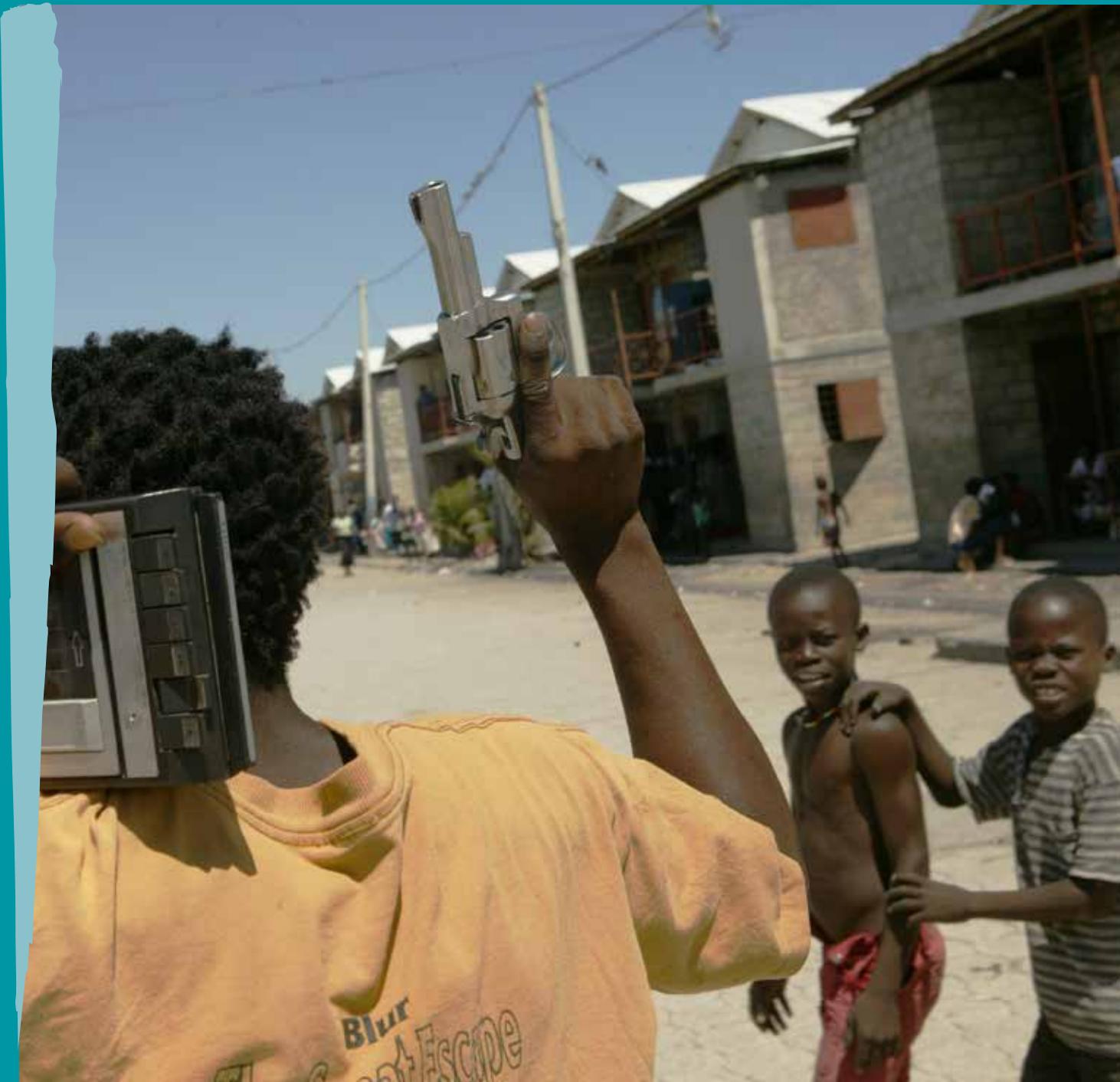




## Protecting children affected by armed violence in the community



Cover photo caption: Two boys watch a youth from a local gang who is brandishing a gun while listening to his radio, on a street in the seaside slum of Cite Soleil in Port-au-Prince, the capital.

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# Protecting children affected by armed violence in the community



## Ending violence against children

Sustainable Development Goals

Target 16.2

## 2 Protecting children affected by armed violence in the community

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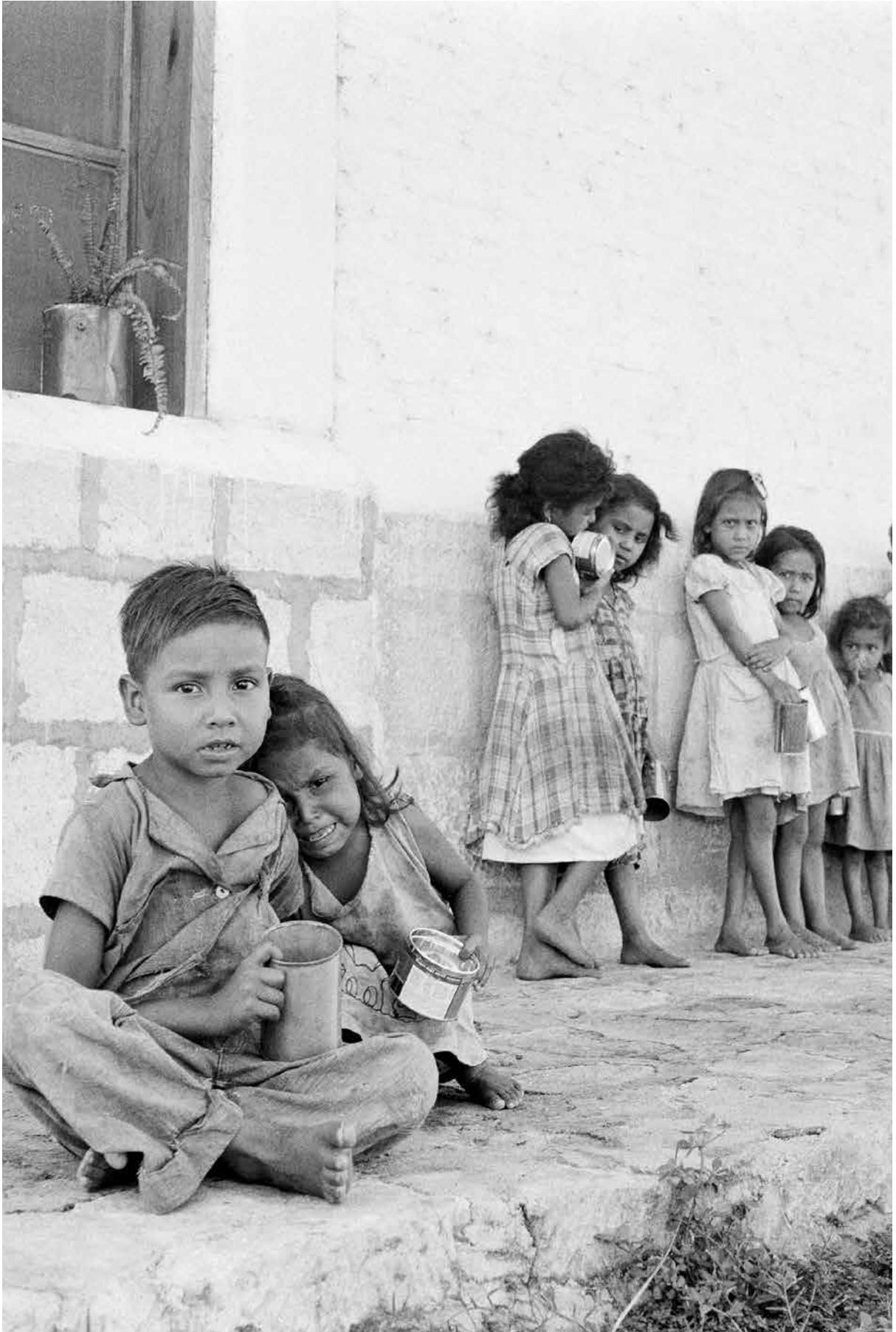
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### THE TRAGEDIES OF ARMED VIOLENCE

- Johannesburg, South Africa, July 2015 – An 11-year-old schoolgirl was getting on a minibus when she was shot, caught in the crossfire of an argument between two men. She died from her wounds; two other teenage girls were injured.<sup>1</sup>
- Batangas, Philippines, September 2015 – Four children were abducted at night by men who forced them into a van at gunpoint. The victims were aged 14, 11 and two boys of 12. The three younger children had been out scavenging for plastic to sell.<sup>2</sup>
- Salford, UK, October 2015 – A 7-year-old boy was shot at close range along with his mother when they answered a knock on their door one evening. The shooters were believed to be gang members targeting the little boy's father. He spent a month in hospital recovering from injuries that shattered his left leg.<sup>3</sup>
- Paraná, Argentina, July 2015 – Public School N° 111 suspended classes due to security concerns, after a series of incidents including a teenager being shot in front of the school and windows being broken by bullets.<sup>4</sup>
- Tennessee, USA, October 2015 – An 8-year-old girl was killed by the boy next door firing his father's shotgun. She was playing outside and had refused to let the boy, age 11, play with her puppy. The boy had bullied her in the past. After the shooting he was charged with murder and taken to a juvenile detention center.<sup>5</sup>
- San Salvador, El Salvador, November 2015 – The Benjamin Bloom Children's Hospital reported that it has admitted 36 children with gunshot wounds in the first 11 months of the year, compared with 25 in the same period in 2014 and 19 in 2013.<sup>6</sup>



## 1. Introduction

Armed violence in the community compromises children's rights and is associated with serious risks for their development and safety, causing children to be injured, disabled, traumatized, exploited, orphaned, imprisoned and at times killed. Living in a community affected by armed violence has consequences for children who are targeted as well as those who witness or feel threatened by such an environment. Armed violence disrupts social harmony and family life, interrupts schooling, compromises health care, undermines economic development and generates fear which limits children's ability to move freely, participate in the life of their community, enjoy childhood and develop as empowered citizens.

Protecting children from the impact of armed violence in the community<sup>7</sup> is a priority concern for the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and is being pursued in cooperation with a wide range of partners within and beyond the United Nations. This is a topic also on the agenda of the Coordinating Action on Small Arms<sup>8</sup> in which the Special Representative participates together with UN agencies to address the impact of weapons on human rights, development, crime, terrorism, gender, youth, health and humanitarian activities.

The UN Study on Violence against Children highlighted this topic, pointing out that "No community is free of violence. However, the risk of encountering violence, both against as well as by children, is much higher in some communities than in others. In some settings, especially those where weapons are in wide circulation, violence has today assumed frightening proportions."<sup>9</sup>

Armed violence in communities is a complex global phenomenon. It is often associated with organized crime and with non-state actors using threats and terror to control communities. It prevents post-conflict societies from consolidating peace. It may be aggravated by climate change, natural disasters and environmental degradation, all of which intensify conflicts over access to natural resources and encourage mass migration to the cities and across borders. Sprawling urban growth and the deterioration of urban areas can generate "no go zones" with little or no state presence. All these processes facilitate

the expansion of transnational organized crime, while an increasing globalization of illicit markets helps illegal groups to coordinate and control criminal activities. This undermines governance and locks marginalized children into a vicious cycle of poverty, marginalization and violence.

In recent years armed violence has increasingly been associated with violent extremism, with groups that support or use violence to achieve ideological or political goals, sometimes distorting religious values to legitimize their action.<sup>10</sup> Violent extremism endangers the safety and human rights of children including through murder, rape, kidnapping and displacement. An additional sinister dimension is the incitement of young people to commit violent acts, including by promoting their engagement as child soldiers and suicide bombers.<sup>11</sup> Transcending nationality, religion or ethnicity, the destructive combination of these three phenomena is a global concern that undermines peace and security, development, human rights and humanitarian action.

### **Box 1.** **UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism**

The UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, adopted by the General Assembly in December 2015,<sup>12</sup> seeks to ensure a balanced implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, by emphasizing prevention and addressing the factors that drive people to violent extremism. The Plan recommends the development of national and regional plans of action to prevent violent extremism, based on fortifying the social compact, strengthening the rule of law and implementing policies to combat discrimination and exclusion.

The Plan of Action includes a number of the strategies that are generally applicable to preventing armed violence. These include: investing in early childhood education; providing educational and economic opportunities; applying restorative justice and other alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and; introducing disengagement and rehabilitation programmes to facilitate reintegration into society of children and young people who have been involved in violence. Supporting and enhancing young people's participation and integration in decision-making processes is key.

Incidents of violence in the community, those associated with criminal activities and those occurring in the privacy of the home are often deeply interconnected. They cause fear, insecurity and harm to individuals, families, communities and society in general. Children are hard hit, both as victims and as witnesses. Adolescent boys are at high risk of homicide because they are more prone to participate in activities such as street fighting, street crime, gang membership and possession of weapons. For girls, the greatest risk is violence from their partners.

Violence in the community, including extortion, physical violence, homicides and disappearances, has a shattering effect on childhood and adolescence. It compromises access to education and health services, recreation and social support, and it is associated with lower levels of school enrolment and retention and higher levels of poverty. By exacerbating poverty, insecurity and deprivation, armed violence undermines a child's right to live and grow in a loving and caring family environment. Even strong families are weakened by it – for example when a family member is lost to homicide. For families that are already dysfunctional or stressed, living in a community affected by armed violence can pose insurmountable obstacles. Migration can become an aggravating factor. In affected countries, many children live with only one or without any parent and in many cases deprivation is pervasive, with high rates of child poverty and limited access to social services preventing any response to incidents of violence.

