

***From Research to Action: Activating Strategies for  
Violence Reduction amidst COVID-19***

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## **From Research to Action: Activating Strategies for Violence Reduction amidst COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven the maxim that what is local is global, and what is global is local. While infections spread rapidly from country to country and national governments took up almost battle-hardened responses, the implications of the virus were felt most concretely at the local level. Shining a light on both remarkable resilience as well as deep structural inequities, the virus acted almost as a blue light, highlighting realities of the human condition around the world that are present, but very often ignored.

In many locales and for many types of violence, the virus attached itself to pre-existing epidemics and conditions. Domestic and intimate partner violence, already massive public health disasters, became exacerbated by the stressors caused by COVID-19. In many locations, community-based violence (to include group or gang violence) declined for a short time, but then spiked up as structures, including community-based systems to prevent violence, were heavily impacted by the virus.

Within short order of COVID-19 being named a full-scale pandemic, cities around the world began to mobilize to respond. While much of this took the form of public health mobilization, cities also inherently understood that there would be public safety implications. In March of 2020 members of the Peace in Our Cities network were surveyed as to the primary violence concerns they anticipated facing as the pandemic spread. Their primary concerns were prioritized into the following six areas: (1) violence against women; (2) violence in informal settlements; (3) violence associated with organized crime/criminal groups; (4) city interaction with national or state policy; (5) social media's influence on violence; and (6) relationships between communities and law enforcement.

Based on these priorities, Peace in Our Cities undertook action research to deliver knowledge of best practice to advance public safety in the context of the pandemic. This research took the form of discussing evidence of “what works,” alongside initial thinking on how to adapt such practice in the context of the pandemic. This essay will present key findings from the research, including how the findings are being actively integrated into city planning and policy discussions by city governments and local civil society organizations. It will explore how cities can enhance public safety and public health simultaneously, and in a way that strives to build peace across city networks around the world.

## **Peace in Our Cities**

The Peace in Our Cities network emerged out of an urgent demand to address the scale of urban violence facing cities around the world. Launched on the International Day of Peace in September 2019, Peace in Our Cities (PiOC) brings together the political leadership of mayors with the power of civil society and the imperatives of the Sustainable Development Goals to boldly assert that we have the tools and knowledge to build peace and save lives in urban areas. With 20 cities signed on as of August 2021, PiOC represents over 25 million people globally. Working together through evidence-based approaches, PiOC is committed to achieving a 50 percent reduction in urban violence by 2030.

In the face of increased difficulties from the COVID-19 pandemic, PiOC remains dedicated to supporting city efforts to reduce violence. Network members have been clear: their urgent priority is advancing public health while simultaneously reinforcing public safety. The research presented here is a direct response to that demand, bringing forth knowledge and practical tools to deliver on violence prevention goals in the highly dynamic context presented by COVID-19.

In 2018, 596,000 people worldwide lost their lives to direct violence. Of these lives lost, the vast majority (409,000) were a result of intentional homicides, with much of these homicides taking place in cities.<sup>1</sup> As political contestations move increasingly to

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<sup>1</sup> Out of the total 2018 global violent death count, 409,000 people were the victims of intentional homicides, 105,000 were defined as conflict casualties and the remainder were either unintentional homicides or “legal interventions.” Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper, February 2021. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-SANA-BP-GVD-scenarios.pdf>.

urban contexts, as has been seen in Mosul, Idlib and Bangui, conflict-related violence further impacts cities and their surrounding areas. Currently 55 percent of humanity resides in urban areas – a number expected to rise to nearly 70 percent by 2050.<sup>2</sup> With more people moving to cities, it is imperative to deploy strategies that help ensure safety for all urban residents.

While in large part cities represent the power and potential of our collective humanity, for far too many people, the benefits of collective urban life are elusive. Nearly half of all people – 44 percent – in mid-size<sup>3</sup> cities face epidemic levels of violence.<sup>4</sup> Over one billion people globally live in informal settlements (“slums”), most often within or on the fringes of major cities. Providing service – both infrastructure service like water and electricity, and public safety service such as outreach work and responsible policing – is a particular challenge in these areas where capacity and resource gaps are amplified by existing inequities. Political and social inequalities reinforce, and are often the underlying reason for, these gaps, creating not only technical but also political challenges that make systemic change immensely difficult. Further, while it is men and boys who are vastly more impacted by lethal violence, women, girls, LGBTQ+ and gender-non-conforming individuals are disproportionately threatened with a range of forms of less-than-lethal violence.

