report *Faces of Violence* that, in El Salvador, 1.5 million weapons are now believed to be in private hands, with only one-third being legally registered. This has contributed to what Kruijt and Koonings (1999: 15) call the "...*mass production and consumption*" of violence. It has also been reported by Chabedi (2003) that violence in South Africa has been compounded by the number of guns available from neighbouring Mozambique since the end of the conflict there. Rather than being a cause of violence, the availability of firearms is seen to *promote* the use of violence, and certainly to increase its fatality.

The use of firearms is also connected to some degree of approval of their possession and use, which is linked to failures of formal state security. For example, the ACTIVA survey found that 49 per cent of respondents in El Salvador were in favour of their neighbours arming themselves to combat delinquency (Cruz and Beltrán, 2000). Approval of firearm use is also related to the normalization of violence described above. Similarly, the development of a "gun culture" makes weapons valuable not only for defence (since your assailant is also likely to be armed), but also for status and symbolic power. As one male interviewee in Chabedi's (2003: 367) research in Soweto, South Africa, says:

"...*people must know that I am around, that I am capable of returning fire with fire. Yes, that's how it is in Soweto. If you want to last be sure you're the first to blast. That's why I'm armed. That's how we live.*"

### Contemporary political violence

Emphasizing the importance of political violence as a legacy is not to suggest that political violence is itself not part of everyday urban violence. To the contrary, political violence continues in both overt and covert form in many urban contexts, with the latter largely the result of state collusion with other violent institutions (see below). Overt political violence may

be either a continuation and/or transformation of past violence.

For example, Taylor (2002) argues that post-apartheid political violence in KwaZulu–Natal, South Africa, is broadly the result of ongoing political divisions, a failure to confront past wartime divisions and their legacy, and the corruption and *politicization* of security services and the judicial system (see below). This has given space to (or even encouraged) a spiral of political revenge and retribution, which has resulted in the death of approximately 2,000 people in the region since the first democratic elections were held in 1994.

In contrast, Duncan and Woolcock (2003) note that, while Jamaica has been a democracy for many decades since independence, it is neither "cohesive" nor "democratic", and indeed that the political system in Jamaica lends itself to fierce inter-group power struggles in urban communities. They find that many poor communities in Kingston are subject to strict clientelism and "political tribalism" by the two dominant political parties, whereby "*…competing groups in Jamaica are killing one another for control of the state, and with it its corresponding prestige, patronage and power*." (ibid.: 34)

Broadly, as a consequence of political violence, cultural constructions of violence as normal have been maintained and transformed in a range of contemporary urban contexts, with the result that an increasingly complex web of institutions, groups and individuals is involved in the perpetration of everyday violence.

## b. Power struggles and complicity in institutional violence

A major outcome of the kind of state inefficiency outlined above is the fight to fill emerging institutional power vacuums. Thus, one of the most significant aspects of urban violence is the range of different types of groups involved in violence for this purpose, and the collusion and conflict between these different groups (see Moser and McIlwaine, 2004).[6] A number of state, private, civic and criminal groups and institutions in many cities in the South are involved both in fighting for social, economic and political power within communities – so-called parallel power systems – but also at times uniting in the commission of certain violent acts. Particularly significant is the resultant merging of different types of violence, which leads Pecaut (1999), for example, to suggest that the most significant development in Colombian violence has been the manner in which politically motivated conflict has increasingly merged with other types of crime and violence. Indeed, despite ongoing political unrest, only 15 per cent of homicides in Colombia are politically or ideologically motivated (Rodgers, 2003b). What emerges in these contexts is a multifarious network of (increasingly indistinguishable) violent actors, who severely affect the communities in which they function.

One example of institutional collaboration in the commission of violence is the recent spate of urban terror attacks in South Africa, where the blurring of boundaries between different institutions makes the motives of the attacks and their perpetrators equally elusive (Box 1). Interesting in terms of the dynamics of violence, is the argument of the leader of the group "Qibla" that there are three types of violence: institutionalized violence used by governments; criminal violence; and revolutionary violence. The latter, he argued, was being used to eliminate the former two, and was seen as defensive, based on the unacceptable crime situation (Hough, 2000; see below on informal justice).

