



Preventing Identity-Based Mass Violence in Cities

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December 2020

Introduction and Summary

The world is rapidly urbanizing. Over half of the global population lives in cities. An estimated 70 percent of humanity will live in urban areas by 2050.¹ For those working to prevent the threat of violence or reduce its immediate manifestation, this urban concentration implies an urgent need to explore new frontiers of analysis, new partnerships, and new ways of exploring risks and resilience.

This discussion paper explores how the prevention of atrocities and mass violence overlaps with the prevention of chronic levels of urban violence. In exploring the connections between urban violence and atrocities, and the relationships between national and municipal authorities, this paper amplifies the unique capacities of cities to be better oriented toward prevention and suggests new areas of collaboration between parallel disciplines.

Why and How Cities Matter

Globally, over half a million people die violently each year and roughly 82 percent of these deaths occur outside of conflict zones, primarily in cities and towns.² The decisions of city-level actors, from those in mayors' offices to city health departments to neighborhood associations, have outsized influence on whether the majority of people will enjoy lives free from fear, the reoccurring onslaught of trauma, and the insidious effects of structural depravity. Given the critical and unique role cities can play in preventing, mitigating, or exacerbating identity-based mass violence, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers concerned with preventing mass atrocities should pay closer attention to city-level dynamics.

The recommendations in this paper are based on research of the intersections of urban violence with mass violence. The research paper seeks to establish the prevention of identity-based mass violence (IBMV) in cities as a cross-disciplinary field of scholarship and practice.³ This research yielded a framework for prevention and mitigation efforts. Based on nine cases of city-level IBMV,⁴ cities affect mass violence in three main ways: (1) cities offer places and reasons to gather, (2) neighborhoods, mobility infrastructure, utility systems, and other city spaces and systems can be seen as proxies for specific groups of people, and (3) violence can be both a cause and a symptom of urbanization, a uniquely urban process by definition, such that urbanization can be one way to mortally wound a city.⁵

Included in the nine cases of IBMV in cities are instances of direct and indirect structural violence. Respecting that there is a difference between the deliberate infliction of bodily harm by one person onto another and the one-step-removed creation of conditions that cause sustained harm, this paper also recognizes that communities themselves that are on the receiving end of sustained, structural harm refer to it as violence. If we accept that peace is not just the absence of violence, then we also must accept that the absence of direct bodily harm does not equate with peace. While bracketing of forms of violence is required for more empirically driven research,

the case study approach taken here allows for a broader understanding of violence that humanizes a lived experience. The cases of Flint, Michigan, and Jerusalem, Israel, elaborate on this point.

An important finding is that in the cases, the local context and the built environment of a city were crucial to prevention and mitigation efforts. Such characteristics include a city's symbolic value as a national or regional capital, the makeup of its population, opportunities for encounter, whether the city is a contested territory, and whether the city has suffered a recent systemic shock. However, three distinct factors stand out presenting the highest risk for mass violence in a city.

The city as an enclave for identity groups. Cities made up of or having features of an enclaved population can be particularly vulnerable to mass violence. Enclaves provide a readily available target for perpetrators of mass violence. In Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the international community created a safe zone for vulnerable Bosniaks to take refuge. This enclaving provided a target for Bosnian Serb soldiers to massacre over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys.

In Nairobi, Kenya, the Eastleigh neighborhood is an enclave for people of Somali descent. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks by the Somali group al-Shabab, over a thousand residents of Eastleigh were caught up in brutal violence committed by Kenyan police. In Kaduna, Nigeria, violence emerging from historical tensions caused a spatial realignment of the city along religious lines. This realignment persists to this day, keeping potentially violent groups separated but doing little to address causes of tensions that could erupt again.

In the cases researched, identity-based mass violence in an enclaved city was more likely to occur if the city was also a national capital and if violence took place in the city periphery rather than the city center or throughout the city. Further, IBMV in enclaved cities correlated to victims who were targeted on the basis of their national, partisan, or ethnic identity as opposed to religion, and where perpetrators of violence furthered a narrative that justified or legitimated the violence.

The city as a place of encounter where cross-communal groups could meet. Cities with cross-communal places of encounter have at least one place in which victims and victimizers are likely to meet in their day-to-day lives. In the cases examined, examples included the Shrine of Hazrat Ali in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan, which is revered by Sunni (Pashtun) and Shia (Hazara) Muslims and is the site of regular cultural celebrations. In San Salvador, El Salvador, the city's bus routes regularly cross and recross gang territories. As a result, public buses from one location passing through the opposing gang's territory served as a place of encounter and a target for violence.

In some cities with a place of encounter, IBMV correlated with violence that was not officially sanctioned by the government or initiated by the military, but where violence was perpetrated by police. Further, IBMV in these cities correlated with individuals being targeted on the basis of their partisan orientation or racial/ethnic identity and perpetrators of violence digging in after the violence rather than pursuing any form of reconciliation.