Whether it takes place in informal settlements or otherwise, violence in urban contexts is often chronic, affecting specific populations more than others. This violence tends to run in a vicious cycle where trauma, disenfranchisement, prejudice, exclusion and poor policy “solutions” compound one another, reinforcing simplistic notions of “bad neighborhoods” or “bad people.” While urban violence is complex, reactions to it too often conform to overly simplistic enforcement-oriented responses that pay insufficient attention to the structural drivers of violence, risk violating human rights, and fail to prevent violence in the long term. At the same

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<sup>2</sup> “68% Of the World Population Projected to Live in Urban Areas by 2050, Says UN.” UN DESA: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, May 16, 2018. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Mid-sized” defined here as having populations between 250,000-500,000.

<sup>4</sup> Small Arms Survey. “Urban Violence or Urban Peace: Why Are Some Cities Safer than Others?” Medium, January 12, 2018. <https://medium.com/@SmallArmsSurvey/urban-violence-or-urban-peace-why-are-some-cities-safer-than-others-8626435dd5c7>.

time, as the *Peace in Our Cities in a Time of Pandemic* report suggests, cities are also spaces of true innovation and resilience when it comes to addressing violence—cities have demonstrated greater effectiveness in reducing violence than nations overall their national counterparts.<sup>5</sup> For all of these reasons—the global percentage of people who lives in cities, the unique challenges cities face in relation to violence, and the range of effective responses that have developed—urban violence merits special attention.

When COVID-19 began its pernicious spread, governments, researchers, policy influencers, individuals and organizations scrambled to monitor and respond to its implications on public safety. Observers noted a degree of relatively consistent effects across regions and countries. Consistent effects included social destabilization, an uptick in violence within the home, a deepening of pre-existing vulnerabilities, heightened spread of disinformation and manipulation of fear, xenophobia and “othering” towards populations perceived to be spreading the virus, and constrained budgets and shifts in work practice—including violence preventive practice. More varied impacts related to violence and public safety were also observed, with significant ranges in areas such as arms purchasing, non-domestic violence (i.e. community violence and conflict-type violence), political manipulations, and effectiveness of ceasefires. Bringing attention to these observed implications has been imperative in helping city-based actors, both governmental and non-government, prioritize response and prevention options, particularly given resource constraints, staff pressures, public health restrictions and more. The research undertaken by PiOC was aimed at helping to inform those response options.

As a group, PiOC members made a decision to ground all research in three fundamental principles:

1. Peace in Our Cities is focused both on addressing the expression of violence taking place today, while simultaneously reinforcing positive peace in the long term. We must reduce the violence impacting people and communities today, keep it down tomorrow, and reinforce more peaceful urban

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<sup>5</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *States of Fragility 2015: Meeting Post-2015 Ambitions*, OECD Publishing, Paris. 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264227699-en>.

landscapes in the long term. We appreciate that different capacities may need to be brought to bear to achieve these aims.

2. All research should be action oriented in nature with a focus not only on the what but also on the how. Operationalizing good practice requires not only technical tools but also practice and process tools.
3. Research must embed violence within its spatial and historical context. Violence typically concentrates in certain areas, with some parts of the city and some individuals impacted more and differently than others based on structural marginalization, exclusion and inequality. The action research described below takes this fact as central across all thematic areas such that it is appropriately responsive to these fundamental dynamics.

