

Policing Urban Violence: Lessons from South Asia

As densely populated urban centres emerge as economic powerhouses where global GDP is concentrated, they are also increasingly vulnerable to shocks of violence and insecurity. Well-managed urban economies have the potential to provide a route out of poverty, however, poor urban communities are disproportionately affected by violence, making the provision of effective and sustainable security in urban centres a key issue in developing countries. IDS research in South Asia shows that urban insecurity tends to receive an overtly militaristic response. While urban police forces continue to play a central role in creating safe and secure urban environments, it is also evident however, that sustainable security results from wider collaborations between state and non-state actors.

Cities across the developing world are increasingly becoming the primary targets of terrorist acts. At the same time, they are also locations of heightened levels of endemic crime and violent contestation. In both regards, the urban poor are disproportionately affected. In an era where most projections foresee an increasingly urbanised world, and where urban economies are viewed as potential drivers of poverty eradication, how cities and towns are policed, and who provides security, continue to be significant debates.

A review of urban policing strategies over the past two decades across India, Pakistan and Nepal reveals that responses to urban violence, have tended to be militaristic, with authorities viewing everyday urban spaces, the infrastructures of cities, as well as urban civilian populations, either as primary targets or as threats. These generally manifest as the increased deployment of armed police, particularly at checkpoints and roadblocks, acquisition of new weaponry or surveillance technology, and in some instances, adoption of stringent legal apparatuses that provide expanded policing powers. These interventions have had limited

success in preventing urban violence. Their application has tended to be haphazard, while investment in auxiliary training and continued maintenance of newly acquired technology is often lacking. Nevertheless, such approaches have found continued favour with national and municipal governments, and a number of coordinated city wide terrorist attacks (recent examples include Mumbai and Lahore) have led to increased political pressure in support of these.

And yet, we also find that social disorder and insecurity in urban areas is related to the wider issues of weak political institutions and socio-economic shocks. Urban living places a range of severe demands on residents through social fragmentation, the often precarious living conditions of poor urban communities, as well as the hazards of air, water and noise pollution. Due to the dynamics of migration, urban areas also tend to concentrate precisely that demographic group most inclined to perpetrate and be victims of violence: unattached young males who have left their families behind and have come to the city seeking economic opportunities. These conditions can tip situations of heightened contestation

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into protracted cycles of violence, and as such, have a devastating impact on the social fabric and economic output of cities.

Stages of urbanisation

India, Pakistan and Nepal are at significantly different stages of urbanisation. The total urban population in Pakistan, Nepal and India – approximately 458 million – account for nearly 13 per cent of the global urban population. Urbanisation in India, at 2.47 per cent annually, peaked in the 1980s and is now characterised by an increasing spread of population in comparatively large cities with more than one million residents. These are dominated however, by a growing number of megacities, with more than ten million residents. Conservative estimates place nearly 30 per cent of India’s urban population in informal settlements.

Both Pakistan and Nepal are experiencing relatively higher rates of urbanisation (2.68 and 3.62 per cent annually respectively). Pakistan is the most urbanised country in South Asia, and over 46 per cent of its urban population lives in informal settlements. Pakistani cities with populations between 500,000 and one million are projected to more than double in number by 2020. Nepal is the least urbanised country in the region, with urban areas covering only 2.2 per cent of the total area of the country. However, nearly 60 per cent of urban dwellers live in informal settlements.

Urban crime and violence

In terms of the incidence of urban crime and violence, the three countries also display significantly different trends.

In India, over the past two decades, urban areas in large and small cities have been targets of terror attacks 63 times, of which 10 incidents involved 50 or more fatalities (as per the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore).