The city suffered a recent political shock. Cities that have experienced recent political shocks were correlated with the range of risk factors in expected ways. Aleppo, Syria, for instance, was under strain from the twin shocks of the Arab Spring protests across the Middle East in 2011 and a major national drought from 2006 until 2010 that drove significant rural-to-urban migration. In Flint, the city suffered a financial and budgetary crisis, which resulted in the appointment of an unelected emergency manager of the city by the state government. The emergency manager decided to switch Flint's water source, resulting in the contamination of drinking water in the city.

Recent political shocks correlated as expected with all of the variables that occurred most frequently across all the cases. This included the involvement of external actors in violence that was just as likely to be lethal as it was to be dehumanizing. In addition, most of the incidents, which did not take place during wartime, were officially sanctioned and perpetrated by the military.

Insights into Policy and Practice

Structural Violence, Acute Violence, and Chronic Violence

Addressing structural violence, particularly in cities with enclaved populations, can go a long way toward preventing identity-based mass violence. Structural violence, which is defined as harm or damage inflicted on people by social structures or institutions and is based on asymmetric power relations,⁶ is a "risk factor for chronic violence—including extremely high rates of violent crime over long periods of time—and IBMV."⁷

Structural violence in the form of discriminatory housing policies established an enclave in Flint, creating a majority Black city in a state that is 80 percent white. Layered on top of racist housing policies were policies that reinforced environmental injustice, resulting in higher than average rates of chronic health conditions. These factors came together when Flint faced a water crisis of contaminated drinking water that ultimately killed nearly 130 people.⁸

In San Salvador, city government disproportionately invests in infrastructure for those who can afford influence, compounding inequalities and reinforcing structural exclusion to the benefits of city habitation for many. As Ariana Markowitz writes:

Urban violence prevention actors and atrocity prevention actors could work alongside local communities and municipal planners to amplify and fund existing cooperative and egalitarian initiatives. ... Positioning deepening structural inequality and the structural violence it engenders as a risk for continued chronic and acute mass violence, including IBMV, could help dislodge the narrative that a segregated and fortified city is a safe city.⁹

Scaling City-Level Atrocity Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

In 2005, at the United Nations World Summit, heads of state and government leaders adopted the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which affirms that “each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.” Furthermore, world leaders affirmed that the international community also has the responsibility to protect populations.¹⁰ While R2P primarily obligates national governments to protect its population, this does not negate a city government’s responsibility to protect vulnerable groups within its jurisdiction. Prevention and protection efforts at the city level can help address structural violence, train local police forces while clarifying their roles, and build capacity to recognize the early warning signs of potential violence.

Very often city borders are less well defined or fixed than national ones; this is particularly true in our current context of rapidly growing metropolises. This makes the question of who has what responsibility more complex in an R2P context. This is evidenced in places like Aleppo or Jerusalem, where people have fled or been forcibly evicted and where protection and restitution pose immediate questions of responsibility, but also in places such as Kaduna or San Salvador, where a mix of national and city-based actors mitigated or aggravated the situation. In practice, the authority for preventing and responding to violence is often a shared responsibility across different levels of government, in some cases including international actors. Greater attention to how national and international actors can either boost the protective responsibilities of city-based actors or constrain them is urgently needed. This includes in areas such as urban planning, but also in enhancing local oversight of national policies or international interventions. As Markowitz’s research suggests:

R2P at the city level offers opportunities for direct and structural violence prevention just as it does at the national and international levels. Working in partnership, urban violence prevention actors and the atrocity prevention community can use their complementary knowledge and experience to overcome the conceptual and practical challenges of adapting the norm to the shift in scale.¹¹

Recognizing, Resourcing, and Empowering Subnational Actors

Efforts to prevent violence and protect vulnerable groups are most successful when local actors with knowledge of the local context and dynamics are empowered and resourced to take action. While city governments may tend to be more accountable to their citizens, they may not possess the tools and budgetary resources to adequately respond to crisis points let alone spearhead efforts to prevent violence. In Kaduna and Flint, for example, some degree of power was devolved to the municipality but without concurrent budgetary authority, which provided national- and state-level authorities the ability to avoid blame when the local government failed to provide adequate protections for city residents.

Grassroots civil society organizations play a critical role in partnering with government authorities to prevent violence and holding them accountable when they fail. This happens in both “invited” and “invented” spaces.¹² Invited space is where civil society organizations engage with authorities through legitimized points of engagement. Invented space is space citizens create to confront and question power systems, including systems that contribute to IBMV. Governments must be willing to engage with their constituencies, whether initially in invited or invented spaces, even when constituents make challenging demands.