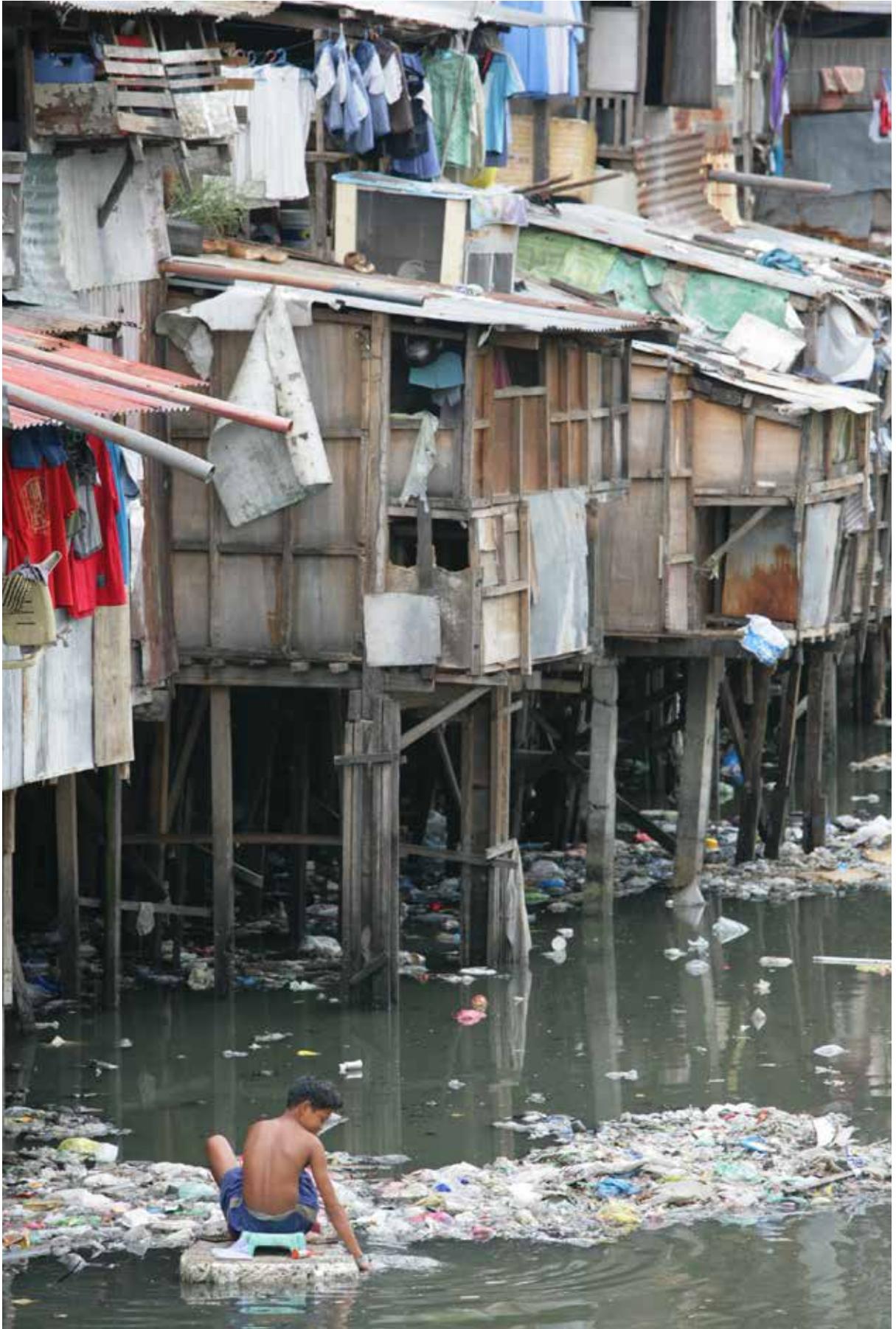
Too often, children from poor communities or from areas known for gang activity are stigmatized and perceived as delinquents, carrying an increased risk of criminalization and detention, and limited options for protection and genuine reintegration. These children become attractive targets for organized criminal activities. Through coercion, social pressure or the promise of financial reward, they are at risk of recruitment and manipulation to hold or deliver drugs or weapons, to carry out petty crime, to forcibly beg on the streets or become involved in other exploitative activities.

Public fear of gang violence and youth crime fuels the perception of children as a danger, rather than as being at risk; and mass media stigmatization fosters tolerance of institutionalized violence against them. In turn, this generates societal pressure to criminalize children and adolescents, to lower the minimum age of criminal

responsibility and impose longer prison sentences, disregarding the fact that gang practices may become reinforced during imprisonment.<sup>13</sup>

This process is exacerbated by weak rule of law, poor law enforcement performance and a generalized fear of retaliation, resulting in crimes going unreported, low numbers of convictions, and a profound sense of impunity.<sup>14</sup> This pattern is particularly serious when children are subject to state violence, carried out by law enforcement agents or by private security guards acting with the consent or tolerance of government entities. Enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, torture, abduction or arbitrary detention make it particularly hard for these children to access effective child protection mechanisms, to seek redress and combat impunity. This only deepens the fear that prevents many victims from reporting violence and decreases confidence in the justice system.

To address these pressing concerns, in July 2015 the Special Representative organized, in collaboration with UNICEF and the Government of Honduras, an international expert consultation in Tegucigalpa. The consultation brought together experts on children's rights, violence prevention, drugs and arms control, representing United Nations agencies, national governments, independent institutions for children's rights, civil society, religious leaders, academia, the corporate sector and children and young people. The meeting provided vital insights to inform this report on the protection of children from armed violence in the community.



## 2. Factors contributing to armed violence in the community

Many factors underlie violence in the community, including poverty, discrimination, social exclusion, lack of access to social services and healthy recreation, food insecurity, deficiencies in governance, repressive and militarized action from security forces and the presence of organized crime. These factors may be not only causes, but also consequences of violence.

For example, in post conflict situations where many of the underlying conditions that led to the outbreak of a conflict persist, including poverty and social exclusion, young people may be prone to use risky coping strategies to improve their access to resources and to ensure their immediate short term survival (Box 2).

### Box 2. Young Burundians adopt high risk coping strategies

Fieldwork conducted by the Small Arms Survey with almost 500 young Burundians between 2012 and 2014 shows that “the threats posed by young people’s involvement in armed violence remain significant in Burundi, influenced by widespread poverty, manipulation by political parties and the availability of arms from the civil war era. In the absence of family support, young Burundians adopt high risk coping strategies including those that led to involvement in armed violence. Major international assistance projects in Burundi have tended to neglect the provision of support to young people, who are most at risk of becoming involved in violent activities.”<sup>15</sup>

Young people whose families are fractured are more at risk of becoming involved in violence; yet, violence also causes families to disintegrate. This pattern is aggravated by drug and alcohol abuse, easy access to firearms, unregulated urban growth and the participation of young people in illicit markets. These factors interact with global processes but have grave local implications. Investment in prevention rests on two pillars: the

general understanding of how these factors function, and a specific knowledge of how they manifest in each community.<sup>16</sup>

### 2.1 Harmful consumption of drugs and alcohol

International research shows that alcohol use often precedes aggressive behaviour, and that harmful drinking is associated with being both a perpetrator and a victim of violence.<sup>17</sup> However, in the case of drug consumption the association with violence and crime tends to be linked to the growing, production and selling of drugs and the unintended consequences of the State fighting drug trafficking organizations.<sup>18</sup> The links between substance abuse and violence may include:

- Consumption of alcohol and drugs can affect cognitive and physical functions, mental health, self-control and the ability to assess risks.
- Impulsivity may increase, putting drinkers at higher risk of resorting to violence in confrontations.
- An impaired ability to recognize warning signs in potentially dangerous situations can make drinkers easy targets for perpetrators of violence.
- Intoxication is often used as an excuse permitting violence to be tolerated and go unpunished.
- Adults who are dependent on alcohol or drugs may neglect their children, leaving them at risk of violence.
- Prenatal alcohol or drug exposure can affect fetal development and lead to behavioural problems including violence in later life.
- Experiencing or witnessing violence can lead to the harmful use of alcohol or drugs as a way of coping or self-medicating.

Patterns of drug and alcohol vary by region and country, depending on cultural norms and government regulations. A World Health Organization study in 2006 found that alcohol was a contributor to 26% of the years of life lost by homicide among males and 16% for females.<sup>19</sup>

◀ A boy floats on a raft next to a pile of debris in a pond in Barangay Apelo, a slum area in Pasay City near Manila, the capital. He is collecting plastic to sell. Some 6,000 people live along the stagnant pond.

The problem is aggravated when drugs, alcohol and violence become part of the ritual culture of youth gangs. In the USA, where significant research has been conducted, a longitudinal study found that frequent use by adolescents of alcohol, marijuana and/or other illicit drugs was strongly associated with involvement in violence.<sup>20</sup> Quarrels among gang members routinely arise after consuming alcohol; they drink before fights to strengthen their confidence and afterwards to cement the bond within the gang. According to the research, alcohol and violence are also commonly used in gang initiation rites.<sup>21</sup>

The illicit trade in drugs is a significant cause of violence, especially in urban areas. Researchers and policy makers are increasingly recognizing that violence associated with illegal drug markets is largely driven by the law enforcement activities that are intended to disrupt those markets.<sup>22,23</sup>

## 2.2 Easy access to guns

It is estimated that nearly 900 million small arms and light weapons are in circulation worldwide, one gun for every seven people on the planet. Around 75% of the world's guns are in the hands of civilians.<sup>24</sup> More than 40% of homicides globally involve guns; however, the figure is close to 70% among young homicide victims in the Americas. Children are disproportionately affected by "stray bullets" fired into the air or at missed targets. A UN Study in Latin America found that 45% of victims of stray bullets were under 18-years-old.<sup>25</sup>

The proliferation of firearms is an important driver of violence, especially in big cities. Guns increase the deadliness of violence; where criminal organizations operate, the arms trade also thrives. The slums of the big cities are ideal spaces for the illegal sale of weapons. The ready availability of guns facilitates the recruitment of children to perform the risky activities of organized crime. If firearm laws are weak or poorly enforced, the legal commerce in guns can fuel the illicit traffic, as legally purchased weapons move into the hands of unauthorized users, either within the same jurisdiction or across borders.

The durable nature of guns enhances their lethality and their monetary value to criminals, because one firearm can be used for many crimes. For example, in January 2015 in La Plata, Argentina, the same 9mm pistol was

### Box 3.

#### Gun proliferation and denial of human rights

"We are all aware small arms do not only make easy the taking of lives, and the maiming of lives – they also kill economies, and the social bonds on which every kind of collective institution and progress rely. Their ubiquitous availability can contribute to the sustained denial of human rights, including to education and health; the lethality of criminal behaviour; the breakdown of social structures; illicit plundering of natural resources; decreasing trade and investment; rising violence against women and girls; gang violence; the collapse of rule of law; and a generalized sense of impunity, opening up in many parts of the world completely lawless landscapes." – UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.<sup>26</sup>

used in three separate crimes: the murders of a middle-aged man and a 17-year-old boy and the wounding of a 34-year-old pregnant woman.<sup>27</sup>

Access to guns is a risk factor for all countries, including high-income nations. A 2005 study in seven developed countries (Francophone Belgium, Estonia, Israel, Latvia, Macedonia, Portugal and the United States of America) found that 10–21% of boys and 2–5% of girls had carried weapons in the previous month. The most common type of weapon was a knife, but in the USA nearly a quarter of those who carried weapons had carried a gun.<sup>28</sup>

The easy availability of guns has serious consequences for children on both ends of the barrel. A gun in the hands of a child or adolescent may easily transform a game, a quarrel or a moment of curiosity into a tragedy. The shooting of one child by another is a traumatic calamity for the shooter as well as for the victim and family. When an older child or adolescent carries a gun illegally – whether for a crime or for self-protection – the consequences can be grave even if the weapon is not fired. In many jurisdictions the presence of a gun automatically elevates the status of a minor offence into a serious crime punishable by incarceration.

Becoming entangled with the criminal system dramatically increases the young person's risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence – or both.

### 2.3 Uncontrolled urban growth

The world is becoming increasingly urbanized, with 50% of the world population living in cities today, and expected to rise to an estimated 75% by 2050. Regions with high levels of violence tend to have higher degrees of urbanization.<sup>29</sup> The most urbanized region is Latin America and the Caribbean (80% of people live in cities); and this region contains 43 of the 50 most dangerous cities worldwide.<sup>30</sup>

A Latin American study for the Inter-American Development Bank estimated that households in cities with over one million inhabitants were 70% more likely to be victims of violence than those in cities of between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>31</sup> However, even small cities may be badly affected if they are poorly organized and rapidly growing.

Physical violence between peers tends to be more common in urban areas characterized by lack of educational and social amenities and low standards of housing, where youthful and rapidly growing populations express frustration, anger and pent up tension in fights and antisocial behaviour.<sup>32</sup> In addition, places that are dirty, dark or abandoned increase the perception of insecurity and fear among citizens, especially among the most vulnerable groups.<sup>33</sup>

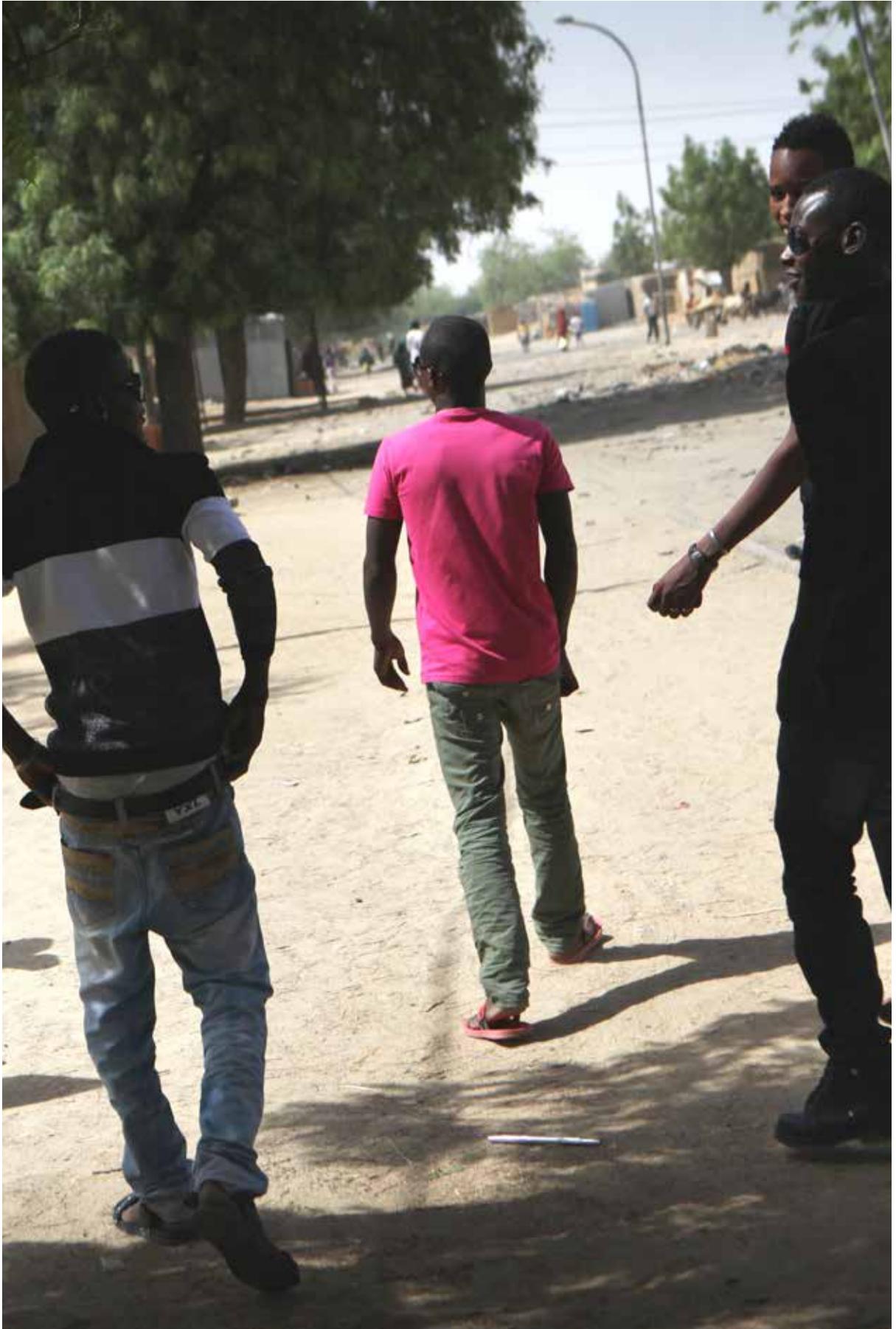
#### **Box 4.** **Port Moresby, capital of Papua New Guinea**

Port Moresby<sup>34</sup> ranks 137th of 140 cities in the Economist Intelligence's Unit livability index, with crime rates among the highest in the world.<sup>35</sup> The city's estimated 330,000 inhabitants live in an area of 240km<sup>2</sup>. It has a large migrant population with over 50% of people having moved into the city from other provinces. While it is mandatory to seek planning approval before dwellings are constructed, this requirement is often ignored in squatter settlements. The expansion of squatter settlements has been accompanied by rising crime in Port Moresby, including drug dealing, vandalism and other offences; and 48% of crimes involve violence. Nearly 15% of crimes relate to organized crime (drugs and weapons trafficking). The decline of traditional structures of authority has given rise to a flourishing gang culture. The gangs assist and absorb recently arrived migrants and provide "rights of passage" for their members through violent areas of the city. Gang membership is mainly male and affiliation is mostly determined by ethnicity.

