

Guns in the City

URBAN LANDSCAPES OF ARMED VIOLENCE

Urban armed violence forces us to rethink our mental geography of state, society, and governance—including the factors that lead to armed violence and the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons. Previous editions of the *Small Arms Survey* focused on the role of arms in conflict and crime as well as on their impact on development and humanitarian activity. This year's theme chapter—Guns in the City—concentrates on the specific characteristics of urban armed violence and insecurity, introducing new evidence from a wide range of urban centres in Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, Europe, Africa, and South and East Asia.

Cities are currently home to the majority of the world's population. More than one billion of these people live in slums and ghettos. Future population growth will be concentrated in urban areas: the pace and scale of urbanization will be especially dramatic in Africa, South and East Asia, and Latin America. Consequently, cities are fast becoming a focal point for violence prevention and reduction policies and programmes. The *Small Arms Survey* is joining an expanding chorus of governments and international agencies—including UN-HABITAT and the Inter-American Development Bank—in analysing urban violence and proposing ways to make cities safer.

Yet the fact that violence is strikingly heterogeneous and influenced by multiple risks only complicates attempts to translate commitments into actions that prevent and reduce urban violence. There is neither a simple nor a necessary causal link between urbanization and armed violence. Depending on where and when it occurs, urban violence is shaped by risk factors such as the drug trade, the availability of weapons, and the dynamics of informal social organizations such as gangs and militia. Urban violence is also highly segmented and spatially concentrated.

The chapter finds that:

- large-scale and uncontrolled urbanization appears to be associated with increased rates of armed violence;
- rapid urbanization is generally coupled with decreasing levels of public safety, posing serious challenges to the provision of security and justice;
- in the global South, urban violence is often political as much as criminal in nature, with criminal violence socially and geographically structured and organized;
- real and perceived insecurity shape individual and collective responses to armed violence, which often involve strategies to contain violence or export it to the urban periphery;
- municipal interventions to reduce or prevent armed violence can be coercive, compliance-oriented, or voluntary, and effective programmes often combine all three approaches;
- any appraisal of or policy response to urban armed violence must be shaped by evidence and a multi-disciplinary understanding of the phenomenon.

Table 5.1 US homicide rates by city population, 1985-2004 (per 100,000)

City population	20-year mean rate	Low	High
1 million +	19.04	8.24	27.82
500,000-999,999	13.86	1.74	55.18
250,000-499,999	11.31	1.09	53.87
100,000-249,999	7.21	0.31	60.22
United States overall	7.57	5.50	9.80

Source: Wilkinson and Bell (2006)

The chapter explores urban–rural variations and local responses to armed violence. New information on the spatial and temporal distribution of urban violence is illustrated with comparative data from the United States, Canada, and Brazil. In the United States, for instance, average homicide rates are higher in larger cities than in smaller ones, but they reach their peak in medium-sized cities (see Table 5.1).

The chapter then considers the emergence of new forms of ‘urban order’, including peri-urban, semi-urban, and inner-city forms of habitation. It looks at how the transformation of urban landscapes is driven by individual and collective reactions to perceived (subjectively experienced) versus real (empirically observed) insecurity. In some cities, violence has become contained or exported to slums in peripheral urban zones, which are characterized by poverty, poor infrastructure and services, and sometimes rampant insecurity. The response of middle- and upper-class residents has been to build walls to shield themselves, giving rise to gated communities. The result is a fragmentation of public space, a breakdown of social cohesion through the generation of new forms of spatial segregation and social discrimination, and potentially more violence.

The chapter reviews the state of knowledge on urban armed violence, revealing regional and city trends and patterns of criminal and political armed violence. Research generated by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime examines trends in gun ownership within selected African cities; household surveys explore the distribution of armed violence in Port-au-Prince, Haiti; and the phenomenon of gated communities in response to the ‘violence of urbanization’ is analysed. From Latin America to Southeast Asia, the chapter finds that urban armed violence is intimately connected to the structural dynamics of urbanization, as well as to the competing interests of—and demonstrated power asymmetries between—social groups. Armed violence is both a result of and a catalyst for transformations in urban governance and spatial organization.

Crucially, the chapter adopts a three-fold approach to the understanding, prevention, and reduction of urban armed violence. Effective municipal-level interventions must consider the different dimensions of the urban landscape, the importance of real and perceived violence, and the role of isolation, containment, and exportation in relation to violence reduction. The chapter introduces a typology for understanding local interventions designed to reduce armed violence and control small arms, highlighting potential entry-points for rethinking improvements in human security and public safety (see Figure 5.5). Interventions can be coercive, compliance-oriented, or voluntary. The most successful activities appear to be planned and executed on the basis of reliable evidence and carefully sequence elements of all three approaches. ■

Figure 5.5 **Conceptual typology of municipal arms control strategies**