In the aggregate, the research is aimed at communicating the imperative of recognizing and sufficiently resourcing frontline organizations – governmental and non-governmental – doing the work of building safe communities for all. Further, our research surfaced four key themes that emerged across geographies and types of violence. First, we saw exceptional strength in community-driven responses. In large part, these efforts were due to the vitality and ingenuity of women and young people. The essential, life-saving action taken by women and youth stands in contrast to their relative power dispossession around the world – an irony all too long understood, but all too often ignored. Second, the urgency of the pandemic motivated efficient and very often effective cross-sector collaboration. This collaboration, when effective, helped to build trust, legitimacy and accountability. A key take-away that should be carried through to a post-COVID-19 world: if collaboration is possible during a crisis, it must also be possible outside of a crisis. Given the integrated nature of violence, this should lend credence to calls for greater cross-sector collaboration in the long term.

Third, technology was leveraged to support pre-existing efforts to reduce violence. The online space offered significant opportunities for adaptation across different types of violence, from violence against women to more organized group-activated violence. However, as in all areas of intervention, there is a potential for harm in the application of technology, an effect that was seen through spread of mis- and disinformation throughout the

pandemic. Finally, the all-too-often-overlooked dynamics between cities and their national government counterparts fundamentally constrain or enable effective violence prevention and public safety. While public pressure is often applied at either the city or national level, it is very often constraints between these levels of government that undermine progress. Much more concerted analysis can and should be done on how to overcome these constraints and activate their respective positive capacities to support peaceful cities.

This research captured the real-life experiences of city residents, policymakers, non-governmental actors, and city government officials during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. At its core, the research set out to provide city-based actors with the tools and interventions needed to build peaceful, just, and inclusive urban centers throughout and beyond the pandemic.

## Research Findings

Around the world, one billion people live in informal settlements, representing one out of eight people; by 2050, this number is expected to increase to roughly three billion people. Informal settlements are characterized by “weak provision of public services, heightened levels of poverty, low levels of trust in the authorities, and, in some cases, high rates of crime and violence.”<sup>6</sup> Informal settlements are also often spaces where those on the losing end of social inequalities find themselves relegated, compounding resource constraints with social prejudices, disenfranchisement and state-initiated harm. And while many living in informal settlements are exceptionally resourceful and resilient, ambitions are all too often undermined by crime and violence. In a national survey in informal settlements in South Africa, for example, one-quarter of respondents said that the fear of crime deters them from setting up businesses.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Peace in Our Cities in a Time of Pandemic. University of San Diego. March 2021. Available at <https://catcher.sandiego.edu/items/usd/Peace%20in%20Our%20Cities%20in%20a%20Time%20of%20Pandemic%204.29.21.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Norul Mohamed Rashid, “Global Report on Human Settlements 2007: Enhancing Urban Safety and Security,” United Nations and the Rule of Law (blog), accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/blog/document/global-report-on-human-settlements-2007-enhancing-urban-safety-and-security/>.

An immediate fear as COVID-19 spread was the impact on food security. From the outset of the pandemic, stampedes, looting and rioting by people desperate to secure food for themselves and their families occurred around the world. The heightened competition for, and violence over, food distribution prompted cities to call for more learning from one another about solutions that were demonstrating positive results. In Medellin, Colombia, for example, the Food and Agricultural Organization's (FAO) City Region Food Assistance Toolkit helped to provide guidance that linked cities with surrounding food producing regions. In Quito, Ecuador, vulnerable urban residents were trained in organic farming techniques and established open-air markets to sell their surplus produce, which led to 2,500 urban gardens and 16,700 people trained using the Participatory Urban Agriculture scheme. Generally, the ingenuity of those living in informal settlements – when harnessed and supported – proved to be life-saving as it alleviated food insecurity, but also alleviated financial pressures that could have otherwise led to massive social unrest and violence. Key here is ensuring that institutions aid in supporting social innovation, rather than hampering it. Appropriately involving policing and justice actors was similarly key, for example to ensure transit lines for food delivery remained open even given pandemic restrictions.

Roughly one-third of all women and girls globally experience physical or emotional violence in their lifetime.<sup>8</sup> As COVID-19 worked its way around the globe and countries responded with stay-at-home orders, the amount of violence directed against women and girls spiked dramatically. Rates of violence against women and girls increased at varying degrees, ranging from 25 percent to 50 percent over a baseline that was already far from acceptable. Quarantine, social isolation, diminished protective service capacity and the emotional and economic toll of the pandemic compounded pre-existing gender disparities in such a way that threatened the lives of millions around the world. Violence against women and girls is a complex phenomenon driven by numerous factors. Any effective response requires a multi-sectoral response – just the type of effort that was put under immense strain as a result of the pandemic.