Uncontrolled urbanization and the explosion of informal slums created by migration from poor rural areas to the cities present serious challenges for governments, both in terms of taking action and in finding the necessary resources. For example, Western Cape Province in South Africa experienced rapid growth in informal housing due to a net migration of 100% between 2001 and 2006. By 2030 about half of the five billion city dwellers worldwide are predicted to live in slums.<sup>36</sup> By 2025, most of the world's slum-dwellers will be in Asia.<sup>37</sup>

Communities with high concentrations of low-income or unemployed families tend to have high levels of residential instability, making it difficult for people to develop strong social ties and support networks. Areas lacking basic services, where there is little or no formal institutional presence, become very unsafe. Cities with high levels of economic inequality and endemic poverty are often affected by insecurity, political tension and instability, leading to increased fear and violence, compromising the safety and wellbeing of children, while deepening their vulnerability and deprivation. This creates a fertile environment for illegal markets, illicit access to weapons and the emergence of criminal gangs.

An estimated one billion people live in slums or other highly unstable communities. Informal economies flourish there, sometimes merging with illicit markets. The production, distribution and marketing of drugs, weapons, counterfeit goods, vehicles and metals in these vast underground markets generate significant wealth. Marginalized young people in urban areas may perceive participating in these markets as an opportunity for economic inclusion (albeit illegal) and as a means to gain "respect" and recognition.<sup>38</sup> Their participation often includes risky behaviours such as alcohol consumption and the use and display of weapons. As a consequence, groups of youths frequently clash, even with no economic motive but simply as expressive acts of violence. Participating in the market for illicit drugs also leads to an increase in young people's own consumption, putting them at greater risk.



### 3. Direct and indirect impact of armed violence on children

According to the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, on average more than 500,000 people die violently each year, and 44% of violent deaths are committed with firearms.<sup>39</sup> Most armed violence occurs in the context of crime or interpersonal conflict rather than of war: 84% of violent deaths occur in non-conflict countries.

Armed violence in the community disrupts social harmony and peace, generating a cumulatively negative effect on the lives of children. It affects a child's nurturing environment, in the home, at school and in the neighbourhood; it hampers health and care institutions; and it hinders efforts to fight the impunity of perpetrators from the actions of the law.

The direct effects of armed violence in the community include physical injuries and psychological harm. And these are associated with a high death toll, particularly among children. Indeed, homicides have a young face. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, homicide claims some 36,000 children under 15-years-old each year (8% of all victims) and about 43% of all homicides are of adolescents and young people aged between 15 and 29.<sup>40</sup> The World Health Organization notes that homicide is the fourth leading cause of death among young people.<sup>41</sup>

The vast majority of homicide victims are male and living in low-and middle-income countries. In some countries of Latin America, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa, youth homicide rates are 100 times higher than in the countries of Western Europe. More than one in seven of all homicide victims globally is a boy or young man living in the Americas. In fact, young males living in poor neighbourhoods in this region have a one in 50 chance of being killed before their 31st birthday.<sup>42</sup> Overall 40% of homicides are from firearms; however among children and youths killed in the Americas that figure is almost 70%.<sup>43</sup> As noted by UNDP, juvenile male homicide in Latin America is ten times the rate amongst women.<sup>44</sup>

Some 19,000 deaths occur each year in confrontations with police, the vast majority of these involving guns.<sup>45</sup> In Brazil, for example, police killed an average of six civilians every day in 2013, totalling at least 2,212 for the year.<sup>46</sup>

Armed violence is also associated with non-lethal injuries among youth: it is estimated that for every homicide, between 20 and 40 young people receive hospital treatment for violence.<sup>47</sup> Armed violence is one of the top three causes of spinal cord injury globally, which makes it a significant cause of disability.<sup>48</sup> For instance, in Colombia the primary cause of spinal cord injuries is gunshot wounds.<sup>49</sup>

Medical and brain science research has shown that exposure to violence in early childhood alters the brain in ways that lead to physical, mental and emotional harm lasting throughout a child's life.<sup>50</sup> Research suggests that approximately 300 million children under five-years-old have been exposed to societal or community violence.<sup>51</sup> In low-income neighbourhoods young children may have nightmares and symptoms of post-traumatic stress associated with witnessing violence between the police and drug traffickers.<sup>52</sup>

According to research conducted in the USA, children exposed to gun violence may experience negative short- and long-term psychological effects, including anger, withdrawal, post-traumatic stress, desensitization to violence, sleep disturbances, intrusive thoughts about the traumatic event, difficulty concentrating in the classroom, a decline in academic performance, and lower educational and career aspirations. Other outcomes include increased delinquency, risky sexual behaviours, and substance abuse.<sup>53</sup> The effects are more acute for children who are direct victims of gun violence, or who live in communities where they witness gun violence repeatedly.

One consequence for children exposed to high levels of armed violence is an increase in aggressive behaviour.<sup>54</sup> In Ciudad Juarez (Mexico) and Medellin (Colombia), teachers report that young children growing up in violent communities engage in role-play, modelling the conflict they observe around them from as young as five-years-old.<sup>55</sup>

◀ The members of the DMX group in their neighborhood of Diffa, Niger March 2014. "It all started with the girls: we would fight for them. Now we keep them safe" one explained "We need money and to get it, we organize operations, against people who are treating us poorly. When a neighbor called the police on us, we poisoned his animals, burned his barn and caught him to beat him... We should not be taken for fools! No area is forbidden for us, we have no frontiers."

Armed violence has a psychological and cultural impact. Weapons are involved in forced recruitment into gangs and criminal networks; and in kidnapping, abuse and sexual exploitation, torture, forced displacement and other serious human rights' violations. As well as being victimized directly, children are profoundly affected by armed violence against adults or other children in their social circle. The loss of parents, loved ones, peers, friends and role models produces profound changes in their daily lives.<sup>56</sup> They may have to move houses or neighbourhoods; and too often they must suddenly assume the adult responsibilities of caring for siblings, minding the home and going to work, thereby sacrificing their own development and education.

Likewise, violence against children and young people has a traumatic impact on people around them, with relatives and close friends of young victims significantly more likely to show symptoms of depression, aggression, or drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>57</sup>

At a community and society level, armed violence generates fear which curtails the daily activities of children and families, whether or not they have personally experienced violence. For example, in a 2009 survey on citizen security in Mexico, 60% of parents said that, due to increasing crime and violence, they were no longer allowing their young children to play outside.<sup>58</sup>

For children who are socially and economically vulnerable, the school and local healthcare centre are crucial elements in the fabric of social support. Yet armed violence also damages that fabric. Because of their social leadership role, schools and health institutions may be attacked and used by violent organizations to control territories. These attacks can range from bribery and the kidnapping of workers, to threats that ultimately cause the institutions to close. For children, that means a deep sense of insecurity and a negative impact on their ability to learn and thrive. Gangs sometimes use schools to recruit children to join in illicit activities.

Armed attacks or extortion of healthcare centres can paralyze local health services. In addition, injuries from armed violence have a severe impact on health systems overall. Gunshot injuries absorb a disproportionate amount of human and material resources, reducing the system's ability to prevent and respond to other health problems (Box 5).

#### Box 5.

#### Gun violence undermines health care delivery

"Gun violence is overwhelming Guatemala's public health system. Gunshot injuries are generally more expensive than, for example, injuries from a car crash that tend to be more manageable. A fractured femur will probably be a closed fracture and the fracture is much less complicated than with a bullet. A bullet will shatter the femur or the humerus, and these are not ordinary fractures that will heal in six weeks—often it takes months to heal, because the bones and tendons are destroyed, the vascular and nervous systems are damaged as well, so the patient spends a very long time in hospital. These cases consume a lot of resources in terms of intensive care, medication. Hospitals face budget constraints due to the huge number of patients injured as a consequence of armed violence. Violence is using up the budgets of the hospitals." – Dr. Sergio Castillo, Head of Orthopedics and Trauma Surgery at Roosevelt Hospital, one of Guatemala's biggest public hospitals.<sup>59</sup>

### 3.1 The cycle of violence

Like a contagious disease, violence is transmissible among individuals and over time. Children exposed to violence at home, either as victims or as witnesses, are at risk of being violent themselves.<sup>60</sup> In the case of armed violence, research has shown that exposure to gun violence approximately doubles the probability that an adolescent will perpetrate serious violence over the two subsequent years.<sup>61</sup> The search for protection or revenge against the aggressor may lead children to become involved with violent gangs, thus exposing them to situations of greater physical and psychological risk and legal vulnerability.<sup>62</sup>

"Violence is something you learn – it comes from the violence you saw at home. "Crime is really a reflection of what is inside each person's heart. When children are so mistreated, they bottle it up until they can no longer keep it inside, they have to let it out. The need to release so much frustration; hate and resentment can make them fall victim to gangs. The gangs feel like the family they wish they'd had. Unfortunately, this environment nurtures the seeds of violence that were planted at home." – Clinical psychologist in Guatemala<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, once injured in armed violence, young people are more likely to be re-injured in the future. For a young person who survives a gunshot in the USA, the risk of being shot again, in retaliation or follow-up is 88 times higher than among those who were never attacked.<sup>64</sup> Urban adolescents treated for a gunshot wound in hospital are more likely to die from a subsequent and similar injury than from any other illness or condition for which they seek care. Research in Rosario, Argentina, found that half of gun homicide victims had previously been treated by the health system for injuries from violence. Hospital emergency room records revealed some patients had been treated for firearm injuries as many as eight times.<sup>65</sup>

For both these reasons – preventing future offending by victims and preventing re-victimization – breaking the cycle of violence must be a core policy and programming objective. This must start early in a child’s life, including special attention to support parents and families in the upbringing of children with care and in a safe environment.

Some groups of children are at particularly high risk of exposure to armed violence in the community. The most vulnerable children are usually defined by age and gender (male teenagers), socio-economic condition and ethnic origin, such as people of African descent, aboriginal descendants or other ethnic minorities within a specific country, and children affected by migration, asylum seekers and refugees. They usually live in urban areas that are socially marginalized.

According to a report issued by the Brazilian Government on “Youth Vulnerability Index on Violence and Racial Inequality,” children and young people of African descent living on the edges of cities are the group most exposed to urban violence and the hardest hit by homicide rates. This index has been developed as an indicator in Brazil’s Youth Alive Plan, which seeks to create conditions that promote the full citizenship of this social sector and overcome the lack of protection they face.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, it is important to acknowledge “the very high level of vulnerability faced by unaccompanied children and adolescents during the migration process: they face harsh and gruelling conditions during the trip, situations of violence, sexual violence and abuse, and are also at risk of becoming victims of human trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, and kidnappings and

extortion, and of being used to transport drugs and being involved in other organized crime activities.”<sup>67</sup>

Child migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees are vulnerable across regions. For example, unaccompanied children arriving in Europe from conflict zones are targeted by people-smugglers linked with organized crime.<sup>68</sup>

### 3.2 The gender dimension of armed violence

The UN Study on Violence against Children called upon States to address the gender dimension of violence against children. Girls and boys actually face different risks; and due to socially-assigned roles, behaviours and attributes, gender influences the way in which violence is perpetrated and the way it is experienced by them.<sup>69</sup>

Teenage boys and young men are the group most at risk of being killed, while girls and women are more at risk of being sexually assaulted. For young children, the greatest risk is witnessing violence in their homes and communities. However, children of ever younger ages are becoming involved in situations of armed violence, resulting in permanent physical and psychological damage that affects them throughout their lives.

When armed violence prevails, women and girls are also victims of lethal violence, including as a result of femicide in the public and private spheres.<sup>70</sup> Femicide, the killing of girls and women because they are women, is the most extreme form of gender-based violence, claiming an estimated 66,000 victims per year over the period 2004–09.<sup>71</sup> Studies in Honduras and Costa Rica show that more than 60% of femicides are perpetrated by an intimate partner or male family member, while in Peru, 70% of femicides are carried out by a former or current intimate partner.<sup>72</sup> The highest femicide rates can be observed in countries and territories affected by high or very high overall homicide rates. In countries marked by high levels of lethal violence, girls and women are more frequently attacked in the public sphere, including by gangs and organized criminal groups.<sup>73</sup>

Despite its widespread nature only a few countries have classified femicide as a crime and data on femicide and gender violence continue to be scarce.<sup>74</sup>

As with boys and men, many of the murdered girls and women come from the most marginalized parts of society. In her report to the Human Rights Council

on gender-related killings of women, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women noted that girls and women between 16- and 24-years-old are the most vulnerable group, and they are often poor, from rural areas, of ethnic origin, sex workers or maquila workers.<sup>75</sup>

There is a close link between guns and femicide. On average, firearms were used in one-third of all femicides worldwide. However, in Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras firearms were used in more than 60% of femicides. The highest percentage of firearm-related femicides was observed in 2009 in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, where firearms were used in more than 80% of all femicides.<sup>76</sup>

Involvement in gangs is another hazard to girls' safety. Girls in gangs report being victimized more often than girls who do not belong to gangs: for example, a study in the USA found that 28% of female gang members had experienced sexual assault in their lifetime, at home or in the gang, compared to 12% of non-gang members.<sup>77</sup>

### 3.3 Children, youth gangs and organized crime networks

Cross-cultural research has identified the main drivers for youth participation in organized armed violence, organized crime networks and gangs. These include poverty, inequality of wealth, lack of economic options including as a result of low levels of education and high levels of unemployment, social marginalization, violence from state forces and other groups, dysfunctional families, and a lack of cultural and leisure activities. These drivers are further compelled by external influences: involvement of key reference groups such as friends and family, exposure to crime in the community, dominant gang sub-cultures, and violence being promoted and seen as an acceptable tool for conflict resolution.<sup>78</sup>

Involvement with a street gang has been identified as a risk factor for children and adolescents becoming victims or perpetrators of violence. However, not every group of teenagers or young people is a gang, and not all gangs are the same. The definition of a gang is contentious but according to one commonly accepted notion, "a street gang is any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity."<sup>79</sup> Illegal activity is a key element, but illegal activity is not necessarily violent, and the same

can be said of gangs who are not all violent or linked to organized crime. Research indicates that most gangs "operate as environments for socialization among peers and as a self-protection mechanism among youth, rather than as organizations linked to organized crime."<sup>80</sup>

Research in different countries confirms that gangs provide their members with an identity and give them a sense of belonging, as well as protection, recognition and respect. However, local gangs can also be linked to illegal activities including extortion, kidnapping – including virtual kidnapping - illegal drug sales, fighting for territorial concerns and in some cases contract killings. Central American research has examined the factors that lead adolescents to join or leave a gang.<sup>81</sup> In Nicaragua, one of the primary risk factors was the disintegration of family and community ties.<sup>82</sup>

A study in Honduras found that joining a gang is more likely for a young person who grew up without affection, whose parents were absent for economic reasons, including as a result of migration, and for whom no other authority figure had stepped in. The gang acts as a reference group, providing a sense of belonging, economic support and protection from what they perceive as a corrupt security system. In one group studied, gang members suffering the loss of their parents saw the gang as a replacement family. In a later group, gang members were far more driven by financial reasons, regarding the gang leader as the boss of the business.<sup>83</sup>

Overall, the most common reasons for leaving the gang were the birth of a first child, concern about damage being caused to family members, the opportunity to move to a different neighbourhood, as well as a commitment to the community and a spiritual experience.<sup>84</sup> Spirituality also emerged as a protective factor against delinquency in research on high-risk and gang-involved adolescents and young adults in El Salvador.<sup>85</sup>

Children and adolescents who feel abandoned, disaffected or angry about injustice, and lack of opportunities, are similarly susceptible to recruitment by violent extremist movements. These groups seem to offer their young recruit a sense of belonging, protection, obligation and respect. Additionally, violent extremist groups claim to offer a sense of purpose – a higher calling, a larger cause in which the young person can play a part.<sup>86</sup> The reality of life in violent

extremism is often dangerous, brutal and psychologically devastating for young members. And, as with gangs, it may be a challenge to leave the movement alive.<sup>87</sup>

Local gangs may begin as unsupervised adolescent peer groups for socially-excluded children and young people, but some become institutionalized in neighbourhoods, ghettos and prisons. Institutionalized gangs may evolve into business enterprises within the informal economy, pursuing violent activities such as extortion, robbery, illegal drug sales, fighting for territorial control and in extreme cases, contract killings.