6. State inefficiency is also both exploited and made worse through the corruption of state officials. In particular, the complicity of police officers and other state actors in organized crime is widely reported. This makes attempts to reduce the associated violence even more challenging, and also further reduces public confidence in state institutions. A public opinion poll in Brazil in 1996, for example, showed that 88 per cent of respondents thought that the police were involved in organized crime (World Vision, 2002).

| Box 1: | Vigilante terrorism: PAGAD, South Africa |
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The group "People Against Gangsterism and Drugs" (PAGAD) was set up in South Africa in 1995 with the aim of creating a collective force against the spread of drug and gang crime. It has since been linked to a number of incidents of urban terrorism, including drive-by shootings and petrol-bomb and hand-grenade attacks against alleged drug dealers and gangsters, as well as attacks against police stations. It is increasingly anti-state, ostensibly due to frustration with the government's inability to combat drugs and crime. Another organization, Qibla, was founded in the 1980s and, at the same time, promoted an Islamic revolution in South Africa. It is thought by some to be the armed faction of PAGAD, and part of "Muslims Against Global Oppression" (MAGO).

Urban terror such as this has been described as a cross between crime and insurgency, but the line between the two is impossible to draw. A continuum of formal and informal institutions is involved in such acts, both directly and indirectly, from the National Intelligence Agency and the police, through to criminal gangs and political and vigilante groups. Thus, the exact motivations of the attacks are ambiguous. Yet, it has been suggested that these groups have used the issues of gangsterism and drugs to garner popular support for a campaign that is, at its heart, more a violent opposition to the political order in South Africa.

SOURCE: Hough, M (2000), "Urban terror in South Africa: a new wave?", *Terrorism and Political Violence* Vol 12, No 2, pages 67–75; also Boshoff, H, A Botha and M Schönteich (2001), *Fear in the City: Urban Terrorism in South Africa*, ISS Monograph Series 41, Institute of Security Studies, Pretoria. Available at http://www.iss.co.za/Pubs/Monographs/No63/Content63.html

The themes of institutional collusion and conflict are key to the functioning and effects of everyday violence in a range of contexts, and are further explored in the following sections.

## c. Drugs, gangs and the interface of institutional and economic violence

The drug trade provides an interesting example of the intersection between institutional and economic violence. While it is largely an economic phenomenon, the drug trade has also assumed an important institutional role, partly as a result of the gap left by weak state institutions. The violence caused by the institutional dominance of drug groups in many communities in Latin America merits specific mention. As Moser and McIlwaine (2004) identify, drugs are integral to many forms of violence at a local level, from gang warfare (controlling the drug market), to robberies and assaults (when money for drugs is scarce), to the murder of drug addicts by social cleansing groups (see below), and constant (often violent) quarrels in the home (see McIlwaine and Moser, this issue).

Gang warfare is perhaps the most overt type of violence associated with the drug trade. In Brazil, for example, 57 per cent of homicides in 1991 were linked to drug-trafficking (Zaluar, 1999). It is commonly the lower-ranking (and therefore) younger associates who are at most risk. This is clearly illustrated in Dowdney's (2003) pioneering study, *Children of the Drug Trade*, in which he likens young people involved in the drug trade in Rio de Janeiro to child soldiers, and suggests that they might actually be worse off than children in situations of political conflict – first, because they are less visible and less easily categorized by advocates and, second, because they might actually face higher mortality rates. For example, in the Israel–Palestine armed conflict, 467 minors died as a result of gun-related violence between 1987 and 2001, while 3,937 young people were killed as a result of small-arms injuries in the same period in the state of Rio alone (*ibid.*).

Drug-trafficking is increasingly (and by its very nature) globalized,

which not only presents greater challenges for international control but also expands the national and local-level impacts of drug-related crime and violence. Within sub-Saharan Africa, for example, Lagos became a transit point for cocaine from South America in the 1980s, resulting, argues Vanderschueren (1996), in the emergence of criminal groups in Nigeria, a major impediment to the transition to democracy in a country that was once considered the most politically and economically influential nation in the region.