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<sup>8</sup> World Health Organization, accessed March 25, 2021. <https://www.who.int/news/item/09-03-2021-devastatingly-pervasive-1-in-3-women-globally-experience-violence>.



The documented spike in of gender-based violence in the first several months of the pandemic was shocking enough that it provoked a considerable amount of action. Technology was harnessed to set up hotlines, crowdsource reporting, embed victim assistance calls to avoid detection, shift renewal of protection orders from in-person to online, and more – changes that may benefit violence prevention systems in the long term. In São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, police allowed online domestic violence case reporting, and judges were authorized to grant emergency protective measures virtually and through WhatsApp.

In the offline space, pharmacists provided code words for women to covertly indicate they were under threat, safety checks were done using messages in grocery bags, and mutual aid societies broke down social isolation, while local governments in many cities led campaigns to bring attention to the “pandemic within a pandemic” of violence against women. In New York City and Mexico City, services for victims of violence were deemed “essential”, allowing them to remain open. In Mexico City, this was enhanced by an online mapping of services for victims. In Valparaíso, Chile, the Safe City and Safe Public Spaces Initiative worked with the Mayor’s office to promote bystander interventions for violence against women (VAW) in public spaces during COVID-19. In Madrid, the municipal government launched the NoEstásSola campaign focused on inter-personal violence (IPV), human trafficking, and broader gender-based violence to share information and raise awareness both virtually and on radio and television. As vaccine rollout continues, and the world looks at what a “return to normalcy” might resemble, the question remains as to whether the spotlight the pandemic shined on the scope of VAW will be enough to compel the scale of change needed to reverse trends.

The pandemic led to other, sometimes less visible forms of violence and threats as well. The online space, and social media in particular, has influenced and been influenced by COVID-19. The public health measures that prompted massive shifts to online education, work and social life also prompted criminal activity to shift online. Scapegoating, fear and isolation caused by the pandemic gave rise to xenophobia; ethnic, racial and religious identity-based violence; extremism; and gender-based violence. This resulted in cities’ efforts to combat digital threats fueling violence and division among communities, as well as increasing calls for

public safety. In Cape Town, organizations used social media to analyze polarization, divisive rhetoric and narrative manipulation related to xenophobia and COVID-19. In Mumbai, the SafeCity app invites anonymous reporting of sexual and gender-based violence, which is then used to lobby local government and security forces to stop violence and harassment. In Ghana, the Primero X app by UNICEF and Microsoft helps social service providers coordinate support to vulnerable children who may be experiencing violence in the home. These online tools proved invaluable during the height of lockdown, and offer a way for cities to harness the positive potential of technology moving forward.

Although struggling with the fall-out from online incitement, cities have often had a hard time influencing terms of use or individual engagement in digital platforms, which typically takes place at national or international levels. Even with such limitations on influence, cities rapidly developed innovative and effective tools to confront disinformation, overcome divisions, and address mental health dimensions leading to risk-taking behavior. In particular, the collaboration seen between city governments, youth, tech companies and others should be taken as a clear signal of the strength that comes in partnership, underscoring the idea that preventing violence and building peace is solidarity-reinforcing.

One of the impacts of the shift to online space was the utilization of that space by organized criminal groups (OCGs). But OCG behavior shifted in the real-world space as well, in highly context-specific ways that ranged from the provision of items to respond to urgent needs, to the hardening of positions of power and the reinforcement of territorial control. As the pandemic continues, many OCGs will work to strengthen their status and positions in communities, expand control of illicit and licit markets, and exploit weak oversight and inadequate transparency with corrupt state officials. The latter can also contribute to further erosion of trust in local government institutions. Local responses to this have included expanding social programs to reduce the appeal of OCGs. In Mexico City, the Barrio Adentro (Inside the Neighborhood) program has a localized approach to provide social services to vulnerable communities and to prevent youth recruitment into organized criminal groups.

