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Helping Accelerate Poverty Reduction in Asia and the Pacific

THE RISING TIDE OF VIOLENCE IN ASIA'S CITIES

A study was commissioned, through a regional technical assistance, to help fill the gap and complement existing knowledge on urban violence. It aimed to draw common lessons and suitable options to mitigate urban violence and enhance public safety and security in urban areas.

The most rapid urban growth in history has taken place over the past 50 years. In 1950, fewer than 30% of people lived in a city; today over 45% of the world's population are urban dwellers. Much of this growth is taking place in Asian cities.

Asia's population has nearly doubled in less than half a century; the population of its cities has nearly tripled. By 2020, Asia is expected to have a population of 4 billion, more than half of whom will be city dwellers.¹ Also, 13 of the world's 23 megacities (cities with at least 8 million inhabitants) are found in Asia.²

Congestion, poverty, and violence have become the undesired effects of rapid urbanization. Cities throughout the world are experiencing escalating violence and crime.³

Urban violence⁴ generates and sustains a fear of crime. Crime and the fear of crime are serious threats to the stability and social cohesion in cities. In the absence of effective criminal justice systems, this in turn threatens sustainable economic development, quality of life, and the realization of human rights.⁵ Economic decline and crisis, weak states, and a decline in the quality of life along with widespread poverty and unemployment arising from these conditions have been empirically linked to urban violence.

The costs of violence can include low investor confidence; higher health and police costs; the disaffection and migration of the urban middle class; higher mortality and morbidity rates; reduced access to social services; and family and community fragmentation, deeper oppression of women, increased fear of crime, and the breakdown of community spirit and participation.⁶

Urban violence disproportionately affects the poor living in vulnerable conditions. Studies reveal that the urban poor consider safety a priority. Urban violence and resulting insecurity disrupt public life, erode the social capital of the poor, restrict their mobility, and thus perpetuate poverty. Poverty and inequality levels mean that the poor are frequently held responsible for much of the crime and violence perpetrated in cities.

While there have been initiatives to reduce crime and the fear of crime in urban areas, addressing urban violence and its causal link to poverty is still stymied by the inadequate data and knowledge on the extent, trends, and specific causes of urban violence, particularly in Asia.⁷

The lack of knowledge regarding the complex nature of the problem and the nexus between poverty and violence has led to prevailing government policies mostly focusing on crime prevention through conventional policing measures. These policies have had limited impact.⁸

Probing Urban Violence in Asian Cities: Phnom Penh and Dhaka

For any intervention on reducing violence to succeed, a thorough understanding of the underlying causes of endemic violence or of its costs and consequences is required.

Regional technical assistance (RETA 6130)⁹ was a regional study to help fill the gap and complement existing knowledge on urban violence. The study intended to understand the types and causes of urban violence and look into the link between urban violence, poverty, and ineffective governance. Specifically, the goal was to collate common lessons and suitable options to mitigate urban violence and enhance public safety and security in urban areas.

An analysis comparing the cities of Phnom Penh and Dhaka was carried out.¹⁰ The two cities offer different positions in the spectrum of urban violence. Urban violence in Phnom Penh,¹¹ already with a relatively high rate, is still on the rise, and Dhaka's¹² urban poverty levels are among the highest in the Asia and Pacific region. Both cities' urban poor cite violence and crime as one of the major problems they face.

The study employed various research methodologies which included participatory action research, focus group discussions,

community surveys, individual interviews, and on-site observations. About 1,000 individuals were interviewed (600 from Dhaka and 411 from Phnom Penh) and focus group discussions were held with city dwellers (youth, elderly, women, and workers), city government officials, criminal justice system officials, community groups, and NGOs. The study also looked into crime reports to assess the cities' crime prevention/resolution programs. This was a notable achievement considering the dearth of information and the relative difficulty in accessing records.

Key Findings and Major Insights

The surveys and focus group discussions conducted revealed the following:

The surveys conducted under the regional TA revealed that a general feeling of insecurity prevails in the open/public spaces of Phnom Penh and Dhaka. Crime and violence hotspots in the two cities share common traits: dimly lit, low police visibility, conducive to illegal activities (e.g., drug trade, illegal gambling, and prostitution), their locations within or adjacent to slum areas also contributes to fear of crime.