Recognizing, resourcing, and empowering municipal actors to prevent identity-based mass violence should be prioritized by the international community. International actors that primarily work with national governments should encourage their counterparts to recognize city leaders who are willing to engage in violence-prevention efforts. Furthermore, small but targeted assistance to cities to build capacity and train their personnel can go a long way toward protecting vulnerable groups and preventing violence. As Markowitz’s research found:

Neighborhood- and city-level actors, with their granular knowledge of their communities and constituencies, are valuable partners for disrupting and dismantling the root causes of structural violence in cities.¹³

Individual and Institutional Partnerships toward Justice and Healing

Meaningful steps toward justice and healing necessitate a victim-centered approach that works to change systems of structural violence while preventing and stopping direct violence. Particularly in cases where the government was culpable for incidents of violence, healing and justice processes can begin by recognizing the harm that was caused and steps being taken to address systemic injustice.

In most cases, this recognition falls short—in part because the acknowledgement of harm is implied in a statement about responsibility to prevent future harm. But it also often implies confronting a status quo ecosystem that benefits an influential elite. Confronting the relationship between this historical reckoning and current asymmetry of political and economic power is part of the process of bringing justice and healing to urban landscapes.

Another critical area is shaping and retelling shared narratives. Civil society organizations that work with survivors of violence can help bridge the gap between victims and perpetrators of violence (respecting that often victims are perpetrators and perpetrators themselves have been victimized). Taking this further, incorporating the voices of those excluded from power can help city residents and institutions reimagine public space as places for remembering, healing, and reconciliation, as well as tools to aid in these processes. In Ciudad Juárez, for example, the Municipal Institute for Women established an office in the historic city center (a place of encounter), where survivors of gender-based violence can find psychosocial support and healing. Per Markowitz:

Because urban space is imbued with meaning, the interactions between harm and space can impact people's capacity for active citizenship, compassion, and empathy. The quality of those interactions can contribute to, or detract from, cities' inherent dynamism and capacity for renewal.¹⁴

Conclusion

In all of the city cases, attackers or perpetrators of mass violence sought to dehumanize their victims as often as they sought to kill them. The relationship between dehumanization and violence is well established but not always sufficiently recognized. In order to ensure that dehumanizing rhetoric is urgently curtailed to safeguard human life, more can be done to collectively heed the tenuous line between violence that is structural and that which is acute.

While questions remain, there is a need to harness the collective capacities of the urban violence prevention community and the atrocity prevention community and to articulate a shared vision for urban safety. Effective prevention of identity-based mass violence in cities must provide space for healing, amplify the voices of harmed communities, integrate urban planning into prevention and healing, adapt urban peacebuilding to context, and commit to ethical commitment of care. These capacities exist—it is a matter of building a willingness to use them and a desire to collaborate in pursuit of a greater objective.

Endnotes

- ¹ Kristine Höglund, Emma Elfversson, and Ivan Gusic, “The Promise and Perils of Postwar Cities,” *Political Violence at a Glance* (blog), January 24, 2020, <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2020/01/24/the-promise-and-perils-of-postwar-cities/>.
- ² Impact:Peace, *Making the Case for Peace in Our Cities: Halving Urban Violence by 2030*, University of San Diego, October 2019, <https://www.sandiego.edu/peace/documents/ipj/real-3-4-20-evidence-brief.pdf>.
- ³ The research drew on the definition of “mass killing” from the Early Warning Project of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Protection Approaches’ definition of “identity-based violence.”
- ⁴ The nine cities studied were Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Mazar-i Sharif, Afghanistan; Kaduna, Nigeria; San Salvador, El Salvador; Nairobi, Kenya; Flint, Michigan, USA; Aleppo, Syria; Ciudad Juárez, Mexico; and Jerusalem, Israel.
- ⁵ Ariana Markowitz, *Big Events on a Small Scale: Exploring Identity-Based Mass Violence in Cities*, Stanley Center for Peace and Security, November 2020, <https://stanleycenter.org/publications/urban-atrocities>.
- ⁶ “Structural Violence,” ScienceDirect, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/structural-violence>.
- ⁷ Markowitz, *Big Events*, 14.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 8, 14.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ¹⁰ Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, “Responsibility to Protect,” United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.shtml>.
- ¹¹ Markowitz, *Big Events*, 16.
- ¹² Faranak Miraftab, “Invited and Invented Spaces of Participation: Neoliberal Citizenship and Feminists’ Expanded Notion of Politics,” *Wagadu* 1 (2004): 1–7.
- ¹³ Markowitz, *Big Events*, 15.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

This Discussion Paper is part of the Stanley Center for Peace and Security’s effort to understand how to prevent mass violence around the world and build resilience against risks through informed policies and practices. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Stanley Center.



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