Yet, while the "drug problem" is commonly viewed as primarily a national or international problem, it has severe repercussions at the community level, particularly in low-income urban areas (see also Moser and McIlwaine, 2004). At their most extreme, drug groups can dominate the institutional structure of entire communities, with the drug trade creating a structure so embedded in some communities as to become normal.

### Direct impact of drug groups: local institutional dominance

Perhaps the best example of the local impacts of drug groups comes from the research by Dowdney (2003) and Leeds (1996) on Brazil, which reports that drug groups impose on *favela* communities their own systems of justice and social norms, which are a response to the erosion of institutions and the emergence of alternatives. The presence of drug barons in these communities is made legitimate through a complex and, to some degree, mutually beneficial relationship: the drug faction is given anonymity and freedom to conduct business, and the community in return receives internal security and often a range of services such as money to pay for medical treatment, soup kitchens and day-care centres. The services provided are valuable only because the state does not provide them, and because the state entities charged with providing essential security services act as a corrupt and repressive force (Leeds, 1996; see also Standing, 2003 on the Cape Flats, South Africa).

Thus, argues Dowdney (2003), drug factions have become a recognized sociopolitical force at a local level, through which democracy is replaced with "narcocracy". It is the failings of the state, rather than any insurmountable power of the drug faction, which has allowed them such control. Dowdney argues that drug groups represent not so much a "parallel power system" set on destroying the institutional power of the state – as is often claimed – but rather a "concurrent presence" exploiting state weakness (page 71). Dennis Rodgers (2003b) makes a similar argument with reference to youth gangs, suggesting that they are not "insurgents" acting against the state, but rather *in lieu* of the state (see below).

Both Dowdney and Leeds report many negative ramifications for local communities, ranging from the omnipresent threat of violence to uphold the "laws", and severe restrictions on personal freedom, to police repression. In communities where drug groups are active, the state often increases its mechanisms of control in an attempt to counteract the growing power of drug groups, yet policing is based on sporadic invasion rather than constant presence. Furthermore, political parties in Brazil have used the presence of drug groups as a pretext for strengthening their influence on low-income communities, intervening with force in the name of public safety and good government, while using the drug group to obtain political access to the community. The targeting of low-income communities by state security forces in the fight against drugs highlights the fact that it is the low-level, rather than high-level, actors who are vulnerable.

It could be argued, therefore, that these communities are subject to

manipulation by the state, the drug groups and the elite political sector, and are permanently caught between multiple power systems.

### Indirect impact of drug groups: increasing criminal externalities

In the case of Colombia, Gaviria (1998) provides some useful insights into the influence of drug groups on violence, arguing that drug traffickers have played a distinct but *indirect* role in the escalation of violence here. He argues that, while only 10 per cent of homicides are directly associated with drug-trafficking, the trade generates high levels of everyday violence through various criminal externalities: congestion in law enforcement, spillovers of knowledge, supply of weapons and the creation of a "culture" that favours easy money and violent conflict resolution over more traditional values. With reference to the last point, he argues that there has been a shift in values brought about by widespread and visible criminal activity, and by the emulation of the actions of drug traffickers. In this way, criminal violence becomes a source not only of income but also of pride and status. Thus, although drug-related crime represents a small fraction of violent crime in Colombia, it has been "instrumental in catapulting crime rates" through its effects on both the state and citizenry, which have, in turn, created an environment in which the drug trade could take a substantial hold.

## d. The failure of the state and informal justice: intersecting institutional and social violence

In the face of increasing economic and social violence, and without either sufficient protection from the state or the resources to enlist private security, research from a range of contexts finds that many inhabitants of poor marginal urban areas consider that they have no option but to resort to informal justice through rudimentary vigilance. As Simpson (1993) argues, a lack of legitimate authority in South Africa has led to a "climate of lawlessness", which has facilitated the resort to so-called "legal self-help". Consequently, state failure can lead to a number of non-state informal institutions associated with local neighbourhoods committing acts of violence on local community members.

