small arms survey

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Research Notes ARMED VIOLENCE

Urban Armed Violence

Currently the majority of the world's population lives in urban settlements. Cities are important sites of opportunities and contribute to economic growth and development, yet they also face many challenges; e.g. increasing numbers of urban residents live in poverty, lack basic services, and suffer high levels of armed violence and insecurity (UN-HABITAT, 2007, p. 10). With the growth of the urban population, urban armed violence is increasingly recognized as a major issue confronting efforts to safeguard urban human security and safety.

But urban settlements also provide space for innovation and creativity in dealing with human security needs. A starting point for addressing the delicate balance between urban security needs and the opportunities that cities offer is to understand the scope and intensity of and trends in urban armed violence in order to inform context-specific and evidence-based policies and interventions.

This *Research Note* addresses the state of research into and some of the main debates around urban armed violence. It draws on relevant literature and research[1] and in particular on work done by the Small Arms Survey and the Geneva Declaration Secretariat in this area. Firstly, it briefly introduces data and research findings on sub-national and city-level armed violence, with a particular focus on lethal violence.[2] The second section examines the use of firearms in urban violence. The following section summarizes some of the main debates and questions around researching, preventing, and reducing urban armed violence. The *Research Note* concludes with some recommendations for policy and further research.

Armed violence and the sub-national focus

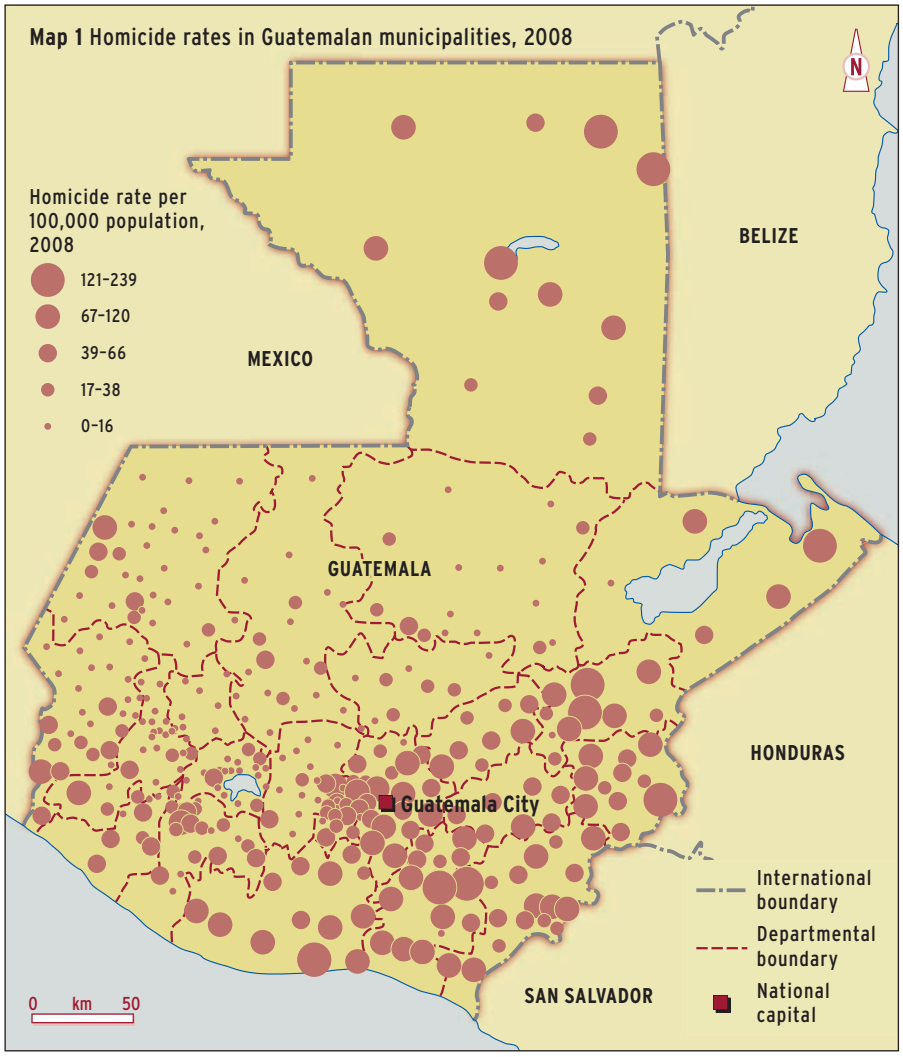
Levels of violence in cities are frequently higher than in rural areas. Knowledge of the scope, intensity, distribution, and trends of urban armed violence is crucial for supporting prevention and reduction efforts. Over the past years significant progress on the availability of information has been achieved with global reports such as the *Global Burden of Armed Violence* reports in 2008 and 2011 (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008; 2011a), the UNODC (2011) *Global Study on Homicide*, and the World Bank (2011) *Violence in the City* report. Although data mostly deals with the national level, all these reports highlight that more attention should be focused on the sub-national level of analysis to unpack local and context-specific characteristics of armed violence—including, for example, border areas, rural–urban divides, and the city level.