The perceived causes of urban crimes are many and interrelated; however, the root causes stem from poverty, dense living conditions, unemployment, and inability of the government to provide adequate security measures to the general public. These conditions trigger actions in public spaces, resulting in various degrees of violence. The occurrences are further induced by the general lack of trust in the police and the judicial system; poor

	Phnom Penh ⁱ	Dhaka ⁱⁱ
Perception of Safety	<p>A majority of respondents considered Phnom Penh unsafe. Concerns were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of personal security and petty crime in the city's public spaces. - General fear of crime outside the home, particularly at night.ⁱⁱⁱ - Vulnerability toward armed robbery and physical assault. <p>Most common crimes reported included robbery, burglary, motorcycle hijacking, snatching of personal items and valuables, street fights, physical extortion, and gang rape.</p> <p>In Phnom Penh, violence is not confined in a certain area or time. However, crimes against property are more common at night in totally dark or poorly lit areas.</p> <p>6 districts^{iv} of Phnom Penh were perceived as crime "hotspots" because of dense living conditions occupied by squatters, drug addicts, the unemployed, and the poorly educated. The setting is conducive to proliferation of gambling dens and establishments that serve as fronts for sexual trade and crime.</p> <p>Many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the police and the criminal justice system.</p>	<p>Security was the greatest concern by most respondents;^v 50% considered Dhaka unsafe. In particular, respondents fear hijacking, terrorism and extortion, and violence as a result of political conflicts between opposing parties. Women are often subject to harassment or even rape.</p> <p>"Hijacking"^{vi} was considered the most common crime occurring. This was followed by burglary, theft, and extortion of individuals and businesses; and violence from political conflicts.</p> <p>Moving around the city at isolated hours and in open public places were not considered safe. Crime and violent incidents occur more in the slums than in "higher-income" areas in Dhaka.</p> <p>Respondents cited crime perpetrators mostly as young and unemployed youth, drug addicts, vendors, beggars, and vagabonds.</p> <p>Only 19% of the respondents would report/had reported to the police and only 2% to the local elites or courts. Little trust is given to the police force; the police are seen as perpetrators of crime or, at the very least, as complicit through inaction.^{vii}</p>
Perceived Causes of Violence	<p>Poverty and associated social ills (drug addiction, gambling and prostitution); unemployment; lack of trust in the criminal justice system; poor lighting of public space; poor conditions in the slum areas</p>	<p>Poverty, unemployment, inequality, influx of people to Dhaka and dense living conditions, poor governance (corrupt politicians and lack of enforcement), change/ shift of cultural values</p>
Recommendations for Prevention of Urban Violence	<p>Suggestions for mitigating urban violence include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Urban planning and upgrading interventions: well-designed public spaces and infrastructure improvements - Policy-oriented development interventions aimed at addressing the causes and risk factors of crime: use information and communication technology to reduce crime, coordinate public-safety-related programs, and develop socioeconomic programs to reduce poverty. - Action-oriented governance interventions to enhance order: strictly enforce laws and reform the criminal justice system, increase police visibility, educate and engage the public, and manage and harness the energy of the youth 	<p>Most respondents view the government and civil society to be jointly responsible for preventing crime.</p> <p>Community-level recommendations were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased security posts or check points; - More street lights; - Improve the infrastructure of the city; - Provide adequate salaries, equipment, and other incentives for law enforcement officers; - Combat social ills, e.g., drug trafficking, illegal gambling; - Register all residents in crime hot-spot areas; and - Promote youth and employment programs. <p>Specific measures recommended for women:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness about security should be taught at home. - School curriculum should include topics on personal safety. - Women should be trained on self-defense.

ⁱ City of Phnom Penh. 2005. Study of Urban Violence in Public Spaces: Towards More Effective Urban Upgrading. Study Report. February.

ⁱⁱ 2006. Study on Urban Violence in the Public Realm of Dhaka. Final Report. February.

ⁱⁱⁱ Findings in a survey covering a total of 411 people from four social groups: the elderly, women/housewives, office workers, and youth. (footnote i).

^{iv} Khan Mean Chey, Khan Chamcar Morn, Khan Dangkor, Khan Russey Keo, Khan 7 Makara, and Khan Toul Kork.

^v Survey covering 600 individuals from a wide range of income groups from all parts of Dhaka. (footnote ii).

^{vi} In Bangladesh, "hijacking" would commonly mean to describe various forms of forced robbery or seizure of personal valuables by criminals. The range of valuables varies from small personal belongings like purses, watches, mobile phones to bicycles, motorcycles, and cars. (footnote ii)

^{vii} footnote ii, p.ii.

lighting of public spaces; and vulnerability of particular groups, such as women, children, and the elderly, to violence.