Together with somewhat sporadic group lynchings, more established vigilante groups are a powerful presence in many low-income urban communities, and both feed off and contribute to fear within the community. In South Africa, for example, Harris (2003) reports that vigilante violence revolves around fear, and frequently creates a silencing effect within communities. Community silence is taken by vigilante groups as tacit support for their actions, but interviews suggest that this silence is caused more by the fear of victimization by the vigilantes. This fear, Harris suggests, may contribute to a short-term decline in crime within a specific area, but it displaces crime to surrounding neighbourhoods, and also risks increasing the violence of crime in the initially affected area in the long-term (see also Box 1 for an example of more extensively organized, if institutionally complex, vigilantism).

Gimode (2001), commenting on the evolution of mob justice in Nairobi in response to state inability to control crime, notes the inequality of justice this represents. The crimes of the rich, such as corruption and economic criminalization, are far less visible than those of the poor, and the wealthy are far more able to manipulate or "buy" justice. Those stealing to guarantee that day's meal, however, are subjected to "mob justice" or gunned

down by the police. Accordingly, Gimode argues convincingly that "*…the poor and the propertyless in a class society are always on the wrong side of the law, whether they actually transgress it or not*." Harris (2003) makes the interesting related argument that the post-apartheid discursive shift in South Africa from framing violence as "political", to simply as "criminal", has redefined not only violence but issues of crime, legitimacy and justice: it has criminalized certain forms of violence, "*…but has simultaneously opened a space for – and legitimized – new violent actions*", including "crime fighting" (see below; also Box 2). Thus, what may be termed "reactive" vigilantism might (and frequently does) merge with "pre-emptive" vigilantism – social cleansing – and might remain morally justified in the fight against crime.

### Institutional collusion in vigilantism and social cleansing

Vigilante violence, or informal justice, and social cleansing can involve a range of actors, in either passive support or active participation. In Haiti, the president himself recommended the use of vigilante "justice" in 2001, claiming that "*…if a delinquent forces someone to hand over car keys and gets behind the wheel of that car, he is already guilty of a crime. So there is no reason to take him to court*." (USDS, 2002a) The police interpreted the message as authorizing the violation of due process and a licence to commit extrajudicial killings against criminals allegedly caught in the act. Subsequent killings by police, and lynching of suspects handed over to vigilante groups were reported (*ibid*.). Similarly, a total of 42 state police officers are suspected of having ties to the vigilante group "Grupo Exterminio" ("Extermination Group") in Venezuela, which is accused of up to 100 killings between mid-2000 and September 2001 in the cities of Acarigua and Araure, in the state of Portuguesa (USDS, 2002d).

Thus, in attempts to regain social order and power, the police may be involved in a form of vigilantism which extends to social cleansing, targeting groups of "undesirables" such as suspected criminals, youth gang members, street children and homosexuals. Such police brutality is alarmingly common in many countries in the South, and while it is widely known that this violence exists, agents on the whole act with remarkable impunity. Extrajudicial killings by police may be characterized as "confrontations" despite eyewitness evidence to the contrary, or as "suicides" if death results from torture or abuse while the victim is in police custody (USDS, 2002d,c,b on Venezuela, Peru and Jamaica respectively). Brazil is frequently cited as one of the most extreme examples of police brutality (Box 2).

Young people as a group are particularly vulnerable to the administration of arbitrary and selective social order at the hands of the police, due to a widespread perception of "youth" as criminal. The Central American NGO Casa Alianza claims that allegations of social cleansing are difficult to prove, however, and it is easy for the accused to pass off such deaths as the result of inter-gang rivalry or drug-trafficking. This is a particular problem in the case of the murder of street children and other "undesirable" youth.

7. See www.casa-alianza.org

Police involvement in the form of passive support of vigilantism, rather than active involvement, may – as Bruce and Komane (1999) suggest in the case of South Africa – be due to the fact that vigilantism and formal systems of policing share many common objectives. Yet, the same research also found that some police officers considered the risks of intervening in vigilante action to be too high. This risk took three main forms: personal assault (particularly in incidents that involved members of the taxi industry, whom

| Box 2: | Institutional violence: police killings in Brazil |
|---|---|

In 1992, in the greater metropolitan area of São Paulo, police killed 1,470 civilians – almost four times more than the total number of such killings during 15 years of Brazil's 21-year military dictatorship. Between 1993 and 1996, the police were responsible for a staggering one in ten homicides. The problem remains rampant, with even government figures reporting an average of 75 killings per month in the region in the first half of 2003, not including killings by off-duty policemen.

