



PHOTO: SHAUN SWINGLER

## Social cohesion: solution or driver of urban violence?

*Social cohesion can play an important role in building and maintaining vibrant communities. But research in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro led by South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and Brazil's Laboratory for the Analysis of Violence (LAV-UERJ) shows how social bonds and stark inequalities can also play a role in fueling violence by criminal gangs and vigilantes.*

Across the global South, urban violence is an increasing concern. Rapid urbanization, weak city governance, and social inequalities have led to marginalization, concentrating the highest levels of violence in historically-disadvantaged areas within urban centres.

Brazil and South Africa, both middle-income countries, have high rates of violence and inequality concentrated in the poorest neighbourhoods of their cities. Policymakers are seeking violence prevention and reduction strategies that reflect their countries' unique demographic, cultural, social, and economic realities.

## The challenge: What role can social cohesion play?

A large body of research in countries of the global North has explored the role of social cohesion as a factor linking violence, inequality, and poverty. Efforts to strengthen community ties and trust in institutions have since entered the mainstream of violence prevention programs. But to date, little research has been done in the global South on the role of social cohesion in reducing urban violence.

To address this gap, the HSRC and LAV-UERJ and research partners explored whether social cohesion and collective action can help reduce violence in two cities with high levels of inequality and poverty: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Cape Town, South Africa. Researchers investigated two intervention programs intended to reduce violence:

### The two faces of social cohesion

What is social cohesion?



Works differently in global North and global South

State interventions in poor neighbourhoods with high levels of inequality:



Can increase civic cooperation...



or lead to gangs and vigilantism



Authorities, communities must work together to strengthen social cohesion, reduce violence

- The Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) program in Cape Town's Khayelitsha township; and,
- The Pacifying Police Units in two favelas of Rio de Janeiro (PPU).

## Two faces of social cohesion

In both countries, findings show that poorer communities display strong social bonds and the ability to work together for a common goal. But in neighbourhoods with a history of inequality, these social bonds can be undemocratic and authoritarian: on the one hand, communities come together to hold meetings and organize

themselves to deal with high levels of violence; on the other hand, these same social connections can take the form of gang violence or vigilantism.

### Does poverty contribute to crime?

Researchers in South Africa found that daily exposure to inequality combined with poverty, was a key driver of violence, rather than poverty *per se*.

In Brazil, neighbourhoods that experienced extreme poverty and low high school education 20 years ago have the highest homicide rates now. Lower homicide rates reflected income distribution and access to quality education.

One expression of these particular social ties can be found in the drug gangs that dominate the Rio de Janeiro favelas, where citizens were caught between two competing sources of authority — the gangs and the police.

In Cape Town's Khayelitsha settlement, the study found many examples of mutual help and solidarity based on the South African ethos of *Ubuntu* (we are human through others). But this solidarity can also lead to vigilante action against those perceived as foreigners or criminals.

## Unintended consequences of violence prevention

In both Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro, the violence prevention interventions had unexpected effects on social cohesion. In the Rio favelas of Tabajaras/Cabritos, pacification policing reduced violence, but it gentrified public space. This undermined existing social bonds among residents. In *Cidade de Deus* the introduction of the pacification units led to a shift of resources from civil society to the state intervention, eroding existing civil society organization. The presence of the police did not displace the informal rule of drug gangs, leaving citizens with competing formal and informal local regulation systems.

In Khayelitsha, VPUU consults with communities, but does this by creating its own parallel structures to existing representative bodies, which complicates fragile processes of community engagement and current networks of cohesion.

## Looking ahead: pathways to policy impact

Researchers are engaging directly with policymakers, disseminating their findings and influencing policy debates through concrete recommendations on violence prevention interventions, such as:

- When designing interventions take into account that social cohesion may take different forms in the global North and South.
- Recognize positive and negative expressions of social cohesion.
- Develop an in-depth understanding of the local social context and local values to inform interventions.
- Involve communities democratically in designing and implementing violence prevention interventions.
- Strengthen local institutions that can reinforce positive social ties.

In South Africa, they are working with the Secretariat for Safety and Security, the Western Cape Department of Community Safety, and VPUU to improve programming. In Brazil, researchers are active in policy discussions, presenting their findings to the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into police killings, the Public Security Commission of Rio de Janeiro, and the State Council for the Defense of Human Rights.

In both cases, knowing how social ties can protect — or threaten — communities will strengthen measures to create safer cities.

### MULTI-FUNDER INITIATIVE



**Safe and Inclusive Cities** is a global research effort jointly funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Launched in 2012, it supports 15 multidisciplinary teams working in 40 cities across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America to build evidence on the connections between urban violence, poverty, and inequalities.

### Safe and Inclusive Cities

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