The sub-national distribution of (lethal) armed violence highlights interesting differences among settings. In Central and South America, for example, it appears that lethal armed violence is highly concentrated in urban areas. Cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants concentrate over 70% of homicides in Costa Rica, 68% in Guatemala and 63% in El Salvador; capital cities usually also concentrate a significant number of homicides—in Nicaragua, for example, Managua accounts for 42% of total homicides (Aguirre and Nowak, 2012, p. 5).

Furthermore, sub-national armed violence trends reveal important patterns. For example, homicidal violence in Guatemala reached a historical high in 2008–09, yet violence affected the country's municipalities (and urban centres) in very different ways. Map 1 shows that the country's major urban centres witnessed the highest homicide rates, especially Guatemala City. Also, the relatively smaller towns and cities bordering on Honduras and Mexico suffered comparatively higher homicide rates than the rest of the country. This can be an indicator of the impact on patterns of violence of organized crime activities ongoing in border areas (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011b, p. 57).

Another example is found in violence related to 'drug wars' in Mexico, which spiked from 2006 onwards with an estimated 47,000 people killed between December 2006 and September 2011 (Molzahn, Ríos, and Shirk, 2012, p. 1). However, this appalling picture represents an average at the federal level. A comparison of levels of violence at the state and city levels in Mexico reveals the extreme concentration of its manifestations. Whereas in 2006 violent death rates observed at the federal, state, and city levels for all of Mexico, Chihuahua State and Ciudad Juárez were very similar (with rates per 100,000 people of 10, 19.7, and 17, respectively), by 2009 the violent death rate for Ciudad Juárez was about nine times higher than the federal rate (at 170.4 per 100,000 people, versus 108 at the Chihuahua State level and 18.4 at the federal level) (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011a, p. 64).

A question that remains open regarding the measurement of violence in urban settings is whether high violence levels are the result of the greater presence of institutions mandated to deal with crime and violence. In other words,



is it true that there is more crime and violence in cities, or does more effective police intervention and recording of such events generate higher victimization rates in cities? For example, a recent survey carried out in Kenya found that people in urban areas are more willing to report crimes to the police than in rural areas (Small Arms Survey, 2012). If the increased availability of reporting mechanisms in urban areas may be a driver of higher levels of reported crimes and violent events, victimization surveys may provide a balance and offer insights into urban–rural divides in reporting crimes and violence to the responsible authorities.

Urban armed violence and the focus on firearms

The *Global Burden of Armed Violence 2011* report shows that of the countries that witness a disproportionate share of deaths caused by firearms, some four-fifths have very high overall levels of armed violence (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011a, p. 100). Furthermore, higher proportions of firearms homicides are also associated with higher (or increasing) homicide rates in Latin America (Gilgen, 2012, p. 11). The proliferation and easy availability of firearms are also recognized as central facilitators of armed violence in urban settings, especially in the hands of criminal gangs (UN-HABITAT, 2007, p. 63).

It appears that urban settings are particularly vulnerable to armed violence. In Brazil, for example, homicides with firearms are a typical urban phenomenon: the role played by firearms in homicides is larger in the urban municipalities (65 per cent) than in the medium urban municipalities (55 per cent), which in turn is larger than that in the rural municipalities (53 per cent) (Fernandes and de Sousa Nascimento, 2007, p. 231).