Some gangs become linked to organized armed violence and transnational criminal groups whose strong economic connections facilitate their activities in trafficking, organized theft and mass distribution of illegal merchandise – stolen vehicles or goods, weapons, drugs, metals, or persons. Organized armed violence involves a wide range of armed groups where there is a command structure and power over territory, the local population and resources. These tend to be far more militarized than “gangs” as they are commonly understood; they are often transnational, but city- or regionally-focused, and may enter into armed conflict with state forces. They often use children and adolescents in armed functions.<sup>88</sup>

Children and adolescents in vulnerable situations are easy and desirable targets for these groups. Occupying subordinate roles, the youngsters are seen as disposable labour and exposed to high risks of violence.

The drug trade has been labelled by the International Labor Organization as one of the “worst forms of child labour”.<sup>89</sup> Children and adolescents are typically used for the most dangerous activities such as monitoring territory, transport and retail sale of drugs, or theft. At the low level of “narco retail”, exposure to violence is very high due to clashes over territory, the protection of merchandise, or punishment by their adult masters if they fall short of expectations. But some children may end up involved with different types of criminal activities, including human trafficking.

Boys and girls, at times as young as 9 or 10 participate in human trafficking, acting as guides, lookouts or informants. Thereafter they may be required to guard the safe houses and prevent escapes; and later they may be armed to become involved in more dangerous assignments such as kidnapping and murder.<sup>90</sup>

Girls and women constitute a growing proportion of gang members, although data remains sketchy. Global estimates suggest there are between 132,000 and 66,000 female gang members worldwide.<sup>91</sup>



## 4. Protecting children from armed violence in the community

Responses to young people associated with violent acts often emphasize punitive, repressive and militarized approaches. Aggressive and repressive policing puts both state forces and civilians at risk, as well as further stimulating the cycle of violence locally, increasing the “acceptable” norm for violent behaviour within society. The increasing use of militarized policing in the context of armed violence has been associated with growing unrest and death. Militarized policing and tactics such as the implementation of “mandatory civil services for children” compromise the protection of children’s rights.

This is especially the case when children are assumed to belong to a “gang” – a term which, as discussed above, may encompass a wide range of different groups and activities ranging from the harmless to the homicidal.

This approach has led to the increasing severity of criminal penalties, the lowering of the minimum age of criminal responsibility and the criminalization of the lower levels of illegal organizations where marginalized children and teenagers are concentrated. Young offenders tend to be incarcerated in overcrowded detention centres, at times together with adults, risking engagement with criminal gangs which control their communities outside the prison walls. Rather than enhancing prevention, this leads to greater violence. According to UNDP and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, repressive Mano Dura (Iron Fist) programmes implemented in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras led to a leading role for the armed forces and an increase in violence – the opposite of the intended effect (Box 6).<sup>92</sup>

On the other hand, efforts that combine community-oriented programmes, working with police, and economic alternatives, have shown positive results. These are called second-generation initiatives: working on the basis of information to reduce and prevent violence with knowledge of the context and characteristics of the violence. The Society without Violence programme in El Salvador was an example of a combination of legislative reforms, disarmament,

### Box 6. The failure of Mano Dura

In El Salvador, in 2003, a police operation called the “Plan Mano Dura” (Tough on Crime Plan) was introduced. Special legislation was enacted that made it a crime for children to belong to a *mara*.<sup>93</sup> Under this law, many children were held in preventive custody, only to be acquitted or have the charges against them dismissed for lack of evidence. According to the information the Commission has received, children were detained merely on the appearance of gang membership.<sup>94</sup> In 2005, this law was replaced through an amendment to Article 345 of the Penal Code, which criminalized membership of a group “when the group engages in violent acts or uses violent means to induct members or keep them in the gang, or when members leave the gang.” The offence of gang membership carried a penalty of three to five years in prison; the penalty for gang organizers or gang leaders was six to nine years in prison. In 2010, the Law Banning Maras, Gangs and Criminal Groups, Associations and Organizations was enacted. It continues to stigmatize children and adolescents who belong to *maras*<sup>95</sup> and made reference to a vague regime that could be applied in a discriminatory manner.<sup>96</sup>

Most of the youth arrested under Mano Dura were subsequently released for lack of evidence that they had committed any crime; though some of those wrongly arrested actually did join gangs while in prison.<sup>97</sup> Gang roundups exacerbated prison overcrowding and inter-gang violence within the prisons. Mano Dura led the gangs to reorganize and modify their methods. Ultimately the government abandoned the policies which had produced a doubling of the homicide rate.<sup>98</sup>

banning the carrying of guns in public places, and social investment in vulnerable communities and in high-risk youth.

Armed violence is part of the larger phenomenon of violence in general, but made more extreme and dangerous by the involvement of guns. The risk factors for violence in general are also risk factors for armed violence: for example childhood exposure to violence, abuse, exploitation, homelessness, misuse of drugs or alcohol, etc. Many interventions designed to prevent or mitigate the consequences of general violence, or of violence against children, are equally important as part

of a multi-dimensional strategy to prevent gun violence. Interventions may be aimed at reducing the risk for specific children (e.g. programmes with schools and families) or may be applicable to society as a whole (e.g. general policies on parent support, or related to alcohol or guns).

To counter the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of armed violence, it is essential to develop a comprehensive agenda of accountability for children's rights, where the rule of law, social inclusion and human development are promoted and people can live free from fear and violence. As the Special Representative on Violence against Children noted in her 2015 report to the General Assembly, "these can be achieved by securing robust accountability systems, peaceful

environments for children and strategies to limit the harmful use of alcohol and firearms, uphold public safety and provide access to justice and restorative justice processes."<sup>99</sup> Those dimensions are addressed below.

#### 4.1 Enhancing accountability for children's rights, strengthened policymaking and committed action

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international standards recognize the State's primary responsibility for the protection of children's rights at all times, including when violence, insecurity, public danger and crime shape community life. They call for a steady and sustained process of implementation.

#### Box 7.

##### Accountability for children's protection from violence

The United Nations Study on Violence against Children developed overarching recommendations for broad action by all States to prevent violence against children and respond effectively when it occurs. The recommendations call for the establishment of a child-centred national child protection system to address and to end all forms of violence against children. A child-centred national child protection system requires specifically: a) the development of a multi-faceted and systematic agenda to prevent and respond to violence; b) a solid legal framework that explicitly prohibits all forms of violence against children in all settings and; c) a sound national data system and research agenda.

Building upon the UN Study recommendations and lessons learned from its implementation, the Global Survey on Violence against Children,<sup>100</sup> conducted by the Special Representative, highlights strategies to prevent and respond to violence which gain a special relevance in the case of armed violence.

- All governments should develop and promote a national, child-centred, integrated, multidisciplinary and time-bound strategy to address violence against children.
- Explicit legal bans on violence against children should be enacted as a matter of urgency, accompanied by detailed measures for implementation and effective enforcement mechanisms to protect victims, provide means of redress and fight impunity.
- Policy initiatives and legal measures should be accompanied by steady efforts to overcome social norms that promote or condone violence against children.
- There must be an ongoing commitment to children's meaningful participation in violence prevention and response.
- All governments must work to ensure the social inclusion of all girls and boys especially those who are particularly vulnerable, and support families in their child-rearing responsibilities for the prevention and elimination of violence against children.
- Governments must consolidate research and collect appropriately disaggregated data on violence against children to inform policy making and monitor progress.

**Box 8.**  
**The rights of children during a state of emergency and in situations of widespread violence**

Subject to international law and when faced with communal violence, political instability, terrorist attacks, natural disaster or other crises, governments may declare a state of emergency. The declaration of a state of emergency may entail a temporary limitation of the enjoyment of some human rights such as the right of assembly. But it needs to abide by crucial principles, especially the principles of legality, proclamation, notification, temporality, exceptional threat, proportionality, non-discrimination and compatibility.<sup>101</sup>

Unlike some other international human rights treaties, the Convention on the Rights of the Child does not include any derogatory clause foreseeing limitations to the rights of the child as a result of a state of emergency. Children's rights need to be safeguarded at all times, and their protection is particularly important when children may be placed at risk in times of political instability, community violence or war.

At the regional level, the American Convention on Human Rights extends non-derogability to the protection of the family (art. 17), of the rights of the child (art. 19), nationality (art. 20) and political rights (art. 23), as well as to the legal guarantees essential to protect those rights.

As noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and States of Emergency,<sup>102</sup> poverty, migratory pressure, the illegal drug trade and terrorism frequently give rise to outbreaks of generalized violence and/or the declaration of a state of emergency. These situations heighten the risks to the rights of the most vulnerable groups of people, including children living and/or working on the streets, migrant, displaced or refugee children; and indigenous children and children belonging to minority groups. In order to safeguard their rights, the Special Rapporteur highlighted the urgent need to address the structural causes of conflicts and violence, to institute conflict-prevention mechanisms and to develop more efficient early-warning systems.

The need to safeguard the rights of the child and promote actions guided by the best interests of the child, is particularly compelling in communities affected by armed violence. This is not merely a question of semantics. It requires the development of methodological tools and strategies to protect the right of children to live free from violence in a nurturing environment that promotes peace, human rights and

sustainable development. It requires examination not only of procedures for formal prosecution to respond to children's rights violations, but also of positive action with the adoption of public policies and state regulations more broadly to prevent risks, to protect victims and to secure the enjoyment of children's human rights at all times. It requires the active participation of all segments of civil society, including children and adolescents who need to be informed and empowered to prevent and safeguard their rights. When actions are taken in conformity with human rights' standards, societies can move away from simply meeting needs and avoiding risks toward more comprehensive social policies to enhance people's capabilities and secure freedom from fear and from want, achieving progress towards greater freedom as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

A child rights-based approach to preventing and responding to armed violence in the community puts children and adolescents at the center of interventions, promotes respect for the dignity of all children and emphasizes equality between boys and girls. Such an approach promotes equal opportunity within systems based on economic equity, equity in access to public resources, and social justice. It fosters mutual respect among children, as well as between adults and children.

**Box 9.**  
**Five important dimensions of a children's rights-based approach**

- Explicit legal recognition of the human rights of children and adolescents
- Protection from discrimination, particularly of the most vulnerable children
- Participation of children in all levels of decision-making
- Empowerment of children and adolescents, incorporating their perspectives and recognizing their contribution as subjects of rights and agents of change
- Shared responsibility of all stakeholders, ensuring accountability in the fight against violence and crime, at all levels of the administration

Armed violence in the community affecting children and adolescents is a complex phenomenon and requires a multifaceted approach where the realization of human rights, the promotion of good governance and the rule of law are supported by measures in the fields of economic and social development, criminal justice, transparency and anticorruption, public health and arms control.

Two crucial developments have been recently promoted by the United Nations and constitute a critical reference for global efforts designed to prevent and address armed violence and its impact on children's rights – the UN Model Strategies and Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence against Children in the field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (Box 10) and Agenda 2030 (Box 11).

**Box 10.**  
**UN Model Strategies and Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence against Children in the field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice**

To strengthen violence prevention and children's protection from violence in 2014 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Model Strategies and Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence in the field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.<sup>103</sup>

The Model Strategies address crucial challenges associated with the protection of children from violence in the criminal justice system and provide an excellent tool to strengthen prevention as well as the protection of children from armed violence in the community. The Model Strategies address misperceptions and widespread prejudice towards marginalized groups of children, which fuel incidents of violence, and result in children's criminalization and deprivation of liberty. Moreover, the The Model Strategies stress the urgency of promoting a multidisciplinary and participatory approach engaging all relevant actors, including those in the child protection system.

The protection of children from all forms of violence, including armed violence, is also a key dimension of sustainable development. Indeed, Agenda 2030 adopted in September 2015 includes freedom from fear and from violence as a crosscutting concern, as well as a distinct target – target 16.2 - on ending all forms of violence against children under Goal 16: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide

access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."<sup>104</sup>

The inclusion of target 16.2 in the Sustainable Development Agenda is a significant achievement which will give enormous impetus to the protection of children's rights around the world and to social progress within and across nations.

**Box 11.**  
**The Sustainable Development Agenda and the protection of children from violence**

Sustainable Development Goal 16 has a crucial relevance for the prevention of armed violence against children, especially through the following targets:

16.1 – Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere

16.2 – End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children

16.3 – Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all

16.4 – By 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organized crime

16.9 – By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration

Other targets under Goal 16 are equally critical for preventing and reducing corruption, trafficking in people and goods, and other forms of organized crime which create and sustain armed violence, namely:

16.5 – Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms

16.6 – Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels

16.7 – Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels

16.8 – Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance

16.10 – Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements

16.a – Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime

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#### 16.b – Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development

Since armed violence is a multidimensional, cross-cutting issue that affects all aspects of development, many of the other SDG goals and targets will also be advanced by successful efforts to prevent and reduce armed violence against children in the community. These include targets dealing with the conditions that increase children's vulnerability such as poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence; as well as targets to reinforce protective factors such as free, equitable and quality education, early childhood development, care and education, youth employment, social inclusion, adequate housing and proper urban planning. The effective implementation of Agenda 2030 is, in large part, a strategic roadmap to reducing violence.

#### 4.1.1 Promoting a comprehensive and integrated policy approach

Armed violence in the community compromises children's rights, including the right to live free from violence, to personal integrity, to protection from discrimination, neglect, abuse and exploitation; to health, education, leisure and recreation; the right to a family environment, to freedom of expression, assembly, association and movement; the right to participation and to access justice, effective remedies and judicial protection.

The prevention of armed violence is traditionally perceived as exclusively relevant for the security sector. This is at odds with the overwhelming body of research which recognizes that these coercive efforts can only succeed if they are supported by, coordinated and consistent with, contributions by other sectors including health, education, gender, youth, human rights and urban development. Sectors such as transport and environment may also be important.

Accountability for children at the national and sub-national levels requires a wide-ranging and integrated approach to prevent violence and to safeguard the rights and best interests of the child in all decisions, including in the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of all legal, political, administrative and budgetary measures.

