

Considering the Contribution of Public and Private Security Providers to Endemic Urban Violence

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Public security institutions that are either unable or unwilling to discharge their duties can trigger and intensify urban violence. Urban violence in turn often has dramatic implications for regional and domestic security as well as aid effectiveness. Yet the relationships between the public institutions responsible for providing security and endemic urban violence are not straightforward. There are factors both external and internal to public institutions that shape the onset and severity of insecurity. Indeed, the causes and character of urban violence, the heterogeneity of actors instigating and containing it, and the range of interventions deployed to address must all be taken into consideration.

The dynamics of endemic urban violence

Endemic urban violence is at the axis of full-scale conflict and low-level inter-personal and domestic victimization. While there is no agreed empirical 'threshold' for what is considered endemic or not, there are parameters to the concept. Endemic violence tends to include a degree of sustained above-average rates of violence, a degree of (collective) action and a combination of motivations. It is not restricted to war zones. Nor is it associated exclusively with high levels of criminality. Indeed, endemic urban violence can be perpetrated by groups of predatory bandits or *raskols* in Port Moresby, *mara* gangs in San Salvador or Guatemala City, or reconstituted combatant units—such as *les cobras*, *cocoyes* or *ninjas*—serving as militia or civil guards in Brazzaville.¹ What is more, the structure of endemic violence is constitutive and dynamic, depending on interests and available resources. Previously 'unorganized' actors can assume more 'organized' functions.²

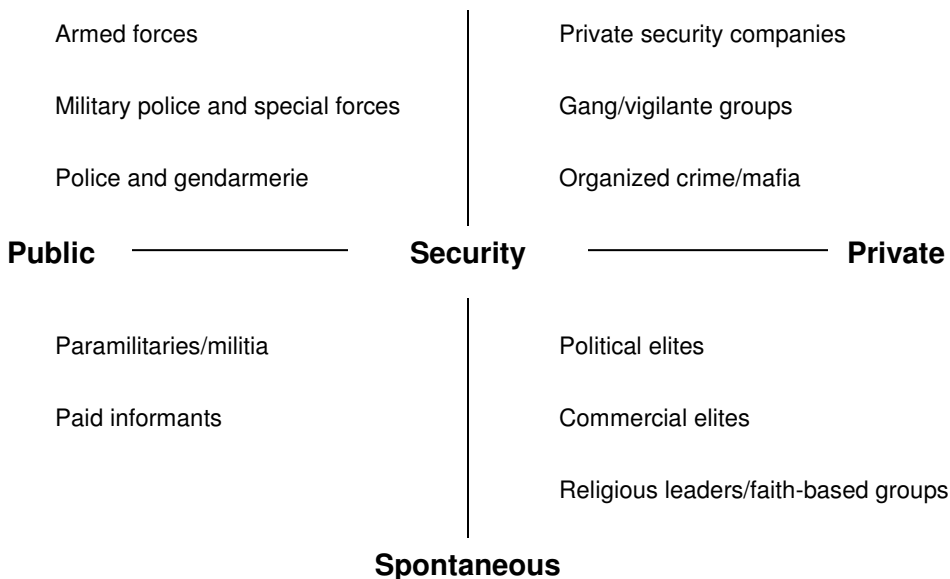
In upper-income settings, endemic urban violence is often associated with organized or smaller-scale criminality.³ In lower- and middle-income contexts, however, it is often political as much as criminal in nature and at times interconnected with larger armed conflicts and their aftermath. Manifestations of such violence include clashes between rival political (or communal) factions, between state officials (police and security forces), and may be a reaction to repressive violence by state institutions against its population. Caracas, ranked as the second most violent city in Latin America, witnessed escalating rates of political violence (an 800 per cent increase between 1999 and 2004) owing to clashes between demonstrators and the police—with deaths recorded as 'resistance to authority' or classified as 'other violent deaths' rather than homicide.⁴ Likewise, escalating violence in Kingston, Port-au-Prince, and Port-of-Spain reveal how collusive relationships between politicians and gang leaders can turn violent when the state security apparatus becomes involved.⁵