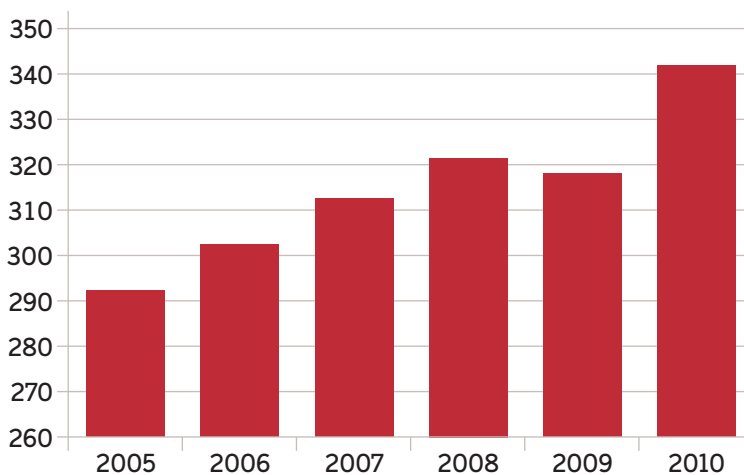
However, there is significant clustering evident, with over 30 per cent of all fatalities in these incidents occurring in Mumbai alone.

Urban crime, however, is more widespread, endemic, and arguably, is as detrimental in its impact as terror attacks. Cities with more than one million residents, which account for 13 per cent of the urban population, consistently experience a much higher rate of crime than surrounding rural areas, and this rate has increased by nearly 20 per cent between 2005 and 2010 (see Figure 1 below). In 2012, the average rate of serious crime in these cities was 294.7 per 100,000 people, much higher than the national crime rate of 196.7. Counter-intuitively, megacities of ten million plus are not the most violent by this metric. The much smaller cities of Kochi, Indore, Gwalior and Bhopal report the highest crime rate in the country (of 817.9, 762.6, 686.1 and 623 respectively in 2012) – data as per the National Crime Records Bureau, India.

Urban violence in Pakistan is largely a function of the deepening ethno-political and sectarian divisions in the four provincial capitals: Peshawar, Quetta, Karachi and Lahore. Of these, Karachi

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Figure 1. Crime rate in 35 Indian cities with more than one million residents



has been described as the deadliest mega city in the world, due to its exceedingly high murder rate of 12.3 per 100,000 people, comparable to the Brazilian city of Sao Paolo's in the mid-2000s. There is an increasingly powerful and dangerous nexus between criminal gangs and militant groups who follow a jihadi doctrine but are increasingly taking refuge in, and targeting, urban locations, and mainstream political parties.

In post-conflict Nepal, urban violence is largely characterised by the increasingly violent activities of disparate armed groups in the rapidly urbanising areas of the Kathmandu Valley and Terai regions. The latter region in particular, which constitutes the most densely populated area of the country outside the capital city, has recently experienced a post-conflict proliferation of armed groups and small arms. Killings now predominantly occur in this region, which also accounts for 60 per cent of all kidnappings. Non-war related homicides have continued on an upward trend, from 575 homicides in 1997 to a high of 936 in 2004, and 917 in 2008, with only a temporary decline to 633 coinciding with the lockdowns during the instating of the peace agreement in 2006. Importantly, urban areas account for a significant proportion of these homicides, with Kathmandu alone accounting for roughly 30 per cent.

Common lessons

Notwithstanding the significant differences in the nature of urbanisation and urban crime, unchecked urban violence threatens the stability of municipal governments and undermines public confidence in the state's ability to enforce the law across all three case study countries.

Even though recent terror attacks dominate the discussion around the mechanics of urban security provision, urban violence across South Asia is not singular in form. Its modalities are very diverse, and the various forms urban

violence takes can be understood through varying degrees and combinations of three broad categories: 'social violence', which is primarily interpersonal and motivated by the will to get or keep social power and control; 'economic violence', which is motivated by material gain and can take the form of street crime, drug-related violence and kidnapping; and 'political or ideological violence', which is inspired by the will to win or hold political or ideological supremacy. All three categories of violence are deeply interconnected and extenuate, or are extenuated by, the particularities of the urban condition.