The majority of victims are young (70 per cent are aged between 18 and 25), male (97 per cent), black (62 per cent), poor, and without a previous criminal record. Despite police claims that the killings often happen as a result of armed stand-offs with criminals or gangs, reports from Rio de Janeiro find that 65 per cent of victims were shot from behind, suggesting they had been hit while fleeing rather than confronting police. The police seem to operate with a significant degree of impunity and, moreover, have in the past received rewards for such actions. But why has there been such a lack of objection to these killings? There is an interesting paradox, not unique to Brazil, in which the "public" mistrusts and/or fears the police, but also approves of police ignoring the human rights of suspects in the fight against crime.

The situation is further complicated by the range of actors carrying out extrajudicial killings. The involvement of the police, private "rent-a-cops", and individual citizen and group vigilantes masks the extent of state involvement in unlawful killings. Moreover, links between state and private security (with police officers often "moonlighting" as rent-a-cops after hours) create a curious situation in which the police are profiting from the lack of security, while being formally employed to uphold it. Social control becomes particularistic rather than democratic, and the state arguably creates more insecurity than it reduces.

SOURCE: Huggins, M K (2000), "Urban violence and police privatisation in Brazil: blended invisibility", in *Social Justice* Vol 27, No 2, pages 113–134; also USDS (2003), *2002 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Brazil*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Available at http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2002/18322.htm; USDS (2004), *2003 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Brazil,* Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Available at http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27888.htm; and World Vision (2002), *Faces of Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean*, World Vision International, San Jose

they believed to be heavily armed), reprisals, or causing a shoot-out, which might jeopardize their jobs (see Bruce and Komane, 2003 for a detailed analysis of police attitudes to, and involvement in, street justice; also Dugard, 2001 for an analysis of the evolution of taxi violence in South Africa).

## e. Youth gangs: social and economic violence as a response to multiple exclusions

"*Violence is not a spontaneous phenomenon but, above all, the product of a society characterized by inequality and social exclusion. It is a distortion of social relationships generated within social structures – family, school, peer group, neighbourhood, police, justice – which can no longer fulfil their role.*" (Vanderschueren, 1996: 93)

According to this analysis, violence is rooted in a range of exclusions, operating at all levels. Some of the possible connections between these different levels in the functioning of everyday violence have been explored in previous sections, especially between the macro and meso levels of society and community. Yet one of the most overt outcomes of multi-level exclusions (or structural violence, as mentioned above), requires specific discussion: that of youth gangs. Youth gangs are an increasingly familiar sight in many low-income urban communities, but have received particular research attention in Latin America and South Africa due to their heightened proliferation, violence and impact there.

The social and economic violence associated with these gangs (including for example inter-gang conflict, robbery and assault) has major ramifications for both gang members and others, not least as a result of the poten-

tially fatal nature of much of this violence (see Winton, this issue). Yet, in situations of multiple social and economic exclusion, the choices available to urban youth are limited. Key to the formation of youth gangs are deficiencies in traditional social institutions at all levels. While it is important to note that gangs take different forms within and between contexts (see, for example, Dissel, 1997, on youth gangs in South Africa; ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP, 2001, on Central America; Rocha, 2000a,b, on Nicaragua; Rodgers, 2003b, on Colombia and Nicaragua; Smutt and Miranda, 1998, on El Salvador), some key issues can be identified.

At a macro level, when the state can no longer make citizenship meaningful (this having long been considered the most basic form of societal membership), it has been argued that "…*the project of a national society of citizens … appears increasingly exhausted and discredited*" (Holsten and Appadurai, 1999, cited in Rodgers, 2003b: 30). The increasing social fragmentation and polarization that result are countered in some cases by the development of an alternative societal membership, and in this context the violence of gangs can become "…*a resource with which to obtain an acknowledged identity*" (Briceño-León and Zubillaga, 2002: 27). Also key here is the normalization of violence. As Vogelman and Lewis (1993) argue, while the term "culture of violence" suggests the broad acceptability of violence, there are differences in the extent to which certain groups endorse violence. Gangs, they argue, are an example of a culture in which violence is particularly pronounced, a characteristic connected to the composition of its members and their societal location.