Security providers

A bewildering array of public and private security providers may contribute to the onset and virulence of endemic urban violence. 'Public' (formal) and 'private' (informal) security providers can be categorized according to the level and type of organizational dynamics (see Figure 1). They may be operating according to a combination of greed-grievance motives, and their strategies to deploy and shore up may vary according to context. These actors are directly and indirectly related—the real and perceived legitimacy of one may affect the legitimacy (and effectiveness/capacities) of the other. They are also connected by ideology, intent, ethnicity or other identity markers, such as gang colours, tattoos or signs. Nevertheless, their affiliations do not necessarily guarantee predictable (or rational) patterns of behaviour.

In many cities, public security providers are regarded as amongst the least credible proponents of law and order. This may be a function of their real or perceived politicization, their overly aggressive tactics, or a legacy of neglect. In such cases, private security actors often acquire new forms of legitimacy through coercion or displays of service provision, as well as constituting informal systems of profit and power.⁶ As such, they directly and indirectly challenge public authority by occupying spaces left in the absence of state presence and acquire certain functions of statehood, as have gangs in Mexico City and in São Paulo.⁷

Figure 1: Agents of public and private security
Organized



Interventions that contribute to and/or contain endemic urban violence

Although there are some indications of good practice with respect to the public provision of security, in many countries the twin principles of necessity and proportionality that underpin the legitimate use of force fall short of international standards.⁸ The means by which public security forces contribute to urban violence span a continuum from repressive to unaccountable service provision. It should be noted that enforcement (as compared to interventions that seek to build compliance or that operate through voluntary means) are not in and of themselves negative. But tough action such as cordon-and-search activities or intelligence-led weapons seizures are often more effective when undertaken by accountable and

responsive security actors and in combination with other interventions designed to address structural and proximate risks.

Repressive interventions by state or municipal security forces—whether ‘crack-down’ operations, forcible disarmament or more subtle forms of intimidation—may well beget more violence. The case of interventions by heavily armed military police brigades in the *favelas* of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro to confront equally (or asymmetrically) armed gangs is a case in point, as are similar operations in inner-city slums of Port-au-Prince, administered by the Haitian National Police in cooperation with UN Peacekeepers (MINUSTAH).⁹ While yielding short-term dividends (such tactics contain armed violence and send out a signal to the middle and upper echelons of society that action is being taken), they fail to redress endemic violence—often sustained by influential inmates in the country’s prisons or by commercial actors—in the long-term.

While now widely recognized in the security sector reform communities, there are important dividends to be reaped from ‘community policing’ and investment in careful stakeholder analysis, prudent partnerships, and the development of well-trained and trusted security providers that deliberately work in cooperation with legitimate municipal authorities. The use of force and firearms can be reduced where the police pursue policies and practices that have the consent of the public—especially the poor, themselves most alienated from the police.¹⁰ Yet when partnerships with the public are developed in undemocratic or factional ways, the marginalized may be excluded, and partnerships themselves may fall under the sway of more powerful local groups and political associations that seek to influence these institutions.

The international donor community is increasingly preoccupied with the failure of public security provision. A rash of new development guidelines and standards are emerging that seek to address pervasive credibility gaps (i.e. real and perceived illegitimacy of the security sector), capacity gaps (e.g. limited capabilities and resources) and protection gaps (e.g. the emergence of unaccountable and predatory private security actors).¹¹ Yet the challenge of endemic urban violence requires a rethinking of the donor and security landscapes. Policymakers and practitioners frequently seek to ‘empower’ national institutions despite the fact that interventions ought to adopt a municipal focus. Instead of relying on conventional public security agents and enforcement interventions, donors would do well to recognize the diversity of actors and interests, acknowledge novel approaches to violence prevention and reduction, and adopt a bottom-up and evidence-based approach to security promotion.