Militaristic responses involving the application of force after the incidence of violence are appropriate insofar as the increase in urban violence can be viewed as the product of inappropriate security policies, including decades of neglected police reform. However, it is also evident that 'security' and 'insecurity' in South Asian cities result out of complex interactions between socio-economic, political and demographic factors. Importantly, different individuals may experience insecurity in the city in significantly different ways. How women, children or poor people, for example, negotiate urban violence and insecurity, can vary not only by the individual, but also spatially and temporally.

Furthermore, in those contexts where violence has become endemic, or in the wake of extreme events like citywide riots or terror attacks, the role of the state as the sole provider of security or arbitrator of justice has often been questionable. On the one hand, functionaries of the state, such as the police, or political parties who embrace a belligerent way of functioning, are often deeply involved in the perpetration of violence. On the other, non-state actors, ranging from gangs to civilian groups and women's collectives, can often provide the most tangible and accessible forms of security. This necessitates a wider 'developmental' approach to understanding and responding to the security needs in cities.

“The various forms urban violence takes can be understood through three broad categories: social violence, economic violence and political or ideological violence.”

Policy recommendations

Several key lessons stand out from our review of urban policing strategies in India, Pakistan and Nepal.

Renewed efforts are needed on police reforms:

- Police forces face endemic shortages of resources, training and infrastructural resources. However, no matter what additional resources are invested in policing, there is an equally urgent need to renew efforts to address issues of corruption, malpractice and inadequate training.
- The mechanisms of security provision often involve non-state and informal actors just as much as formal providers of security. Nevertheless, given the scale and nature of urban insecurity, the role of the formal police agencies continues to be central to the maintenance of law and order. It is critical for the police to establish a monopoly over the legitimate use of force, particularly in light of the increasing presence of armed groups in urban areas. Failures in the prosecution and judicial systems also contribute to ineffective policing in this regard, and reforms to instil fair and just procedures (including fast-tracking of cases where necessary) can greatly compliment policing strategies.
- Diligent monitoring and control of small arms, nationally and across borders, is essential, as is investing in a robust data and intelligence infrastructure focused specifically on groups operating in urban areas.
- Police recruiting also needs urgent reform to attract a high calibre, diverse, and gender-balanced set of applicants for all ranks. While physical fitness continues to be a core requirement, it should not be the only criteria for selection, even for the constabulary. Often it is the lowest ranked personnel who interface with the public the most, and thus a well trained and highly competent constabulary goes a long way in establishing credible and long lasting community relations.
- Any plans for acquiring new technology (weapons and surveillance) need to be transparent, context specific and expressly driven by local needs. Often the latest innovations in weaponry or surveillance are not designed for the realities of operating in the vast informal settlements that typify South Asian cities, and require heavy long-term investment in training and maintenance.

Urban security provision can no longer simply be reactionary in its application of force. Several longer-term issues need addressing:

- Evidence suggests successful strategies employ long-term outlooks to build the credibility and legitimacy of the police. These involve community-police collaborations, including state, and non-state actors (as well as armed/criminal groups themselves), and prioritise neighbourhood level safety issues. There are several successful models in evidence across the region, ranging from Slum Panchayats to Peace Committees. However, these are few and far between. There is an urgent need to divert resources towards extending and updating such efforts.
- Evidence suggests successful policing interventions are based on high quality data, which can be disaggregated by neighbourhood or precinct as well as be aggregated to reveal macro-level or temporal patterns. These also have the potential to highlight aspects such as the gender-sensitive dimensions of insecurity. Qualitative and participatory data on perceptions of safety and security can greatly complement traditional forms of crime data, particularly in rapidly urbanising smaller towns and peri-urban areas, which are difficult to monitor owing to the constant flux in demographic shifts and settlement patterns.
- The operational need for working relationships between the police and elected city representatives and administrators should be supported through formally mandated platforms for consultation. Simultaneously, steps should also be taken to explicitly delink police functioning from being usurped by political agendas.

Further reading

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Credits

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