State policies need to address the root causes of armed violence, including deprivation and social exclusion; undertake gender-sensitive approaches to secure boys' and girls' safety and protection, and the recovery and reintegration of victims; and fight impunity. Special protection measures are also needed for children and young people who try to leave gangs and organized criminal structures, to counter the risks they face and promote long-term options for their reintegration.

The success of those measures depends on genuine political will and a commitment to acting in a coordinated manner at the national and community

#### Box 12. Two approaches to prevent armed violence<sup>105</sup>

	Formal	Informal
Coercive	Licensing, registration, limits on number and types of guns Gun tracing, criminal investigation, seizures, prosecutions Regulation of international transfers Reducing access to alcohol/ drugs Community policing Gun Free Zones	Armed vigilantism Private armed security Local rough justice
Voluntary	Amnesties Voluntary gun surrender programmes Restorative justice Educational, parenting, life skills programmes Survivor assistance Urban strategies	Neighbourhood Watch Committees Public awareness Campaigns Toy gun exchanges Local mediation

levels. Indeed, central departments and local authorities are indispensable and mutually supportive players, including those dealing with social affairs, health and education, as well as justice and law enforcement, planning, financing and urbanization. Guided by international human rights standards, mobilizing secure funding and support from all areas and coordinating the diverse actors effectively, they can build and preserve safe spaces, including through early warning systems, and help transform violent contexts into inclusive, caring and peaceful environments for children and their families.<sup>106</sup> Strong legislation and sound data are essential to move in this direction.

#### 4.1.2 Securing a solid legal framework

Legislation is a crucial dimension of State's accountability for children's rights, including their protection from violence. The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires States Parties to adopt, "all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures" to safeguard every child's fundamental rights, including their protection from all forms of violence.

Legislation is a key component of any comprehensive strategy to prevent and address all forms of violence against children. It sends a clear message to society about unacceptable behaviour towards children and it legitimizes actions required to safeguard children's safety and protection at all times. Appropriate legislation encourages positive discipline and the education of children by non-violent means, underlining the need to safeguard their dignity and integrity at all times. It is an important reference for capacity-building initiatives for professionals working with and for children, and supports public information, social mobilization and behavioural change. Where social conventions or deeply entrenched traditions fuel harmful practices, legal reform can mobilize key actors and institutions, including parliamentarians, local authorities and religious leaders, and support efforts to promote the abandonment of these practices.

Legislation is essential to guarantee the protection of victims and witnesses, ensure appropriate redress, and provide recovery and reintegration services. It is critical for ensuring the accountability of perpetrators of violence against children and for ending impunity. This includes appropriate legal penalties for those found guilty of such violence, and the banning of those convicted from working with children.

Finally, the possibility of protecting children or offering them effective recovery, reintegration and redress is compromised if incidents of violence are not reported. Child victims need to have access to both information and institutions in order to be able to seek help and advice and report their situation. These mechanisms must have legal backing to ensure that children have recourse to effective remedies when caregivers and others fail to protect them.

A solid legal framework legitimizes a process of transformation of the violent context into peaceful and inclusive environments for children, especially when it clearly prohibits all forms of violence against children and offers effective child-sensitive mechanisms to provide counselling and referrals for those at risk, as well as for reporting, investigating and responding to incidents of violence.

As illustrated by the Global Survey on Violence against Children,<sup>107</sup> the introduction of legislation to protect children from all forms of violence is gaining momentum. Government responses to the Global Survey indicated that 92% of countries have some sort of legislation on violence against children or some of its manifestations. By 2016, more than 50 countries had a comprehensive law banning all forms of violence against children in all contexts. Nonetheless, only 10% of the global child population benefits from such legal bans on all forms of violence.<sup>108</sup>

#### 4.1.3 Consolidating data and research

Data and research are needed to capture the manifestations and incidence of armed violence, to monitor progress and the impact of interventions, and to document those initiatives that prove to be effective. Moreover, they are indispensable to provide the needed evidence to inform advocacy, States' policy making and programming interventions.

Despite the scale and seriousness of the problems associated with armed violence in the community, available research on this topic is woefully inadequate. This means policy and programming decisions are often made without a detailed understanding of the problems or of what interventions are most likely to be successful. In addition, there is an extreme imbalance between the countries where violence occurs and those where research is done: 90% of scientific research on interpersonal violence comes from high-income

countries (of which 60% is from the USA). Only 10% of research comes from low- and middle-income countries, which account for 85% of violent deaths globally and 98% of population growth in the next 30 years.<sup>109</sup>

Evaluations of interventions are especially rare in developing countries. A 2013 review of the evidence on youth violence prevention across the 33 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean found only 18 scientifically-robust assessments, mostly concentrated in just four countries: Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Jamaica.<sup>110</sup> As a result, perceived well-functioning health and education systems and adequately resourced police forces may in fact be mis-represented. Such perceptions may hide evidence of a lack of resources, a lack of capacity, or corruption, and interventions that are only nominally evidence-based may prove ineffective.

Another factor affecting transferability of interventions is cost. Some evidence-based interventions that may be universally effective are too expensive to implement in low income countries. For example, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is proven to reduce violence among young people who are at very high risk or already involved in violence. However, CBT depends on highly trained mental health practitioners and this is not feasible in many countries.<sup>111</sup>

Practitioners in one context can always learn from programme or policy evaluations conducted in another. However, there is an urgent need for local evaluations in the countries most affected by armed violence in the community. Those evaluations should examine the best way to adapt interventions that have proven effective elsewhere, as well developing indigenous solutions. For example, in Chicago, USA, a programme providing summer jobs for high school students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, paid at the regular minimum wage, was proven to reduce violent crime arrests dramatically.<sup>112</sup> Such a programme may not be able to be replicated exactly in other countries, where budget shortfalls mean that even full-time public servants might not be paid;<sup>113</sup> yet adapting elements of the programme (meaningful occupation and some kind of reward) could help to reduce the high rates of gun crime in violent cities.

Some promising interventions that may reduce violence have only been evaluated for their impact on risk factors, rather than on violence itself. For example, youth unemployment, drug use and poor school attendance

are all risk factors for violence. Programmes providing vocational training may help the participants to get jobs, and mentoring programmes have been shown to reduce drug use and improve school attendance. However, it is not known whether such programmes actually reduce violence in the community.

In fact, in countries where there is weak implementation of evidence-based interventions that are increasingly commonly in high-income countries – for example, parenting trainings, policies to control firearms and alcohol consumption, or support services for victims and perpetrators, limited resources are often channelled into programmes that are unproven or ineffective, and valuable opportunities for better investments are missed.<sup>114</sup>

Routine data collection systems on violence are weak in most countries, but especially in the Global South. According to the WHO, 60% of countries do not have usable data on homicide from civil or vital registration sources.<sup>115</sup> Since most violence against children and young people is not reported to government agencies, the CDC's THRIVES programme recommends collecting data from self-reports in household surveys such as national Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS). Data gathered through VACS have already led to interventions to reduce violence in the home and in schools; and similarly could contribute to preventing armed violence in the community.

The Expert Consultation organized by the Special Representative on Violence against Children in Honduras noted the urgent need for information – not only research on the problem, but also systematic documentation of good practices from around the world, development and testing of pilot projects, and monitoring and evaluation in order to identify interventions that actually work to prevent and reduce armed violence in communities of different types and in different locations. Lessons can be learned from every region.

In addition, there is a need to build capacity for research, evaluation and implementation of evidence-based violence prevention measures. Researchers and practitioners can learn from colleagues in other nations, and skills and knowledge can be strengthened via South-South cooperation.

This area will remain a key priority for the Special Representative on Violence against Children at the global, regional and national levels and in the implementation of Agenda 2030.



## 5. Building safe and nurturing environments for children

Accountability and leadership for children must translate into safe and violence-free environments in their homes, schools and neighbourhoods.

### 5.1 Holistic interventions in the family environment: positive parenting

The family home is most often a place of safety, protection and learning, but it can also be a place where violence is witnessed, endured and reproduced. A growing body of evidence suggests that parenting style influences children's likelihood of being victims or perpetrators of violence later in life. Harsh and inconsistent parenting can be associated with aggressive behaviour in children and the promotion of the intergenerational transmission of violence. On the other hand, raising children in a nurturing and non-violent environment, where human rights are respected, helps to prevent armed violence in the community.

In this process, the support of the State to parents in their child-rearing responsibilities is vital, through social policies and universal access to quality social services. Providing guidance and support for parents and caregivers can also enhance their skills in child development, non-violent discipline, promotion of gender equality and non-violent masculine identities. Such programmes are especially needed when families fear for the safety of their children, or require support, healing and closed-door mediation to overcome the distress associated with community violence.

Some positive parenting programmes rely on home visitations; others involve parents in larger school- or community-based violence prevention programmes. A longitudinal study in Jamaica found that a home visitation programme for children aged 9-24 months and their mothers showed significant mental health, educational and behavioural benefits 22 years later. The children who had participated in the parenting improvement programme were less likely than others to have been expelled from school. They also had less involvement in physical fights, and were less likely to be

involved in serious violent behaviour such as gun use, fights with weapons, and gang membership.<sup>116</sup>

#### Box 13. Overcoming trauma with love: Lessons from war zones

Research on children and families in war zones has identified principles and strategies for intervention that can reduce the impact of violence on young children and help them to recover. Such strategies may be similarly applicable to children living in contexts of armed violence in the community. One study conducted in Gaza during periods of political violence sought to identify the factors that protected children's mental health.<sup>117</sup> The researchers concluded:

- Good and loving parent-child relations and supportive child-rearing practices can protect a child's mental health even in extreme conditions. If mothers and fathers showed love, caring and wise guidance and restrained from punitive practices, children showed better psychological adjustment in spite of exposure to military trauma, did not develop PTSD symptoms, and did not develop aggressive and antisocial behaviour.
- A balance between intelligence (IQ) and creativity predicted good recovery from trauma. High IQ was directly associated with resourcefulness, but it was not sufficient on its own. Rather it was a balance between intelligence and creativity that could protect children's mental health from the long-term negative impact of military trauma.
- One-third of the children studied were classified as resilient, that is showing only moderate levels of distress despite high exposure to trauma. One distinguishing characteristic of these children was that their parents had good mental health.

### 5.2 School-based violence prevention programmes

The school is extremely important for connecting children, families and teachers; and in remote areas it can become a bridge between a child's home and the community. Schools have a unique potential to nurture non-violent behaviour and to change attitudes that condone violence.

◀ An adolescent's hand holds several lines of string that stretch across a large room, intersecting with lines held by other adolescents, during a workshop for youth from poor urban and rural areas to promote community leadership and self-esteem, and combat drug use and violence.

Staying in school, rather than dropping out early, protects against violence and many other adverse consequences. A study in Chile found that simply extending the school day reduced youth crime as well as teenage pregnancies.<sup>118</sup> Since children and adolescents spend so much time in school, this is also one of the principal settings for interventions aimed at nurturing non-violent behaviour and changing attitudes that condone violence.

Promoting social inclusion, empathy and anger management, mediation and peaceful conflict resolution at school and in the community, helps to build spaces of coexistence and dialogue: to process grief and overcome differences, tensions and stigmatization of children at risk. Implementing initiatives that are sensitive to age, gender and cultural difference creates opportunities to invest in young people's potential and self-esteem, to express diversity and gain leadership skills through sports and art, and to offer a second chance in education and a different path in life.

As addressed by the Special Representative's 2012 report *Tackling Violence in Schools*<sup>119</sup> these interventions also help to prevent bullying and other forms of aggression in educational institutions. Many school-based programmes are also relevant to preventing violence in the wider community. A systematic review by the US Task Force on Community Preventive Services found strong evidence that universal, school-based violence-prevention programmes decrease rates of violence both inside and outside school.<sup>120</sup> In fact, a study of youth violence prevention initiatives in Latin American and the Caribbean concluded that the evidence base was strongest for school-based programmes.<sup>121</sup>

One example that has been rigorously evaluated is the Open Schools programme developed by UNESCO in Brazil, which includes more than 4000 schools. Open Schools involves opening the schools on weekends and offering opportunities for students, families and the community to participate in sports, cultural, arts and leisure activities, as well as skills' workshops and training programmes. The programme is credited with pacifying the schools and also reducing crime and violence in the local communities.<sup>122</sup>

It is also fundamental to provide educational opportunities for children and adolescents who have dropped out of school. The experience of the "Las Hormigas" education centre in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, is

located in a marginalized area affected by violence and inhabited mostly by immigrants from different regions of the country. The programme provides education and therapy for children and young people who have dropped out of school, as well as engaging parents and caregivers.<sup>123</sup>

### 5.3 Community-based programmes

The commitment to preventing violence and the protection of children can be enhanced, and impunity more effectively fought for, with improved urban governance, trusted authorities, strategic alliances with all parts of society, community surveillance mechanisms and urban design that reduce the opportunities for violence and crime.

In communities affected by armed violence, children and young people from marginalized areas are often perceived as a threat to society. Violence drives and is driven by fear and is also associated with an environment of tolerance of violence, an inability to settle conflicts in a peaceful way, a lack of confidence in the authorities and fear of reporting, which in turn leads to high levels of impunity.

Strong community-based programmes such those addressed below, may overcome such challenges by promoting youth development programmes and urban strategies.

#### a) Youth development programmes

Children and young people who are not enrolled in school are particularly at risk of becoming involved in violence, as victims and at times as perpetrators. Community-based programmes enable them to learn about civic engagement, alternative conflict resolution and other life skills. These skills include emotional regulation, pro-social behaviours (e.g. cooperation, teamwork or support of others), communication and decision-making, goal-setting and bullying prevention. By developing critical thinking, building confidence and teaching effective communication, life-skills programmes can help children and young people to protect themselves and cope better with violence when it does occur (resilience).

Life skills are often taught through peer support programmes, which are important for changing cultural patterns toward non-violent models. International research shows that holistic, multi-component

programmes of this type are effective in decreasing youth participation in violence and illicit activities.<sup>124</sup> The difficulty may lie in engaging young people with these programmes. Due to precarious living conditions and irregular contact with agencies, it can be difficult to maintain consistent relationships with the very young people who stand to benefit most.<sup>125</sup>

Unemployed young people whose families have disintegrated may be tempted to dedicate their spare time and energy to antisocial activities, so one of the classic strategies is to engage them in sports or recreation. Luta Pela Paz (Fight for Peace) originated as a boxing-based programme initiated by Viva Rio, an NGO in Rio de Janeiro, with children affected by violence and crime (Box 14).

#### **Box 14.**

##### **Fighting for a better future: Fight for Peace**

Fight for Peace (Luta Pela Paz)<sup>126</sup> was founded in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro in 2000 to support young people armed and employed by drug trafficking gangs. Founder Luke Dowdney coined the term “children in organized armed violence” to describe this group.<sup>127</sup> What started as a boxing club, where participants had citizenship classes after training, has developed into an international NGO that supports young people affected by violence, using a holistic methodology based on five pillars: boxing and martial arts, education, employability, social support and youth leadership.

As well as offering opportunities across the five pillars, FFP focuses on the personal development of young people to ensure they build resilience and create positive futures for themselves. Fight for Peace directly supports young people at Academies in Brazil and the UK. It also reaches 250,000 young people through its Global Alumni Programme which trains community-based organizations in its methodology to support young people in communities around the world affected by crime and violence.