¹ On Papua New Guinea, see Nicole Haley and Robert Muggah, “Jumping the Gun: Armed Violence in Papua New Guinea,” *Small Arms Survey 2006: Unfinished Business* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Robert Muggah, “Diagnosing Demand: Assessing the Motivations and Means for Firearms Acquisition in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea,” Discussion Paper 2004/7, Australian National University (2004); on El Salvador and Guatemala: UNDP, *The Economic Cost of Violence in Guatemala* (Guatemala: UNDP/PNUD, 2006); and William Godnick, Camilla Waszink and Robert Muggah, “Balas perdidas: el impacto del mal uso de armas pequeñas en Centroamérica,” Occasional Paper 5, *Small Arms Survey* (2003); on Brazzaville: Robert Muggah and Ryan Nichols, *Quoi de neuf sur le front congolais ? Evaluation de base sur la circulation des armes légères et de petit calibre en République du Congo* (Geneva/Brazzaville: Small Arms Survey/UNDP, 2007).

² See, for example, Jurgen Brauer and Robert Muggah, “Completing the Circle: A Theory of Firearms Demand,” *Journal of Contemporary Security Policy* 27.1 (2006) for a review of motivations and means shaping resort to armed violence.

³ There are of course exceptions to the rule, such as the extensive networks of gangs in Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Manchester. Malcolm Klein, “Gangs in the United States and Europe,” *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 4.2 (1996); Dennis Mares, “Gangstas or Lager Louts? Working Class Street Gangs in Manchester,” in Malcolm Klein, Ed. *The Eurogang Paradox: Street Gangs and Youth Groups in the U.S. and Europe* (New York: Springer Press, 2001); Malcolm Klein, “The Value of Comparisons in Street Gang Research”, in James Short and Lorine Hughes, Eds., *Studying Youth Gangs* (New York: Rowman Altamira, 2006).

⁴ Brodie Ferguson, "Urban Security in Caracas," Small Arms Survey, Background Paper (2007).

⁵ See, for example, Robert Muggah, "How to Fight Gangsters in Rio", *The Mark*, 22 December 2010, <http://www.themarknews.com/articles/3437-how-to-fight-gangsters-in-rio>; Robert Muggah, "Jamaica's War on Gangs", OpenDemocracy, 13 September 2010, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/robert-muggah-glaister%2%A0leslie/jamaicas-war-on-gangs>; Robert Muggah, "Fighting the Gang Threat", *The Mark*, 10 May 2010, <http://www.themarknews.com/articles/1475-fighting-the-gang-threat>; Robert Muggah, "Dealing with Haiti's Gangs", *Ottawa Citizen*, 18 January 2010, <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/news/Dealing+with+Haiti+gangs/2462207/story.html><<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/news/Dealing+with+Haiti+gangs/2462207/story.html>

⁶ William Reno, "Order and commerce in turbulent areas: 19th century lessons, 21st century practice," *Third World Quarterly* 25.4 (2004).

⁷ See John Rapley, "The New Middle Ages," *Foreign Affairs* 85.3 (2006).

⁸ For a comprehensive review of armed violence prevention and reduction programmes consult Robert Muggah and Achim Wenmann, *Mapping Security Promotion: A Global Review of Armed Violence Prevention and Reduction* (Paris: OECD/UNDP, 2010).

⁹ Oliver Jütersonke, Keith Krause and Robert Muggah, "Guns in the City: Urban Landscapes of Armed Violence," in *Small Arms Survey 2007: Guns and the City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also Robert Muggah "Stabilization and Humanitarian Action in Haiti" *Disasters* 34: pp. 444–S463.

¹⁰ See Small Arms Survey, *Small Arms Survey 2009: Shadows of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹¹ OECD-DAC, *The OECD-DAC Handbook on SSR: Supporting Security and Justice* (Paris: OECD-DAC, 2007); OECD-DAC, *Guidance on Preventing and Reducing Armed Violence* (Paris: OECD-DAC, 2008); IDDRS, *International Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Standards* (New York: IDDRW, 2006); and Robert Muggah, *Listening for Change: Participatory Evaluations of DDR and Arms Reduction in Mali, Cambodia and Albania* (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2005).