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Urban growth, resilience, and violence

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Cities undergoing rapid growth are at risk of outbreaks of violence as competition over scarce resources and space intensifies. In this context, it is critical to identify conditions that make cities and their inhabitants resilient to violence. We review research findings about the general relationship between urban growth and the violence-proneness of cities, as well as insights about the factors that underpin violence–resilience in three different areas: 1) urban governance and planning, 2) security institutions, and 3) the everyday practices of urban dwellers. We argue that in order to understand cities’ resilience to violence, we need to account for both the mechanisms linking urban growth to violence, and the possible conflict resolution and mitigation mechanisms present in cities.

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Introduction

Urban growth is fundamentally changing the outlook of cities across the globe [1–3]. Cities in the Global South, especially in the least-developed parts of Asia and Africa expected to experience the largest and most rapid growth, are already facing challenges related to environmental degradation, social turmoil, and political violence [4,5].

In the wake of rapid urban growth, what conditions make cities resilient to violence? Can cities adapt in the

face of the pressure caused by urban growth to avoid violence or prevent it from escalating? This article reviews conceptual advances and key findings from existing empirical research on the causes of violence and the conditions for peacebuilding of relevance for understanding urban resilience. Particular attention is on literature published between 2020 and 2023. The literature was identified using keyword searches on Google scholar and in relevant journals (such as *Urban Studies*, *Cities*, *Journal of Peace Research*, and *Peacebuilding*).

Urban violence is a broad concept encompassing urban warfare, terrorism, gang violence, and riots, as well as psychological and structural violence [6,7]. We focus on physical violence manifesting in public urban space as communal violence, violent protests, and organized armed violence. Such violence has been captured in recent datasets, including the Urban Social Disorder dataset covering 186 national capitals and major urban centers from 1960 to 2014 [8], and the Cities and Armed Conflict Events dataset covering 1989–2017 [9]. These datasets constitute public goods for the scholarly community concerned with investigating the causes of urban violence and its prevention.

A growing research field is devoted to understanding the conditions that shape risks of urban violence. In-depth study of cities across the Global South uncovers how violence and insecurity impact citizens’ behavior, and how trust and social cohesion are features preventing violence in urban neighborhoods [4,10–12]. The relationship between urban growth and urban violence is probed in several quantitative studies [8,13–18]. A relatively consistent finding is that more populous cities are at higher risk of violence and upheaval [8,9,16,17]. However, while some studies indicate that urban population *growth* specifically increases violence [15,16], others find no such association or even inverse effects [8,19,20]. This research instead emphasizes the importance of factors that mediate the effect of rapid growth on urban violence, such as socioeconomic inequality, political institutions, and the behavior of political elites [16,18,19].

Violence-resilience and urban growth

Urban growth results from several different, but often related processes. It entails demographic processes as populations grow naturally, or due to migration into cities as people search for better life opportunities. Sometimes, migration results from the hardship

individuals and communities face due to climate change [15,21], and sometimes urban in-migration is a consequence of armed conflict when insecurity forces people to seek safety in cities [22–24]. Urban growth also entails spatial processes, that is, expansion and restructuring of urban space, as cities struggle to adapt to an increasingly urbanized world.

Urban growth can cause both immediate shocks and long-term strain on society [19]. The risks of violence increase when urban growth fundamentally shifts the demographic balance in cities, fuels competition over scarce resources and space, and when lines of authority are redrawn [25]. In this changing environment, the ability of society to withstand, cope with, and adapt is essential for understanding when violence is more likely and when it can be avoided. Cities in war-torn contexts face particular challenges, as armed conflict may spill over into urban violence centered on unresolved grievances or illicit wartime economies [26,27]. However, some cities remain remarkably peaceful in the midst of conflict, providing important insights into urban resilience [28].

We combine recent research findings relating to urban violence and peacebuilding to uncover violence–resilience in the context of urban growth. Resilience has gained traction in the literature on peacebuilding and violence prevention as it directs attention to features of society underpinning the sustainability of peace. From this perspective, the role of external actors is primarily to foster and encourage processes that create self-sustaining peaceful societies that can resist violence and shield themselves from the most destructive effects of violent conflict [29,30]. The concept derives from ecology and encompasses three key dimensions [31]. First, resilience is about absorptive capacity — the ability of societies to ‘bounce back’ from shocks to the system and manage emerging consequences. Second, adaptive capacity concerns the strategies individuals and communities use to adapt to changing circumstances that entail elevated risk. Third, transformative capacity is the ability of society to fundamentally alter the social system so that the root causes of insecurity are addressed and society becomes better at mitigating impending conflict. We proceed to review recent scientific insights into the conditions that underpin the resilience of cities to violence.