Youth exclusion is also related to globalization (Moser et al., 2003). As Briceño-Leon and Zubillaga (2002: 28) argue, "…*globalization is democratic and egalitarian in spreading expectations, but it is inequitable in providing the means to satisfy them.*" So, increasing economic expectations are combined with decreasing economic opportunities. Through their engagement in crime, gangs offer the prospect of economic sufficiency in the face of a lack of alternatives. Indeed, the balance between the economic and social motivations of gang membership in some contexts tips towards the economic, with youth gangs increasingly connected with, and in some cases transforming into, more organized criminal groups (see for example, Kinnes, 2000 on South Africa; Rodgers, 2003a on Nicaragua).

At the micro level, much research points to the absence of family cohesion and support as an important factor in promoting gang membership. Dissel (1997: 406), for example, found that in South Africa, the destruction of "…*extended family networks, and their role in extending support and discipline to members of the family*" by the apartheid system contributed to the upsurge of violence in South Africa. Dissel concludes that "…*gangs provide members with a sense of belonging, as well as opportunities for economic improvement for gaining a sense of power, acceptance and purpose*" (page 407; see also Winton, this issue).

The intermediate level of the community is given less attention in the literature. In the second volume of what is to be a highly valuable three-volume study of youth gangs in Central America, it is argued that:

"…*young people can become gang members, integrate themselves in drug distribution networks and live in violence not only because they live in situations of poverty and social disadvantage, or because their parents abandoned them when they were young or because they systematically mistreated them, but also because they do not find any resources in their immediate social setting which provide them with what their family and the economic institutional order has not been able to give them*" (ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP, 2004: 21).

They note that while existing research has connected social capital and gang membership, this has been in relation to the social capital of gangs themselves, and the "perverse" nature of this (see Rubio, 1997). They argue instead that it is important to recognize the impact of *community* social capital on gang membership: a lack of social capital at this level may encourage membership, while its presence may discourage it (see ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP, 2004, for an extensive analysis of community social capital and gangs in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua). It is also significant that gang activity can itself decrease existing community social capital, primarily through reducing trust and communication as a result of fear and stigmatization (see Winton, this issue).

The highly visible nature of organized youth violence in urban areas, particularly youth gangs, can result in a phenomenal amount of media attention. Yet, media reports can exaggerate the actual occurrence of gang violence, and often serve "*…to obscure far more insidious violence such as that associated with organized crime*" (Moser and Winton, 2002: 25). Indeed, the range of groups involved in violence, and the frequent connections between youth gangs and more organized criminal gangs (with the former often recruited as foot-soldiers), make it difficult to determine distinct group involvement in violence, particularly violent crime. With criminal violence increasingly lacking "a concrete face" (Cruz, 1999b), an identifiable target is politically convenient, and where youth gangs are present, these are often accused of perpetrating violence far beyond their actual involvement. For example, the director of police affairs in Nicaragua attributes less than 1 per cent of crime to youth gangs, and yet in terms of perception, youth gangs have been identified as the second or third most serious public security problem in Managua (ERIC, IDESO, IDIES, IUDOP, 2004). Media attention to gangs both feeds off and increases citizen fear.