The two case studies provided a number of recommendations on economic and social development, urban infrastructure improvement, governance, and specific crime prevention measures. Among these were:

- Design and implement socioeconomic programs to alleviate poverty, reduce inequality, and engage the poor;
- Design public spaces and city infrastructure that meet technical and sociocultural requirements for public safety (e.g., adequate street lighting, surveillance, sense of place, etc.);
- Promote public education and awareness on violence and crime prevention and public safety programs through broad-based participation from various elements of the society;
- Include various elements of the citizenry in representative board that monitors and sets policies on security;
- Implement appropriate youth development programs;
- Promote safety for women from gender-based violence; and
- Adequately enforce laws and criminal justice system reforms; provide the necessary resources and incentives to ensure enforcement (i.e., adequate salaries for police and other law enforcement officers)

The regional study captured the various characteristics and perceptions of crime as they occur on the streets and environs of Phnom Penh and Dhaka. However, the link between urban violence, poverty, and governance needs to be substantiated in a way that enables a comprehensive and cross-sectoral analysis and detailed intervention proposals.

Preliminary findings from the two case studies indicate that poverty, unemployment, inequality, and conditions arising from dense living provide the ingredients for urban violence, which is exacerbated by the lack of civic trust, the ability of the local authority to provide public security, and the absence of an effective criminal justice system.

In any further work, it would be helpful to find out if crime and violence occurring in the open/public spaces of the two cities are similar to those in the rural areas. It would also be interesting to explore the questions of what made urban violence in Cambodia and Bangladesh an urban phenomenon— whether the erosion of social capital/cohesion was a contributing factor to crime, or whether the phenomenon that emerged was a result of urban violence.

In both cities, the poor were often mentioned as perpetrators of the crimes and the crime hotspots have been within or are adjacent to urban poor communities. Any future, more in-depth analysis should explore social and economic exclusion and inequality which is more prevalent in urban settings than in rural.

The regional TA provides the initial baseline data on the urban crime situation in both cities and has proved a useful catalyst for articulating and discussing issues on crime and violence. The preliminary recommendations and positive response of the city governments imply a commitment to building safe urban

environments. The momentum achieved by this regional TA will hopefully be sustained as stakeholders take forward the findings.

Endnotes

- ¹ www.adb.org/Documents/Speeches/2005/sp2005040.asp
- ² 2005. *Study of Urban Violence in Public Spaces: Towards More Effective Urban Upgrading*. City of Phnom Penh, Study Report, February 13.
- ³ Surveys and poverty assessments show that urban violence has risen by 3–5% per year over the last 20 years—and the degree of violence has intensified. Graham Dwyer. 2003. *Violence and the Poor*. www.adb.org/Documents/Periodicals/ADB_Review/2003/vol35_6/violence_poor.asp
- ⁴ Urban violence refers to the destruction of persons and property within an urban context; the term “urban violence” has usually been applied to crimes committed in the public environment in large cities. Thus, urban violence is considered violence perpetrated within the framework of the relations and dynamics characteristic of urban living. It includes economic violence (street crime, armed robbery/carjacking/kidnapping/theft, killing, drug-related violence, etc.), social violence (interpersonal violence, assault, rape, and abuse), and organized crime conducted by informal entrepreneurs or mafia and gangs.
- ⁵ www.publichealth.pitt.edu/supercourse/SupercoursePPT/18011–19001/18391.ppt#2
- ⁶ www.wolbank.org/html/fpd/urban/publicat/rd-ou10.htm
- ⁷ Most such case studies are confined to Latin America and Africa. A few regional urban poverty assessments allude to urban violence, but have not carried out comprehensive investigations.
- ⁸ SSTA Proposal. 2003. 17 October.
- ⁹ RETA 6130: A Study of Urban Violence in Public Spaces: Towards More Effective Urban Upgrading. TA amount \$150,000. TA approval date: October 2003. TA completion date: July 2006.
- ¹⁰ The World Bank, under a parallel exercise, will study three other cities in Asia and Latin America.
- ¹¹ The city of Phnom Penh has an estimated population of 1.2 million, growing at a rate of 4–5% annually. Squatters and other urban poor groups are estimated to form more than 25% of the city’s population. In 2003, between 280,000 and 310,000 people live in some 560 low-income settlements. The people living in all these communities are socially marginalized and economically poor. www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=2969&catid=5&typeid=6&subMenuId=0
- ¹² Founded in 1608 ADB and became the capital of Bangladesh in 1971, it has a population of over 10 million in 2006 and ranked 9th among the most populated cities of the world. It is also one of the most densely populated cities in the world with an area of 360 sq km. (Wikipedia)

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