FFP has proven its expertise in reducing youth involvement in armed violence through a model that significantly improves young people’s future outcomes and increases their education and employment opportunities. FFP’s approach has been recognized as a best practice “sport for development” model by the International Olympic Committee, Beyond Sport, Laureus, and the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace.

Another life skills programme is CASA or Centro de Asesoría y Promoción Juvenil (Center for Youth Advice and Promotion) in Juarez, Mexico. CASA works with young people aged 15 and over, in the sections of Ciudad Juarez most affected by organized crime and gangs. CASA relies on a participatory approach that recognizes and respects the rights of young people exposed to situations of extreme violence – at home, in the neighbourhood and in society where their rights are neglected. The programme promotes dialogue and negotiation, recognizing the young participants as rights-holders and citizens with obligations and responsibilities to their projects and their community. Activities include advocacy to reduce gun violence in their communities and prevent the spread of organized crime. CASA emphasizes building an emancipated citizenry. The programme goes beyond skills training and educational inclusion, to engage children in one of the world’s most violent cities to commit to change in their communities by acting as subjects fully vested with rights.

#### **b) Urban strategies**

Since rapid and disorganized urban growth is an important driver of armed violence, Sustainable Development Goal 11 is directly relevant to finding solutions. Goal 11 addresses safe and affordable housing, transport and basic services, upgrading slums, urban planning and management, and resilience to climate change and natural disasters. City governments are key actors. Urban upgrading can help reduce violence by reducing opportunity for crime, providing safety infrastructure for hot spots (e.g. street lighting, surveillance technology), and improving the interaction between residents. In Brazil, El Salvador, Jamaica and South Africa, the strategy of upgrading housing and services in poor urban neighbourhoods is yielding promising results in terms of young people’s perception of safety and, it appears, in terms of actual reduction in crime. Infrastructural interventions also include creating opportunities for inclusion, by connecting members from high-risk neighbourhoods with the larger society. In Medellin, Colombia, the construction of a public transit system connecting isolated low-income neighbourhoods with the city centre was associated with strong reductions in homicides and in reported violence.<sup>128</sup>

UN Habitat’s Safer-Cities Programme, launched in 1996, uses a holistic, integrated, multi-level and multi-sectoral

approach to make neighbourhoods safer by improving urban governance, planning and management. Safer-Cities initiatives are in 77 cities in 24 countries across the world. The urban approach makes it possible to understand the range of internal conflicts that can lead to violence. The three pillars of prevention are:

- Law enforcement and criminal justice reform: visible police patrols, conflict resolution, neighbourhood watch, by-law enforcement, improving relationships and accessibility
- Social prevention for youth and women: youth empowerment, victim support, recreational facilities
- Urban design: improving street lighting; redesigning streets, buildings, parks, markets, bus terminals, etc, to reduce opportunities for crime

#### Box 15.

#### Interrupting violence before it turns lethal: Cure Violence

Cure Violence<sup>129</sup> (formerly known as CeaseFire Chicago) is a violence prevention model that uses highly trained outreach workers and violence “interrupters” to mediate conflicts on the street before they escalate into shootings. Rather than aiming to change the behaviour of a large number of people, Cure Violence concentrates on changing the behaviour and risky activities of specific individuals who have a high chance of either “being shot” or “being a shooter” in the immediate future. The outreach workers, who come from the neighbourhoods where they work, guide young people toward alternative ways of solving problems, while providing counselling and connecting them to a range of services. The programme also aims to change community norms regarding violence, through community mobilization, public education and mentoring.

Cure Violence has undergone two independent evaluations. A 2008 U.S. Department of Justice study found that the Cure Violence model was responsible for significantly decreasing shootings and killings in several of Chicago’s most violent neighbourhoods. A 2012 evaluation conducted by The Johns Hopkins University found that Safe Streets, the Baltimore-based Cure Violence replication site, was successful in reducing shootings in all four neighbourhoods where it was implemented.

The Cure Violence model has been applied in 23 US cities as well as in Puerto Rico, Mexico, Honduras, Iraq, Syria, South Africa, Canada and England. Several other countries are considering applying or adapting the programme.

With improved urban governance, trusted authorities, strategic alliances with all parts of society, community surveillance mechanisms, and an urban design that reduces the risk of violence and crime, commitment to violence prevention and children’s protection can be enhanced, and impunity effectively fought.

#### 5.4 Services for survivors of violence

Providing support to people who are being or have been victimized is part of violence prevention in several respects. Services like counselling support groups and housing can stop the recurrence of violence. They can also reduce the mental and physical health impact of violence, thus preventing its worst consequences.<sup>130</sup>

In addition, providing support for victims is a method for interrupting the cycle of violence, since victims of violence are themselves at increased risk of committing violence against others. Directing attention and resources to victimized children and young people reduces the likelihood of their becoming perpetrators.<sup>131</sup>

Children and young people experiencing violence often do not know how to seek assistance to overcome their trauma and seek redress; they often do not know where to go to address issues with housing, foster family support, employment, transportation, education, vocational training, health care, material goods, or legal and financial assistance. They can benefit from advocacy and case management to connect them with the services they need. This approach, applied to domestic violence survivors in the Community Advocacy Project (CAP) in the US, has been proven to decrease the recurrence of physical and emotional violence, and to increase psychological well-being.<sup>132</sup>

For children, telephone hotlines make it possible to reach out for support. In 2013, the Brazilian government’s Child Hotline 100 received complaints of 252,470 cases of violence (of all types) against children and adolescents, an average of 29 cases per hour.<sup>133</sup>

One approach to violence prevention that has gained support in recent years uses the hospital setting as a point of intervention with young people admitted for treatment of gunshot or knife injuries (Box 16). Hospitals in several major US cities have created the National Network of Hospital-based Violence Intervention Programs (NNHVIP).<sup>134</sup> These programmes teach nonviolent problem-solving skills such as mediation and

negotiation, while helping participants to access the services they need in the health, welfare and education systems. Evaluations of these programmes have demonstrated promising results including:<sup>135</sup>

- significant reductions in misdemeanor offenses, feelings of aggression, and improved self-efficacy.
- 50% reduction in criminal convictions, 75% reductions in convictions for violent crime.
- significant reductions in reporting of re-injury.
- higher use of social and welfare support services and lower rates of substance misuse.
- significantly reduced involvement with the criminal justice system.

**Box 16.**  
**Making use of the “teachable moment” for young gunshot survivors**

Quality services for young gunshot victims can effectively treat the effects of injury and trauma, address risk factors for re-injury and facilitate pathways out of violence for young patients. Research on violently injured young patients in emergency departments suggests that early detection of high-risk youth immediately post-injury offers an opportunity to prevent long-term psychological harm. Victims of violence aged 10–24 can change their lifestyles to avoid becoming repeat “clients” at emergency departments for gunshot and knife wounds. This change can be initiated by health professionals who choose to do more than “treat them and street them”.

Young people often describe being shot or stabbed, or witnessing violent injury to others, as an “awakening,” a “wake up call,” akin to being “slammed against a wall”, prompting them to re-examine their lives. These are “teachable moments” for guidance and redirection by caring and competent health professionals, peers, and other role models, to assist those who have become enmeshed in violence to extricate themselves, break the cycle of violence, and support positive youth development. The “teachable moment” may be useful in assisting the survivor and their family to become engaged in future violence prevention activities.

“When I woke up from being shot, I couldn’t talk, I couldn’t move, I couldn’t eat, and I couldn’t breathe without the help of a machine. In fact, for the first six months, I couldn’t communicate with anyone at all. All I could do was lie there and think. You hear gang members say all the time, “I’m

not afraid to die.” But let me tell you, when you are lying there gasping for air, bleeding, going into shock, rushing toward death, that hard core is gone and all that’s left is fear. As for me, I had to learn to forgive. I had to let go of my anger toward the person who shot me, or it would have soured my life. Once I got over that boulder, I felt there was so much more that I could accomplish in rehabilitation, spiritually, mentally, and socially in my life.” (José, age 20, shot at age 17).<sup>136</sup>

## 5.5 Reducing the harmful use of alcohol and drugs, and the availability of arms

### 5.5.1 Limiting access to alcohol

The combination of alcohol and weapons often features in situations of community violence. Measures to reduce the availability and harmful use of alcohol are essential for protecting the rights of children and reducing armed violence in the community. Such measures also serve to implement Sustainable Development Goal 3.5: Strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol.

Interventions which have proved effective in reducing alcohol consumption include taxation and pricing policies, minimum age limits, restrictions on hours and venues where alcohol is sold. Other measures focus on changes to the design and management of drinking venues, training of staff, and restrictions on alcohol advertising. Adequate legal enforcement is critical for these measures as well as drink driving laws. Large public education campaigns have been developed in support of change to cultural norms around drinking; these are most effective when they involve a variety of sectors and are part of a comprehensive strategy.

When these interventions have been evaluated, the aim has generally been to ascertain whether they reduce consumption of alcohol – a risk factor for violence – rather than reducing violence itself. However, evidence strongly supports restricting the availability of alcohol as a violence reduction measure, as exemplified by the Diadema community in Brazil (Box 17).

**Box 17.****Reducing violence by limiting alcohol sales**

The experience of the Diadema community in Brazil illustrates how effective regulation of alcohol can reduce violence against women and children.<sup>137</sup> The city implemented a community-wide strategy to reduce alcohol-related violence, based on a law requiring bars to close by 11pm, security cameras in high-crime areas, and increasing local and state police patrols around bars, car parks and other spaces deemed to be high-risk. The intervention also included vocational training and work placements for high-risk youths, life skills training and organized activities during school holidays (a peak period for youth crime). This comprehensive strategy reduced homicides from 389 cases in 1999 to 167 in 2003, and robberies from 5,192 cases in 1999 to 4,368 in 2003.

**5.5.2 Drug law reform**

The approach taken by most countries to alcohol is known as harm reduction, relying on regulation rather than prohibition. In contrast, most countries have adopted absolute prohibition as their approach to other drugs such as opiates, cocaine and cannabis. Prohibition means that people who use these drugs necessarily come into contact, directly or indirectly, with criminal actors. However, the main link with armed violence lies in the fact that prohibition has driven up prices, providing a profit motive for criminal groups to enter the drug trade. Illicit, unregulated drug markets are inherently violent, especially when they intersect with the illicit gun traffic, and corruption. Aggressive, militarized law enforcement can lead to increased violence, by fuelling competition between criminal organizations. This raising of the stakes also raises the danger for economically and socially vulnerable children and young people who participate in these illicit markets, whether as drug users or as part of the distribution networks.

The burden of current drug laws falls heavily on children and adolescents. As the lowest-ranking workers in the drug trade, they are more likely than adults to be caught and arrested. If they are only selling small quantities of drugs to finance their own addiction – or even if they are not selling, but only using – the punitive drug laws nonetheless drag many thousands of otherwise nonviolent young people into the detention system. Going to prison has a range of deleterious consequences

for young people, including dangers to their health and safety, likelihood of becoming further involved in crime, as well as limiting their ability to secure employment or finish their education.<sup>138</sup>

A 2015 study of drug policies and juvenile justice in Latin America revealed the extent to which drugs are the reason for young people's incarceration.<sup>139</sup> In Brazil, where most criminal cases overall relate to drugs or property crime, nearly 27% of adolescents in detention are there for drug trafficking. In Colombia, 25-30% of adolescent prisoners have been convicted of producing, carrying or trafficking drugs. In Paraguay, 85% of adolescents detained in the juvenile justice system are there for using crack cocaine, even though using (as opposed to selling) drugs is not officially a crime.<sup>140</sup>

The penalties for offences related to drugs are disproportionately high in some countries – as high as the sentences for homicide. In fact, a 2012 study of drug-sentencing in seven Latin American countries found that three – Bolivia, Ecuador and Mexico – had maximum penalties for drug trafficking exceeding the maximum for homicide. In Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, the minimum sentence for drug trafficking was also higher than the minimum for homicide.<sup>141</sup> A few grams may be the difference legally between the offence of possession for personal use and the offence of trafficking.

A growing body of opinion supports the idea of reversing the traditional approach – that is, of regulating drugs instead of prohibiting them – in order to reduce the sums of money and consequently the levels of violence involved.<sup>142</sup> Evidence in support of this proposal comes from Portugal, which reformed its drug laws and saw reductions in violent crime and drug addiction (Box 18).

**5.5.3 Reducing the availability of firearms**

Arms trafficking fuels violence and organized crime; comprehensive policies and strategies are needed to stem the flow of guns. Reducing the proliferation of guns requires national and international regulation, intervention by police and the courts, public awareness and disarmament efforts. It also requires responsibility and accountability in the private sector, from gun manufacturers and sellers to the private security companies whose armed agents outnumber the police in some countries.

**Box 18.****Portugal drug policy promotes a health-centred approach<sup>143</sup>**

Portugal decriminalized low-level possession and use of all illicit drugs in 2001. The results demonstrate that drug decriminalization – alongside a serious investment in treatment and harm reduction services – can significantly improve public safety and health.

The reforms eliminated criminal penalties for low-level possession and consumption of all illicit drugs, re-classifying these activities as administrative violations. A person found in possession of personal-use amounts of any drug is no longer arrested, but rather ordered to appear before a local “dissuasion commission” – comprised of one legal official and two from health or social services – who determine whether and to what extent the person is addicted to drugs. The commission can refer that person to a voluntary treatment programme, pay a fine or impose other administrative sanctions. While drug use and possession no longer trigger criminal sanctions, drug trafficking remains illegal and offences are still processed through the criminal justice system.

Independent research of the Portuguese policy has shown remarkably promising outcomes:

- Rates of illicit drug use have remained flat or declined, and are below the European average.
- Adolescent drug use, as well as drug use by people deemed to be dependent or who inject, has decreased.
- 60% fewer people are arrested for drugs; and the percentage of people in prison for drug offences has dropped from 44% in 1999 to 24% in 2013.
- The number of people receiving drug treatment increased by 60%.
- New HIV cases among people who use drugs declined from 1,575 in 2000 to 78 in 2013. New AIDS cases declined from 626 to 74.
- Drug overdose deaths reduced from about 80 in 2001 to just 16 in 2012.
- The per capita social cost of drug misuse decreased by 18%.

A comprehensive coherent legal framework is essential for the success of efforts to reduce gun proliferation and prevent armed violence. Legislation should prevent children, and unauthorized or irresponsible users from having access to guns, and prevent the build-up of arsenals. This means:

- Setting high standards and conditions for permission to acquire, possess or use guns
- Limiting the number and types of guns permitted for different categories of users
- Making authorized owners accountable for their weapons
- Removing weapons from people who fall short of the required standard of responsibility
- Designating schools and other public places where guns are not allowed.

The most successful gun laws rely on a robust system of licensing owners, registration of weapons and strong enforcement. Many countries’ gun laws contain loopholes such as exemptions for certain categories of persons (e.g. former military, police or parliamentarians). Traffickers and criminals can take advantage of these loopholes. A growing number of countries are strengthening their gun laws and seeing reductions in gun violence as a result. Examples include Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, South Africa and the United Kingdom.<sup>144</sup>

Regulating international arms transfers is critical to reducing proliferation and preventing armed violence. International standards have been adopted at the United Nations with this aim, including:

- the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in all its Aspects
- the International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons
- the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime<sup>145</sup>
- the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT)<sup>146</sup>

Several regions also have legally-binding instruments, for example the Inter-American Convention on Firearms (CIFTA) and the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms.