Urban settings in high-income countries are also subject to a higher incidence of firearms violence. A recent study of firearms murders in metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs)[4] in the United States shows that two-thirds of the areas studied exceeded the national firearms homicide rates, 86 per cent of the cities had homicide rates higher than those of their respective MSAs, and residents of 50 MSAs—who represent 54 per cent of the US population—accounted for 67 per cent of the national firearms homicides (CDC, 2011, pp. 573–77).

As regards non-lethal outcomes, including firearms-related injuries and the use of firearms to threat and intimidate, the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS) found that the proportion of such incidents was higher in urban areas (capital cities) than in rural settings (see Figure 1) (Alvazzi del Frate, 2012, p. 91).

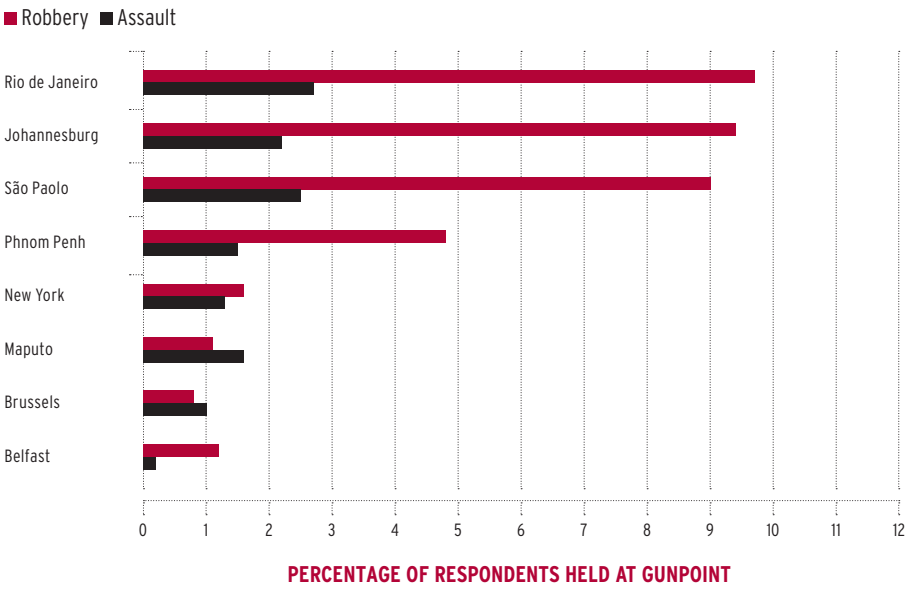
Tracking other forms of victimization in urban sites is equally relevant. Stray bullets, which are often a consequence of violence, are an important example. In Colombia, for example, according to data from media sources, 'stray bullets injured at least 1,200 men and almost 700 women between 2001 and 2011' (Alvazzi del Frate, 2012, p. 86), and over 90 per cent of the injuries and deaths took place in urban areas (Almanza, Navas, and Restrepo, forthcoming).

Questioning urban armed violence

What are the specific vulnerabilities of cities and what evidence is available in this regard? This section briefly addresses some of the main questions around urban violence.

The relationship between city *size* and overall levels of violence is not clear. The World Bank (2011, p. 17) found that there is no clear evidence that links city size and violence among a sample of 50 cities. However, the relationship between violence and the *rate* (slow or rapid) of urban growth has been examined in a study of 50 countries where the World Bank (2011, p. 18) found a positive correlation between the annual pace of urbanization and city homicide rates. This relationship is not uniform, however. Cities such as Mumbai (which has a low homicide rate) that grow rapidly or cities such as Managua (which has a high homicide rate) with a lower pace of growth do not necessarily reflect this correlation. Nevertheless, a survey in Latin America found that

Figure 1 **Proportion of respondents who were victims of armed robberies and assaults with firearms for the five years preceding the ICVS**



Note: The eight cities in this graph ranked highest for robbery and assault among the 38 countries and cities included in the ICVS 2004-05.

Source: Alvazzi del Frate (2012, p. 90)

'households located in areas experiencing high levels of growth are more likely to be victimized than those in communities with stable populations' (UN-HABITAT, 2007, p. 68). Furthermore, 'in interaction with other factors, such as economic crises and a weak state, urban growth appears much more likely to contribute to violence' (Gizewski and Homer-Dixon, 1995). The unequal distribution of violence is one indication for these factors.