## f. Fear as a cause and effect of urban violence

The media can play a significant role in reflecting, shaping, and perhaps distorting public opinions of the use of violence, such that:

"*Sensationalist treatment of violent and delinquent events can generate a climate of fear and a strong feeling of vulnerability in the population, which is not always real, or corresponding to the observed level of violence.*" (Arrigiada and Godoy, 1999: 10)

It is argued that this increased fear can lead to a growing disposition to carry guns, to increased support for the death penalty, to illegal or violent police behaviour and to support for the right to kill (Briceño-León, 1999), and therefore can contribute to the continuation of violence. A situation thus arises in which violence is at once "normalized", as is evident in approval of a violent response, and also equally feared. Sanjuán (1998) suggests that in Venezuela, public policy on citizen security reacts more to dictations and opinion from the media than to systematic studies, leading to the construction of a new "dangerous class" (see also Winton, this issue). Unbalanced media coverage of violence means that the public becomes more fearful of crime, even when objective crime rates decrease. López Regonesi (2000) notes that the perception of delinquency is not based on individual experience, but on a collection of external elements. Perhaps related to such trends is the fact that not all violence attracts equal press coverage. López Regonesi goes on to report that violence in poor neighbourhoods is often reported as aggregate figures, and is thus de-personalized. Violence in middle-income areas is often considered more headline-worthy, and provokes long articles

about individual events, and is thus personalized, with the media thus constructing some victims as more important than others.

### g. The societal embeddedness of gender-based violence

Gender-based violence is certainly not restricted to urban areas, but it takes particular forms in relation to the wider urban context. Broadly, Moser and Moser (2003) note that while it is important not to over-generalize and fall into the trap of categorizing women as victims and men as the problem (Cornwall, 2000), violence against women is nevertheless one of the key ways in which men assert their masculinity and ensure control over resources and decision-making at every level of society (Pickup, 2001).

Research in a number of countries shows that violent chastisement is frequently regarded as a husband's right (Heise et al, 1999). In urban Nicaragua, almost 30 per cent of women surveyed believed that some circumstances justified a husband's use of violence against his wife (INEC/MINSA, 1999). A South Asian study listed the following excuses for men's violence towards women: male ego, wife's alleged promiscuity, and women's assertiveness (Hayward, 2000; see Moser and Moser, 2003). Zaman (1999) points to structural and systemic causes for gender-based violence in Bangladesh, maintaining that women's economic deprivation and the patrilineal nature of property relations render women vulnerable to exploitation and susceptible to male domination and abuse in interpersonal and social relationships. This is further reinforced through cultural values that legitimize the discriminatory treatment of women. Jimeno (2001) – writing on Colombian social life in relation to violence – argues that there is a mutually constitutive relationship between private and public social violence:

*"The cultural representation of authority as being arbitrary is key, and is found at the cognitive and emotional heart of acts of domestic violence, among those who suffer it as well as those who inflict it. This way of understanding domestic authority breaks down the barriers surrounding private life, and makes it into a framework with wide significance, within which people orientate themselves in social life."*

These understandings of domestic authority intersect with perceptions of the state as an arbitrary, menacing but ultimately ineffective authority, and frame violence "*…as a relationship that has been constructed by a specific social environment*" (Jimeno, 2001, page 239).

Since gender-based violence is deeply embedded in societal structures, any transformation of these structures is likely to affect the levels of violence experienced by women. For example, Simpson (1992) links the social and economic disempowerment of young black males in South Africa to increases in gender-based violence, and particularly "jackrolling". Indeed, South Africa is particularly notable for alarmingly high levels of violence against women, particularly sexual violence, with an estimated rate of one rape every 90 seconds (Coomaraswamy, 1994, cited in Moser and Moser, 2003). The direct, yet complex link between societal transformation and gender-based violence in this context is elaborated in Box 3.

### h. Development and violence

Since societal transformation, in its many forms, is at the heart of so much contemporary urban violence, the role of external intervention in this

**Box 3: Gender-based violence in South Africa: a reflection of societal transformation**

Violence against women in South Africa (as in other places) is "…*widespread, deeply entrenched and increasingly considered normative rather than deviant*" (Simpson, 1992).Yet here, the intersection of three key interlinked factors has made it particularly prolific, particularly during transition from apartheid in the early 1990s:

- gender-based violence is socially sanctioned as part of the wider "culture of violence";
- latent aggression has resulted from a loss of control and power during political and social transition among a range of social groups; and
- male hegemony results in this increasing aggression frequently being manifested in a range of violent acts towards women.