The ATT is a groundbreaking convention which makes the link between international arms transfers and human rights: if a proposed transfer of weapons would result in violations of international human rights or international

humanitarian law, the transfer must be refused. Ratifying the ATT is one of the highest priorities for countries seeking to reduce the proliferation of guns and armed violence.

Weapons surrender, collection and destruction programmes have been part of some of the most successful national gun law reform packages. If legal changes mean that certain weapons are banned or certain users no longer qualify to own guns, the state must provide a way of removing those weapons from circulation. In order to secure compliance, collection programmes generally offer cash compensation in return for the weapons surrendered. The largest gun destruction programme was held in Australia, where the gun laws were comprehensively reformed after a mass shooting in 1996. The new laws included a ban on semi-automatic rifles and shotguns. The banned weapons were bought back and destroyed in a programme that removed nearly 650,000 guns from circulation initially, and was later extended to bring the total to over one million.<sup>147</sup> The gun buy-back and other elements of the reform package dramatically reduced gun deaths in Australia.<sup>148</sup>

Local weapons surrender programmes have been held in many communities affected by armed violence, with compensation taking the form of vouchers for consumer goods, movie tickets, building materials, or sometimes in return for development projects. These smaller programmes do not generally have an effect on rates of violence but they serve an educational and awareness-raising function.<sup>149</sup>

Public awareness initiatives generally accompany other policy elements such as legal reforms, weapons collection and destruction programmes, or bans on carrying guns. Changing attitudes towards guns is a crucial dimension of armed violence prevention efforts. Public campaigns and social mobilization do not in themselves reduce violence; but they can influence policy development, compliance and especially cultural change on gun possession and use. When based on sound data and research, they help to build strong partnerships between advocacy groups, religious communities, human rights organizations, businesses and government.

In Brazil, a massive public advocacy campaign by civil society organizations led to the adoption of the Disarmament Statute, which substantially tightened the regulation of guns. This campaign involved primary

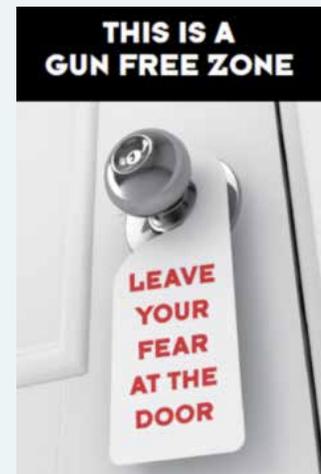
research and dissemination of the results, as well as legal work, community organizing and communication. Partnerships between advocacy groups and organizations in the religious, human rights and business communities created an extensive national network. The campaign was a resounding success, changing the law and reducing gun ownership, gun sales and gun violence.<sup>152</sup>

Another type of campaign is directed primarily at children and toy guns, on the basis that these contribute to normalizing the acceptance of the use of weapons.

### Box 19. Gun-free zones

Gun-free zones are a local quasi-legal measure that have demonstrated impacts including increasing the sense of security, reducing gun battles in the designated areas and decreasing social acceptance of the presence of weapons. This method was pioneered in South Africa, which has one of the world's highest homicide rates, at 31 per 100,000, and around one-third of killings are by firearms.<sup>150</sup>

The Gun-Free Zones (GFZ) programme began there in the 1990s, seeking to raise awareness and generate support among vulnerable young people and communities for the idea of stronger controls to reduce the proliferation of guns. Communities voluntarily declare certain areas to be gun-free, where it is forbidden to bring firearms. The State does not intervene in these citizen pacts: implementation is the responsibility of the community and local businesses. South Africa strengthened its gun law and has seen a dramatic reduction in gun violence. Although a causal link with GFZs cannot be proved, local research suggests that gun-free zones have reduced gun-carrying and gunshots on the street, while increasing the sense of safety for local residents and workers. Versions of GFZs have also been successful in El Salvador, Colombia, Sierra Leone and Solomon Islands.<sup>151</sup>



Source: Gun Free South Africa

For example, Afghanistan has recently banned the sale of toy guns as part of an effort to curb the culture of violence.<sup>153</sup> In 2015 the Mexican government called on parents to avoid buying toy guns as Christmas gifts for their children, in order to foster a culture of prevention in early childhood.<sup>154</sup> Following the terrorist attacks on Paris in November 2015, the toy retailer Toys R Us decided to remove all toy guns from its shelves, to avoid causing confusion for police who might think the toys were real weapons.<sup>155</sup>

In El Salvador, a campaign called ¡Armas ni de juguete! (Not even toy guns!) was developed as part of the UNDP programme Toward the Construction of a Society without Violence. The campaign ran in 12 municipalities, with activities for children aged 7–13. These included exchanging war toys for school supplies; recycling toy guns or creating sculptures out of them; distribution of campaign-themed materials; role plays and workshops aimed at developing skills to deal non-violently with difficult situations in a violent society. The children also produced and broadcast radio programmes on topics related to guns and violence. National and international experts supported the children's activities.<sup>156</sup>

A programme in Mendoza, Argentina, involves more than 2000 schools with over 500,000 students in events where children can exchange their toy guns for items like books, plants, sweets and non-war toys. On the advice of psychologists who said smashing the toy guns could be seen as a violent act, the toys are instead melted down and the plastic used in mosaics and other artworks for exhibition in the schools. Many schools also incorporate the anti-violence message in drama, songs and balloons released to the sky.<sup>157</sup>

## 5.6 Outreach, awareness-raising, communication and social mobilization

Armed violence in the community has a cultural component that exacerbates the impact on children. Children and young people from marginalized areas are often perceived as a threat to society. Violence drives and is driven by fear; it is also associated with an environment of tolerance or indifference to violence, an inability to settle conflicts in a peaceful way, lack of confidence in the authorities, and fear of reporting, which in turn leads to high levels of impunity.

School and community-based violence prevention programmes seek to change norms and values

among the individuals who participate directly; but larger mobilization and communication strategies are needed to counter these aspects of armed violence. Outreach, awareness-raising, communication and social mobilization are strategies for promoting change in individual and collective attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. All sectors of society must be involved, including local leaders, religious communities, professional and civic associations, the business sector and the media. Indeed, media organizations sometimes contribute to the climate of fear, stigmatization and suspicion, but they can also become strategic actors supporting efforts to address misperceptions, to change social norms condoning violence, and to promote peace and coexistence. Communication efforts are particularly effective when they engage with a wide range of actors, including children, civil society and local businesses in public campaigns and events, mobilizing public opinion and with all levels of government to invest in services for children and build safe and peaceful neighbourhoods.

Communities that adhere to restrictive gender norms are particularly likely to see physical, sexual and emotional violence committed by men against women and children.<sup>158</sup> Research conducted by Promundo in the context of high violence and post conflict settings across regions illustrates that engaging men in gender equality addresses some of the biggest drivers of gender inequality and helps promote caregiving, violence prevention and healthy lives. Helping men and boys to promote non-violent masculinities and find new identities together with women and girls, and helping communities to build on positive local cultural practices, result in better livelihoods for all.

Community mobilization to challenge gender norms has been rigorously evaluated as a strategy to prevent violence and HIV transmission in Uganda. The SASA initiative trained community activists, cultural leaders, police and healthcare workers in power analysis, advocacy and communication, and then each participant fostered engagement and awareness in their own social circles. Over 400 activists took part in training, and subsequent activities reached over 260,000 community members. Evaluation showed that the programme succeeded in changing attitudes and reducing physical violence by 50%.<sup>159</sup>

In Cali, Colombia, a community mobilization programme called Mejor Hablemos (Let's Talk) included activist training, theatre and music productions, printed flyers

and awareness raising through mass media. It also included advertising and public service messages while incorporating anti-violence messages into a popular television serial. Evaluation showed that *Mejor Hablemos* had changed attitudes and helped to reduce violence in the city.<sup>160</sup> Another comprehensive example of mobilization against violence can be seen in Juarez, one of the most violent cities in Mexico. The movement called *Hazlo por Juarez* (Do it for Juarez) engaged children, civil society organizations, local businesses and media in a campaign of posters, murals and public events challenging all levels of government to invest in services for children in the city.<sup>161</sup>

In relation specifically to armed violence, public campaigns can have an impact by raising awareness and promoting cultural change on attitudes to gun possession and use. Such programmes are often developed to accompany and support gun control and disarmament efforts.

#### 5.6.1 The role of community and religious leaders and actors

Community and religious leaders play a significant role in addressing social problems, including violence, as they command respect and are able to reassure and persuade those around them. In contexts of sectarian violence and violent extremism, religious leaders become vitally important in preventing and countering radicalization and in promoting tolerance, mutual respect and peace because of their unique positions of authority, credibility, access to institutional resources and ties with communities. In Jamaica, for example, the Violence Prevention Alliance (VPA) has supported the establishment of the Churches Violence Prevention Network (CVPN). This network consists of the various groups of churches present in the country. The purpose of the Network is to provide support in violence prevention activities targeting at-risk youths in the communities. The Network has developed an online database to promote services to the community and serve as a source of reference for community programmes offered by faith-based organizations.<sup>162</sup> The VPA works with churches to reach unattached youth and to engage them in multiple preventing violence programmes through sports and recreational activities.

The role of religious leaders gains a special relevance when violent extremism is encased in religious terms. As stressed

by a prominent Muslim theologian in the USA, who constantly speaks out against extremist violence by groups claiming to be guided by Islam: “We [Muslims] are more scared of terrorism than anyone. We suffer in the actual act of terrorism, and then we suffer the backlash.”<sup>163</sup>

The UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect has developed, in collaboration with religious leaders and actors from different beliefs, the Fez Plan of Action on The Role of Religious Leaders in Preventing Incitement that could lead to Atrocity Crimes.<sup>164</sup> The plan contains a series of measures that religious leaders and actors may consider using to prevent and counter incitement to violence. These include engaging in dialogue with those who express radical views; countering incitement speech both online and offline through unequivocal messages; training youth ambassadors who can support and multiply initiatives through social media; supporting inter-faith dialogue, education and activities that uphold respect for religious and cultural diversity, and expressing solidarity with the victims of incitement to violence.

The Plan of Action has been reviewed at four regional meetings with religious leaders and actors from Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, the Americas and Africa, with the support of Member States, inter-governmental and civil society partners. The plan will be adopted at a global event bringing together partners that are ready to support implementation.

The Fez Plan of Action and related regional plans are pioneering actions, promoted with religious actors to develop context-specific strategies to prevent incitement that could lead to atrocities. Their implementation plays a significant role especially in regions affected by religious and sectarian tensions and violence.

#### 5.6.2 The role of the media

The media can be important in both promoting and preventing violence, if only because of the large numbers of children and young people exposed to media. For example, according to some studies, the average child in the US spends 28 hours a week watching television – more time than they spend in school. They may be exposed to themes and depictions in movies, television shows, online and in video games. By the age of 18, the average child may have witnessed 200,000 acts of violence, including 16,000 murders.<sup>165</sup>

Hundreds of studies have investigated the effects of exposure to violent media, concluding that such exposure is linked to desensitization to real-world violence; increases in aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviour; and decreases in empathy and helping behaviour.<sup>166</sup> This finding also applies to violent video games (Box 20).

### Box 20.

#### Do violent video games cause violent behaviour?

Some video games are based on conflict or crime scenarios where the players engage in virtual armed violence, including hunting down, shooting and being shot by opponents. Gamers may spend many hours involved in such onscreen violence. Many parents and educators wonder how these games might influence behaviour in real life.

Scientific research on the effects of playing violent video games indicates a link with aggression and desensitization toward violence, according to the American Psychological Association. “The research demonstrates a consistent relation between violent video game use and increases in aggressive behaviour, aggressive cognitions and aggressive affect, and decreases in prosocial behaviour, empathy and sensitivity to aggression,” says the 2015 report of the APA Task Force on Violent Media.<sup>167</sup>

However, the report said there is insufficient evidence to link the games to actual criminal violence: “No single risk factor consistently leads a person to act aggressively or violently rather, it is the accumulation of risk factors that tends to lead to aggressive or violent behaviour. The research reviewed here demonstrates that violent video game use is one such risk factor.”

The APA has called on the industry to design video games that enable parents to control the amount of violence the games contain. It recommends improvements in the video rating system; urges developers to design games that are appropriate to users’ age and psychological development; and calls for more research to address gaps in the knowledge about the effects of violent video game use.

Research from Singapore, Japan and the US suggests that playing a different type of video game can produce positive changes in attitude and behaviour among children, adolescents and young adults. Prosocial games, which emphasize strategic cooperation and helpfulness over violence, were found to build pro-social and helpful behaviour after the games were turned off.<sup>168</sup>

News coverage and commentary can also influence people’s attitudes and behaviour in a way that makes violence more likely. One notorious example was the role of hate radio in the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Broadcasting to a large population, hate radio stations like RTLM projected racist, dehumanizing propaganda against Tutsis and moderate Hutus, urging listeners to exterminate “this race of bad people” and at times even targeting specific victims, broadcasting their names, license plate numbers and hiding places. In 2003, nine years after the genocide, three RTLM executives were convicted of genocide for inflaming the ethnic hatred that eventually led to more than 800,000 people being slaughtered.<sup>169</sup> In Kenya, where the 2007 election was followed by a wave of violence in which 100,000 people were killed, the local news media were also accused of fuelling the flames of inter-tribal hostility.<sup>170</sup>

Sensationalist news media coverage can increase the likelihood of terrorist attacks<sup>171</sup> and school shootings,<sup>172</sup> as well as generating stigma and discrimination against young people,<sup>173</sup> racial minorities,<sup>174</sup> transgender people,<sup>175</sup> and people with mental illness.<sup>176</sup> In South Africa, an analysis of news articles on school violence found that it was portrayed as being an individual, rather than a societal, problem. In many articles no mention was made of possible solutions; in the cases where solutions were discussed, the emphasis was on stronger law enforcement. According to the researcher, this type of coverage “strengthens the perception that society is powerless regarding the prevention of school violence and that it is simply a law and order problem”.<sup>177</sup>

Of course, the media can also play a positive role in preventing and responding to violence, through responsible reporting and by raising public awareness of the problem and the solutions and the services available. The 2013 elections in Kenya were conducted peacefully thanks to intensive efforts by government, civil society and the media to disseminate messages about peace and prevent messages that might incite violence. This included business involvement in preventive action: before and during the election, seven radio stations broadcast a radio drama carrying the theme of peace. Titled Gutuka (meaning “awaken” in Swahili), the series specifically encouraged women to participate actively in the promotion of a peaceful society. This gender-specific approach to conflict prevention was novel in Kenya. One of the companies involved, the Well Told Story production house, was able to multiply the impact

of the series by promoting listener participation, with fan competitions, call-ins and discussions on the topics covered.<sup>178</sup>

On another positive note, research indicates that the negative impact on children of watching violent media can be counteracted by building the children's skills as critical consumers. In Germany, adolescent students participated in five weekly sessions where they analyzed how violence is presented in the media, learned about why media violence might increase users' aggression, and made short films about what they had learned. The emphasis was on promoting a critical understanding of the effects of media violence through active mediation. After the intervention, the participants reduced their consumption of violent media and showed less aggression than the students who had not participated. The effect was sustained for several months.<sup>179</sup>

### 5.6.3 The role of the corporate sector

Armed violence in the community is a major obstacle to business activity in some countries. For example, the World Bank reported that in Brazil in 2003, 52% of managers ranked crime as a major business constraint.<sup>180</sup> Beyond investing in their own private security, businesses can make a valuable contribution to preventing violence in their communities, as well as nationally and globally.