Research shows that marginalized and segregated communities suffer the most from the incidence of violence. In São Paulo, for example, the districts experiencing higher homicide rates also show a higher share of the population living on less than half the minimum wage (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011a, p. 160).

A study on homicides in New York comparing income level per household and overall levels of poverty against homicide rates in five city boroughs (the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island) reveals that boroughs with higher incomes and a lower proportion of the population living below the poverty level have lower homicide rates, whereas homicides tend to cluster in the most disadvantaged boroughs of Brooklyn and the Bronx (UNODC, 2011, p. 82).

Unemployment; high proportions of youth in populations; low levels of education; the presence of youth gangs, poverty, and inequality; poor urban design; the proliferation of firearms; and high demographic density in informal settlements are some of the many factors linked to urban armed violence (UN-HABITAT, 2007; World Bank, 2011).

It appears that many of the risk factors associated with urban armed violence relate more to development than strictly to security. Such 'developmental' aspects of crime and violence prevention highlight the importance of social and territorial variables that affect trends in violence. For example, physical space and urban design have an impact on levels of crime and violence. A study found that 10–15 per cent of all urban crime has an environmental design component (UN-HABITAT, 2007, pp. 69–70), which could be addressed through Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) interventions.[5]

Conclusions and further research

Cities are facing serious challenges related to the spread of crime and violence, especially with the involvement of firearms. Patterns of urban armed violence reveal a complex phenomenon that is related to poverty, inequality, unemployment, youth maladjustment, and the prevalence or accessibility of firearms. All these aspects interact in many ways and provide 'profiles' of armed violence in particular cities that need responses tailored to these specificities.

This *Research Note* highlights that tracking the distribution, patterns, and characteristics of armed violence at the sub-national and city levels provides highly relevant information. In particular, it explores how a focus on sub-national and urban trends of armed violence sheds light on how these trends evolve over time, with a displacement effect moving violence towards urban areas.

Detailed data and research on urban armed violence are central to identifying elements to make institutions stronger and communities more resilient to violence, with the aim of selecting successful initiatives and practices that may be replicated and adapted in programmes to prevent and reduce violence.

In order to respond to this challenge, the following issues should be addressed:

- Research should provide support to cities. They are a hub for developing promising, creative, and evidence-based initiatives to reduce and prevent armed violence and are best placed to counteract such violence effectively.
- Development indicators, household surveys, and criminal justice or public health data, as well as crime and violence observatories, provide numerous opportunities to investigate in depth how socio-economic and territorial factors interact to encourage or constrain urban armed violence. More research should include this wealth of data in a holistic way to generate relevant information on which to base policy and programming.
- Understanding how patterns and trends of armed violence interact with firearms availability, what the attitudes towards these patterns and trends are, and why people use guns is crucial for creating a corpus of evidence that feeds into specific firearms control initiatives and disarmament measures. ■

Notes

1 See Fernandes and de Sousa Nascimento (2007), Frost and Nowak (2011), and Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2008; 2011a; 2011b). This *Research Note* also makes reference to work by UNODC (2011) and the World Bank (2011).

2 This *Research Note* relies largely on homicide data, which is used as a proxy of overall levels of violence.

3 Violence here is understood as 'the intentional use of illegitimate force (actual or threatened) with arms or explosives, against a person, group, community, or state that undermines people-centred security and/or sustainable development' (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008, p. 2).

4 An MSA is defined as a 'core area containing a substantial population nucleus, together with adjacent communities' (CDC, 2011, p. 573).

5 CPTED is a criminological approach aimed at improving environmental settings, and in particular urban design (Newman, 1972), in the belief that clean, light, accessible spaces reduce opportunities for crime and violence. Urban design includes the quality of buildings; the extent of street lighting; the availability of spaces for social activities, sports, and leisure; and the accessibility of services, among others.

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For more information on the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, please visit: www.genevadeclaration.org.

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The project has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, international public policy, law, economics, development studies, conflict resolution, sociology, and criminology, and works closely with a worldwide network of researchers and partners.

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