Urban governance and planning

One key challenge arising from urban growth is how urban space can be organized and restructured to accommodate a growing population. Urban planning is emphasized to play a key role in mitigating the complex challenges of rapid urbanization [32–36]. In the face of rapid growth, many urban in-migrants end up residing in

slums or informal settlements, where poverty, marginalization, and lack of opportunities often interact to raise the risk of violent mobilization and conflict. Several studies indicate that the inability of urban planning and service delivery to accommodate city growth elevates violence risk [4,6,15,22].

A major share of current urbanization is taking place on the ‘urban fringe’, compounding the risk that new urban residents remain disconnected from the power and resource networks of the city [37–39]. Recent findings indicate that it is in these peri-urban areas that population growth is most likely to lead to violent unrest [15]. Generally, existing research points to the marginalization of certain urban areas as a key risk factor for violence [6,15,20,35]. For instance, a study covering flood-affected cities in Africa found that urban unrest was more likely when floods occurred in marginalized areas [20]. Hence, planning interventions aimed at integrating marginalized areas into the urban fabric strengthen resilience to violence [40,41]. An oft-mentioned example is Medellín, one of Colombia’s most violent cities, which saw a dramatic reduction of urban violence after concerted efforts to address urban inequalities under the banner of ‘social urbanism’ [4,42]. The success in Medellín is attributed to a combination of socioeconomic interventions in marginalized areas, integrative urban planning, and a shared narrative of urban transformation, underpinned by political will and support [43], although some studies suggest that strategic interests of armed groups rather than these policies drove the reduction in violence [44].

A specific violence risk occurs where city growth results in redrawing of borders, clearance of areas for gentrification, and land tenure change. In many cases, the formal or informal expansion of growing cities encroaches on land that has been used for subsistence farming or cattle rearing, and governed under customary land tenure systems that clash with urban planning principles [45,46]. Such changes increase the risk of urban land conflict, particularly if dispossession coincides with salient identity cleavages [37,47,48]. In Ethiopia, plans to formally expand the capital Addis Ababa into the surrounding Oromo land led to violent protest and eventually a new government [49,50]. In other cases, informal expansion of city boundaries has created conflicts, for example, the rapid spatial expansion of Yamoussoukro has “swallowed up adjacent villages and deprived indigenous people of their land resources”, leading to conflicts which at times have turned violent [51]. Transparent and responsive land administration can alleviate the risk of urban land conflicts [52], whereas formal or informal mediation initiatives can prevent such conflicts from turning violent [45,51]. Mediation allows disputing parties to articulate their grievances, and is effective when a trusted and

legitimate mediator can adjudicate, although asymmetric conflicts — such as between a city government and individual landholders or communities — are more difficult to resolve through mediation than symmetric conflicts [45].

Another risk factor for urban violence is when in-migrants end up living highly segregated along identity lines. In urban Ghana, “[t]he carving out of ethnic-cultural enclaves along socioeconomic lines in cities threatens the very foundations of urban cultural difference and consequently, the sustainability of cities” [38]. Segregation undermines social cohesion, a factor emphasized as important for resilience [4,53]. Seminal work by Varshney illustrated how crosscutting ties among different ethnoreligious groups made urban communities resilient to violent mobilization by political elites [54]. Recent work further shows how broad-based movements bringing together different socio-political groups in the city can facilitate the growth of cosmopolitanism and promote a transformative form of resilience to violence [28,55]. Where urban cleavages foster the development of patronage networks along ethno-communal lines, resilience to violence instead diminishes: such patronage networks generate both incentives and infrastructure for politicians to provoke communal violence [25,56].

Security institutions

The growth of cities creates challenges for the political and security establishment, and a key factor determining the resilience to violence in the face of urban growth is the governance strategy applied by city governments. National-level factors, such as regime type, electoral incentives, and material capabilities, condition the strategies of urban actors, including security providers [6,25,57].

The police play a pivotal role in shaping urban security environments. While tasked with upholding law and order, in many rapidly urbanizing contexts in the Global South, excessive police violence is commonplace and poses a serious threat to the security of urban communities. Restraining the excessive use of force by the police has been found to reduce not only police violence, but also urban criminal violence [58]. Police reform for improved capacity and accountability is, however, typically linked to political willingness and can be disrupted as a result of political fragmentation and turnover [59]. One important strategy for improving police–citizen relationships and make cities more resilient to violence is by introducing community policing. Community policing is a collaborative arrangement, where the police’s closer interaction with the communities they are intended to serve — through, for example, community meetings and foot patrols — helps to improve public

security. However, extensive research by Blair et al., including in the cities Medellín (Colombia) and Monrovia (Liberia), found no effect of community policing programs on citizens’ trust and cooperation with the police, nor on crime rates [60].