Processes of political, social and cultural upheaval have resulted in the emergence of a range of different types of violence against women among and between different social groups, from family killings (most commonly perpetrated by white men), to the abuse of black female domestic workers by their employers, to the open rape of young women by groups of young "jackrollers" in many townships. As Simpson (1992) argues:
"*Whether as victims of criminal youth gangs, of their bosses, or of their husbands within the confines of the privacy of the domestic realm, women remain the primary victims of displaced aggression which manifests itself as a result of dramatic social change. Across all the pre-existing cleavages in this uniquely divided society, men are ironically unified in their shared patriarchal identities*."

Particularly overt has been the phenomenon of "jackrolling" in many townships. According to Vogelman and Lewis (1993), there are a number of aspects which make jackrolling different from ordinary rape. First, it is mainly a youth phenomenon. Second, it is almost always committed in the open, with the rapists making no effort to conceal their identity. Indeed, this may be an important part of the offence, so as to earn respect. Most incidents of jackrolling are committed in places such as *shebeens* (informal township bars), picnic spots, schools, nightclubs and in the streets. Finally, jackrolling is often committed by roving gangs of armed youths. In such a context, argues Simpson (1992), women are victimized both directly and indirectly in terms of the extreme limits such a threat places on their personal behaviour and spatial freedom.

SOURCE: Simpson, G (1992), "Jack-asses and jackrollers: rediscovering gender in understanding violence", paper written for the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Johannesburg/Cape Town. Available at http://www.csvr.org.za/papers/papjack.htm; also Vogelman, L and S Lewis (1993), "Gang rape and the culture of violence in South Africa", published in German under the title, "Illusion der Stärke: Jugenbanden, vergewaltigung und kultuur der gewalt in Südafrika", in *Der Überblick* No 2. Available in English at http://www.csvr.org.za/papers/paplv&sl.htm

process of transformation cannot be ignored. Violence is often presented as a threat to development. Yet, it is a pertinent irony that current patterns of violence are themselves argued to be strongly related to the imposition of certain models of development in the South. Kothari and Harcourt (2004), for example, argue that the reordering of society resulting from processes of economic, political and social transformation carried out in the name of development has resulted in multiple kinds of violence. As Gimode (2001) points out, the accepted wisdom is that violence recedes with the advance of liberal democracy and industrialization (read individualization). According to this argument, democracy and a free market are an important antidote to violent crime. Yet, it has been widely noted that, to the contrary, the spread of these post-Cold-War development aims has gone hand in hand with widespread increases in unrest and violence. In particular, the broad application of structural adjustment policies has led to unprecedented socioeconomic dislocation, to say nothing of their weakening of already frail states. Indeed, it is the impacts of such dislocation and weak state institutions that have formed the basis of this guide.

More specifically, Simpson (1997) highlights impacts of mismanaged conflict transitions. He argues that in such contexts, much international aid

for the long-term recovery or reconstruction process favours economic over social reconstruction, and in the process disregards the need to address the social dislocation which both produces and results from conflict. Indeed, to ignore this is to believe that there really is such a thing as "post-conflict", instead of acknowledging that:

"*...to understand social conflict, whether we label it political, ethnic or class-based, we must understand the dynamic and intimate relationship between social, political and economic interests*." (ibid.)

As compelling evidence in this regard, Simpson cites the common slide – discussed at length above – from political to criminal violence.

## IV. CONCLUSION

THE LITERATURE COVERED here dealing with urban violence in the South raises a number of key points. While such violence is highly context-specific in terms of its manifestations, relative levels and the actors involved, what is consistent is the importance of macro-level social, political and economic structures in creating, fomenting and transforming violence. It also follows, therefore, that "post-conflict" or transitional societies, in which these structures have been (and, indeed, often continue to be) disrupted or weakened, face an increased risk of "reactive" violence. In addition, and vital to the current focus on urban violence, these influences converge in very particular ways in different settings, and intersect with local conditions to produce violence. To suggest that the connections between the structures, levels and actors involved in violence are as important as the manifestations of violence itself, relates back to the wider issue of the relationship between violence and development. This relationship is inherently contradictory: while violence is a considerable barrier to development, the development process itself has been instrumental in both producing and shaping new forms of urban violence in the South.

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