While OCGs in many parts of the world look to strengthen their positions of influence, there are also examples of local governments and civil society asserting their legitimacy. In some places there has been a degree of competition for public appreciation through the doling out of food items, protective gear and “stay-at-home” support. To reduce the likelihood of public sector complicity with OCGs or rent-seeking, local governments in some locales helped to set up monitoring systems with local residents to ensure transparency of budget allocations. In Patzicia, Guatemala, 150 households set up a Neighborhood Association to monitor COVID-19 initiatives run by the municipal government to prevent corruption. Confronting disinformation can also be valuable in limiting the operating space for OCGs. Los Angeles, for example, stopped companies from making false advertising and selling unapproved items, and established a collaboration with US Attorney’s Office to reinforce crack-downs.

As evidenced in all of the examples in this research, community and government relations have heavily influenced the facilitation or hindrance of public safety in the wake of COVID-19. The pandemic exacerbated pressure on law enforcement, while also worsening conditions for police officers and creating great uncertainty and vulnerability for civilians. While the pandemic revealed longstanding tensions between police and communities in many locales, it has also spurred new innovations in law enforcement practice in collaboration with communities. Across Latin America, police agencies in 10 large cities have diversified channels of communication with the public, reduced number of arrests for minor offenses, and assisted with distribution of food, medicines and other essential goods. The Māori (New Zealand) set up roadside checkpoints to manage access areas, done with support of police and helped reinforce self-determination as regards safety provision.

Research makes clear that where law enforcement earns the trust of residents and is thereby perceived as legitimate – where there is a positive relationship, to put it simply – there tends to be less community violence. Where the relationship is negative, there tends to be more violence. This is not necessarily a causal claim – there is a lot at play within those dynamics – but the correlation does demand attention to relational matters. In many cities, COVID-19 exacerbated pre-existing predatory or abusive use of force by police against communities, further undermining prospects for

fruitful partnerships between them. The implications of this negative dynamic will resound for years to come.

The pandemic cast a bright light on the inherently connective tissue between what is “local” and what is “global” reminding us that hard and fast categorical separations are, in fact, quite integrated. The final area of investigation for this research focused on how these local-national dynamics influence violence prevention, how to harmonize local and national policy, and what has been learned as a result of the pandemic. The struggle to address violence requires both immediate and more medium- to long-term measures. To fully understand both the violence and the dynamics of response, one must consider how both are embedded not only within a historical context but also within nested levels of governance, from local to regional, to national, and even global. In Cape Town, for example, local leaders recommended priorities to the national government addressing group/gang violence, including the creation of a specialized police unit. While this may prove beneficial in the short term, it could result in longer-term intensification of structural violence and systemic deprivation.

Our research further exposed myriad examples of cities that are striving to advance effective prevention measures in the context of an unsupportive national environment, highlighting key strategies of collaboration and networking. Barcelona’s City of Refuge program countered restrictions around migration, in direct defiance of restrictive national policy on refugees and asylum seekers. During COVID-19, the program’s existing relationships allowed for outreach to communities otherwise undocumented or left out of more official channels.

## **Conclusion**

At the most basic level, this research, and Peace in Our Cities more broadly, has evidenced the power of networks. This work is grounded in practical experiences from city members—from the initial phase of city government and civil society groups prioritizing their areas of concern, to engaging a group of experts to expand our knowledge base, to sharing practical experiences through organized webinars, to establishing connections between city members on implementation of these best practices. Birds flock together precisely so that they can go for longer, supporting one another

through the air, pushing through wind that could otherwise exhaust two single wings alone. This is the crux of the goals behind Peace in Our Cities.

Overcoming violence takes perseverance, commitment to the evidence, and dedication to those most affected. It also takes one another. We will not succeed alone. This research shows how cities – made up of individuals, families, communities, governments – are striving to uphold a commitment to freedom from fear for all residents. They remind us that while we all must get much more ambitious with our goals to preserve life and reduce violence, the solutions can be right in front of us—among our neighbors, colleagues and local organizations.

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