In many marginalized urban areas, nonstate actors exercise *de facto* control. For instance, in several rapidly growing cities in Latin America, criminal organizations have extensive control over urban space and social order [6,39,61,62]. Where multiple actors compete for control, violence levels tend to be particularly high [39,63]; however, negotiated settlements such as the gang truces in San Salvador may create at least a temporary violence relief and help communities recover, through pragmatic ceasefires replacing coercive and violent strategies to combat armed gangs [64]. In some urban areas, residents support local governance and security provision by criminal organizations over the heavy-handed policing by the state, as in the cases of Ciudad Juarez and Karachi, where the former was perceived to produce more stability and less violence [63]. More generally, urban residents in cities with fractured or contested security governance often develop strategies to navigate these different actors to increase their own security [62,65].

Everyday practices

Recent debates emphasize the building of resilience from below, rather than the top-down perspective that traditionally has been dominating both policy and research [66,67]. An important component is to understand how individuals and communities manage and adapt their everyday practices to face the strains caused by conflict and urban growth. In the *de facto* capital of Somaliland, Hargeisa, in-migration brought on by conflict and environmental degradation, has rapidly expanded the urban margins of the city. In these spaces of informality, precarious conditions create “violent ‘site effects’” for residents. In response to an ever-changing environment and uncertain future, residents construct narratives of security and stability as a coping strategy [68]. Also highlighting the discursive element of resilience is the construction of a strong metropolitan identity in the face of divisive and conflictual politics. In Addis Ababa, residents — especially the middle class — have retained a collective identity in defense of the city to uphold everyday peace, as evidenced in the strain caused by widespread urban protests in 2020 [50]. While some violence of an ethnocommunal character erupted, it was limited in comparison to many other cities in Ethiopia.

During protracted insecurity, everyday coping strategies by urban dwellers take on spatial dimensions. Violence in the context of urban growth shapes city space, and in turn the movement patterns of urban residents as they

adapt their behavior to cope with insecurity. In the rapidly expanding port-city of Buenaventura (Colombia), violence has proliferated with high rates of homicide and forced disappearances, and intimidation and killings by armed (youth) groups. To cope with the violence landscape, urban dwellers engage in various adaptive strategies, including charting safe spaces by engaging in a continuous and collective effort of redrawing cognitive maps of the city, as well as adopting an unpredictable pattern of movement, such as showing up late or too early to meetings [69]. Similar everyday security strategies have been documented in Beirut [70], Nairobi [71], and Karachi [72].

While urban residents can influence their own security and perceptions of safety in different ways, the local effects of urban growth are often blatant, and the everyday life of urban residents in the Global South is fundamentally political [73]. In many cities of the Global South, access to basic services, especially among the urban poor, is highly dependent on the social and political networks they can utilize. As a form of ‘personal problem solving networks’ [74], urban residents use such social networks to cope with scarce resources in the growing city in order to secure, for example land tenure, even if temporarily [68]. In volatile contexts, community leaders can assume important functions as social brokers in negotiations with militant actors, highlighting the potential for individual agency to create everyday peace [75].

Conclusion

Urban growth brings precarity to cities across the globe, as the processes associated with demographic change and spatial expansion create insecurity, vulnerability, and are difficult to predict [68]. We argue that in order to understand cities’ resilience to violence, we need to account for both the mechanisms linking urban growth to violence, and the possible conflict resolution and mitigation mechanisms present in cities. Based on our review of existing research, several key insights emerge about how cities can become more violence-resilient in the face of rapid growth.

First, urban planning and the built environment shape cities’ capacity to ‘bounce back’ from and manage the consequences of rapid growth. For instance, existing research indicates that cities with despairing segregation and social inequality are more vulnerable to the strain of rapid growth, rendering such cities more likely to experience violence.

Second, the ability of communities and violence-mitigating actors to adapt in the face of urban growth varies significantly with important implications for violence-resilience. The police, for instance, are critical in managing emerging violence risks, but findings are

inconclusive as to the specific strategies that are most effective. Importantly, heavy-handed policing may further elevate violence risks, whereas nonstate groups often play major roles in urban security provision. Research also points to underutilized adaptive capacities to learn from, for instance, how communities adapt to insecurity by inventing new narratives, cognitive maps, and mobility patterns to sustain peace.

Third, in the longer run, urbanization holds the promise of bolstering resilience to urban violence. Resilience can be nurtured through increased interactions among different politicized groups, and the city enables the development of social cohesion and collective identification with the city [67,76,77]. In addition, urban growth can stimulate the emergence of political organizations and social movements that demand improved governance of the city, thereby addressing the root causes of urban violence.

Data availability

No data were used for the research described in the article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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