A business culture that understands and fully respects children's rights can effectively create positive change for children. Promoting a peaceful and sustainable society is closely linked to business sustainability. By adopting a holistic child rights-based approach, companies can create enabling and supportive environments for children. They can support positive parenting, implement zero tolerance policies toward violence in the family and within the chain of production, and promote cultural transformation of attitudes that tolerate and condone violence. For example, the furniture maker IKEA has published its commitments to children where one of its main targets is to "advocate for children's rights by influencing policy development, raising awareness and supporting families in vulnerable communities."<sup>181</sup>

A key contribution of the corporate sector is the provision of employment to young people from disadvantaged communities who might otherwise be drawn into criminal activity. For example, in 2015 a group of US companies led by Starbucks Coffee

announced a commitment to provide employment or training to 100,000 at-risk youth over three years.<sup>182</sup>

Businesses can equally help to prevent and reduce violence through the development of products to make communities safer. One innovative example is SafetiPin<sup>183</sup>, a map-based app for mobile phones developed by a social enterprise in India. SafetiPin provides safety information on every neighbourhood in a city, based on parameters including lighting, visibility, people density, security, walking paths, transportation and gender diversity in the area. Users can view safe and unsafe locations, and plan their routes accordingly. They can also enrich this information by providing reports on hazards, harassment or broken street lights. The app has a personal safety tracker feature, permitting a user's movements to be GPS-tracked by family or colleagues, who can provide swift help in case of a crisis. SafetiPin originated as a tool



Source: Safetipin

to prevent violence against women, but it can be used by anyone wanting to plan safe movement around a city. It is also useful for local government as it provides information on safety hazards requiring attention.

Many products, practices and attitudes endanger children and undermine their rights, as in the case of guns or exploitative advertising. To support businesses promoting tolerance and respect and fulfilling their responsibilities towards human rights and children's rights, the Special Representative on Violence against Children collaborated with UNICEF, Save the Children and the UN Global Compact in the development of the Children's Rights and Business Principles. The Principles are designed to inspire and guide companies on the actions they can take in the workplace, marketplace and community to respect and support children's rights.<sup>184</sup> These include the commitments to:

- Ensure the protection and safety of children in all business activities and facilities (Principle 4)

- Ensure that products and services are safe, and seek to support children's rights through them (Principle 5)
- Respect and support children's rights in security arrangements (Principle 8)
- Help protect children affected by emergencies (Principle 9)
- Reinforce community and government efforts to protect and fulfill children's rights (Principle 10)



## 6. Securing public safety, access to justice and restorative justice approaches

Citizen security is closely dependent on respect for the rule of law, transparent and accountable institutions, and community engagement in public safety efforts. It requires a comprehensive approach based on collaboration between local violence prevention groups and police to identify challenges and promote intervention strategies. These strategies should aim to: promote children's access to justice, and to counselling and reporting mechanisms to address incidents of violence; avoid the stigmatization, criminalization and detention of children at risk; promote programmes to prevent the involvement and support the reintegration of children affected by armed violence, including those who are members of gangs and criminal networks; create whistleblower systems to interrupt institutional violence and arms trafficking, supported by effective accountability systems and; develop initiatives to promote disarmament of communities and promote a change in attitudes towards guns and tolerance to violence. Moreover, it requires restorative justice processes to address those affected, through mediation, conciliation and reintegration strategies.

Society demands strong responses when violence occurs and crimes are committed. However, accountability for these acts is not only achieved through the formal criminal justice system, especially when children and young people are the alleged perpetrators.

Restorative justice<sup>185</sup> promotes an alternative response. Rather than focusing on punishment, restorative justice uses mediation or group conferencing to address the causes and consequences of offending and aims at repairing the harm caused by wrongdoing. As illustrated in the Special Representative's report "Promoting Restorative Justice for Children",<sup>186</sup> a number of countries have already recognized the value of this approach. Promoting a participatory and voluntary process involving all those concerned helps to strengthen

### Box 21.

#### A new paradigm and a new mindset: Indonesia legislation on restorative justice

- The law is framed by the CRC and addresses children as offenders, as victims and as witnesses of crimes.
- Status offences are decriminalized.
- The minimum age of criminal responsibility is raised and marital status no longer constitutes grounds for treating the child as an adult.
- Children's right to legal counsel and other assistance and to access justice before an objective and impartial court and in closed proceedings is recognized, as is the right to humane treatment and freedom from torture and other inhuman, cruel and degrading treatment or punishment.
- Protection of privacy and confidentiality of the child's identity in public media is guaranteed.
- Arrest, detention or imprisonment can be used only as a last resort and for the shortest possible time.
- Only specialized personnel can handle cases of children involved with the justice system.
- Police, prosecutors and judges are required to prioritize diversion and restorative justice in cases of an offence punishable with a sentence of imprisonment of up to a maximum of seven years and when the child is not a recidivist.
- Legislation provides a variety of sentencing options, including admonishment, non-institutional and institutional treatment, social services, supervision and vocational training.

community ties, fostering repentance and forgiveness and shaping a genuine and purposeful process of social reintegration.

Another advantage of restorative justice is that it can be applied at any stage of the criminal justice process, or even before a crime has actually been committed, to address anti-social behaviour in the context of family, school or community. Thus, restorative justice serves to prevent crime and violence. Its flexibility allows the design and implementation of holistic interventions

◀ Boys walk near a mural promoting peace, at the Eastern Peace Centre in the Mountain View community in the parish of Kingston and St. Andrew, Jamaica. The Centre provides recreational activities, life-skills and conflict-resolution training and safe spaces for young people in violence-affected communities.

consistent with children's development and the achievement of their potential in all aspects of life.

The participatory dimension of restorative justice gives adolescents the opportunity to take responsibility in a constructive and forward-looking way. This approach is associated with positive results. Indeed, children and young people participating in restorative programmes show fewer tendencies to anti-social behaviour, lower rates of recidivism and are less likely to reoffend. They are also less likely to become involved with gangs, and thus at lower risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of gun violence or gang violence. This in turn means they are less likely to go to prison, with all its adverse health, human rights, social and economic consequences.

The UN Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, called by General Assembly resolution A/69/157 paragraph 52, will examine the situation of children in detention and make recommendations for preventing their deprivation of liberty and promote non-custodial alternatives, and ensure the safeguard of their rights.



## 7. Conclusions and recommendations: Bridging strong public policies with committed local action

Armed violence prevention and response call for a comprehensive approach where human rights are safeguarded, social inclusion and human development are promoted, and all people can live free from fear and violence.

Success depends on genuine political will and commitment to act at the national and local levels. Central departments and local authorities are crucial and they need to work with mutually supportive players, including those responsible for social affairs, health and education, justice and law enforcement, security, planning, financing and urbanization. Guided by international human rights standards, mobilizing firm funding and support from all areas, and coordinating effectively among diverse actors, they can build and preserve safe spaces, and help transform violent contexts into inclusive, just and peaceful environments.

A solid legal framework legitimizes this process, especially when it clearly prohibits all forms of violence against children, and offers effective mechanisms to provide counselling and referral options for children at risk, to report and investigate incidents of violence, and to end impunity.

Data and research are indispensable, not only to capture the manifestations and incidence of community violence and the impact on children, but also to monitor progress and the effect of interventions, and to document initiatives that actually work, both to reduce and prevent violence, and to safeguard children's rights. Sound evidence is equally important to inform States' policy making, advocacy and strategic action.

Listening to the experiences and opinions of children is vital. This makes it possible to understand the hidden face of violence and factors that aggravate its impact, and to capture perceptions, attitudes and behaviour which may fuel increased violence. Moreover, children's views can inform the development of better tools and strategies for prevention and for building resilience, for

counselling, reporting, reintegration and rehabilitation, and for evaluating the difference that interventions make in their lives.

Conflict prevention and resolution calls for the contribution of all actors, including young people involved with gangs. Although often seen simply as lawbreakers, they can become influential interlocutors, help to modify gang behaviour and change violent environments. As highlighted by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, "Youth represent promise – not peril."<sup>187</sup>

Recognizing the enormous but long-overlooked potential of young people to help prevent and overcome problems of violence and conflict, in December 2015 the UN Security Council adopted a historic resolution on youth, peace and security.<sup>188</sup> Resolution 2250 urges "inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels in local, national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict." It positions young people and youth-led organizations as important partners in the global efforts to counter violent extremism and promote lasting peace. This represents a major breakthrough in collective efforts to change the predominantly negative narrative about youth and recognize the significant role of young people in building peaceful societies.

The impact of armed violence on children's rights is serious, cumulative and long-lasting. Addressing root causes of this multi-faceted phenomenon demands a comprehensive approach to building peaceful, resilient and cohesive communities where children are protected and given a genuine chance of developing to their full potential. Even though significant knowledge gaps persist, a large body of expert knowledge, experience and evidence from around the world points toward valuable solutions. These require investment in steady and well-coordinated and well-funded action at all levels and from all sectors of society, ensuring the active engagement of children and young people, and the adoption of legal and policy measures, capacity-building of professionals, collection of data and research, and an investment in wide public awareness and social mobilization campaigns.

The measures below constitute crucial building blocks to sustain progress in this direction.

#### A. Building safe and nurturing environments

- **Support families' capacity to provide children with care and love in safe environments.** Positive parenting programmes starting early in a child's life, including through support from health professionals beginning in the pre-natal period, based on home visitation or in other settings are crucial to build a safe and nurturing environment where violence is prevented and children are supported to develop to their full potential. Combining economic development and social protection programmes (like micro-finance, cash transfers and job training) with efforts to address social norms about gender and non-violent child-rearing can improve children's resilience and help to protect them from becoming victims or perpetrators of violence.
- **Economic empowerment of women.** Increasing women's access to education and economic resources strengthens the safety of the household, improves children's school attendance and reduces the likelihood that children will witness violence at home, or become victims or perpetrators themselves. Women's economic position can be strengthened by overall policies that help low-income families and communities, and by targeted programmes of family supplements, group savings plans or microfinance initiatives.
- **Promotion of programmes to change gender and social norms,** including through small group programmes, reform of school curricula, community mobilization and public campaigns, and the active engagement of boys and men in the process is crucial to promote tolerance and respect, a shared sense of responsibility and to support social inclusion and equity in society.
- **Restorative justice opportunities in school and community settings** offer a strong potential to address incidents of anti-social behaviour or minor offences, enabling children and adolescents to understand the impact of their actions, to communicate their own feelings about the situation and to repair harm. This approach can avoid involvement with the formal justice system with all the negative consequences that this entails for young people, while ensuring accountability and solutions guided by fairness and justice.
- **Effective training and guidance for teachers and others professionals responsible for children is indispensable** to create a safe and inclusive environment and to support children's engagement in peaceful and violence-free settings and to enhance their ability to prevent violence and cope with adversity.
- **Programmes to strengthen the participation and the skills and resilience of children and young people are vital** for conflict prevention and peaceful resolution, including through high quality school-based and sports-based programmes, as well as support to participation in decision-making, critical thinking and anger management as well as conflict resolution, cooperation, communication and goal-setting.
- **Investment in comprehensive, integrated and evidence-based prevention is essential** with a focus not only on eliminating or reducing risk factors, but also on strengthening protective factors. Evidence-informed programmes are especially crucial in low-income settings, tailored to the local context.
- **Securing comprehensive services for victims of violence, and for those at risk of becoming perpetrators is crucial,** both to help victims to recover from the harm they have suffered and to interrupt the cycle of violence. Services should include counseling, psychological support, information on children's rights and on how to access other services, including for reporting and redress, and case management and advocacy for violence prevention and response.
- **Supporting child-centred secondary prevention programmes for those voluntarily trying to leave gangs and organized armed groups is of utmost importance.** These should include education and mentoring and have a focus on developing employment skills.
- **Development of a community child protection strategy, coordinated by local authorities and involving multi-sector groups is indispensable.** Such a strategy should seek to better coordinate existing resources and programmes, as well as identify areas for investment and on-the-ground delivery.

## B. Enhancing accountability for children's rights by adopting and implementing legal and policy measures to ensure children's freedom from armed violence

- **Legal prohibition of all forms of violence against children is imperative.** Most countries still lack legislation banning all forms of violence against children; and even in those countries where laws are in place, enforcement is not always adequate. Children must benefit from legal protection from all types of violence in all settings, including at home, in school, in workplaces, in public places, and in the welfare and criminal justice systems. This includes protection from stigmatization and discrimination, as well as access to justice, and to mechanisms for reporting incidents of violence and seeking redress, and to support for recovery and reintegration.
- **Reform and implementation of policies and laws addressing factors contributing to violence are of special value,** including measures to limit access to and advertisement of alcohol, reform of drug laws, and regulation of the sale, possession and use of firearms. Policies to promote gender equity and those to prevent and punish gender-based violence are also fundamental in preventing violence in the community in general.
- **Violence prevention needs to be a core component of policy action.** Armed violence is a multi-dimensional phenomenon affecting all aspects of community life, and requiring multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary responses. In order to be effective and sustainable, interventions to prevent armed violence in the community should be mainstreamed into social and economic development initiatives, education and public health programmes, urban infrastructure and action, administration of justice and other policy areas.
- **Design and implementation of comprehensive and data-driven national action plans on the prevention and elimination of armed violence are of crucial relevance.** They must be broad, multi-dimensional, involve all stakeholders and include "indirect prevention" policies and programmes which support efforts to protect children from armed violence in the community. For example, many interventions in the areas of health,

education and culture and arts can be strongly protective against violence.

- **Incorporation of restorative justice approaches at all levels of the criminal justice system** helps to prioritize repairing the harm done rather than punishing the offender. Restorative justice mechanisms can be used to prevent a young person being formally charged of having infringed the penal law, to provide non-custodial sentencing options if the offender is convicted, and to improve outcomes even if the offender is sent to prison.
  - **Implementation of security sector reform** to ensure the end of militarized and repressive policing policies and an increase in community policing is crucial to prevent and address armed violence. Impunity and injustice are major drivers of armed violence in the community. Legal regulation and training programmes based on international norms must be applied to stop State and private security agents abusing their power to perpetrate violence, and to ensure the punishment of those who do. State and private security forces must also be made accountable for their weapons, to prevent diversion of arms and ammunition into the illegal market.
- ## C. Enhancing accountability for children's rights at the local level
- **Safe and well-supervised recreational facilities for children and young people** through sports, arts and other recreational programmes provide an outlet for energy and creativity, especially for young people who are out-of-school or unemployed while promoting the development of social skills and self-esteem.
  - **Securing safety in the physical environment in urban areas** helps to prevent and reduce violence and crime including through creating attractive, accessible public spaces; installing good lighting to avoid "hidden places"; and integrating neighbourhoods to prevent marginalization and alienation between wealthier and poorer communities.
  - **Urban development and regulation management** can help prevent conflict and violence within communities where high population density is combined with poor urban infrastructure.

Explosive urbanization and the rapid growth of slums has created an urgent need for careful planning, direction and management of the growth of neighbourhoods, and for the provision of adequate housing and associated facilities – including schools, recreational areas, transport, water and other basic social services.

#### D. Consolidating evidence to promote and sustain progress

- **Improving a national system of data and research is crucial** to reveal the true extent of armed violence in the community and its impact on children; to understand and address the situation of especially vulnerable groups; to inform effective policies, and to monitor and measure progress in the realization of children's rights and in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In this regard, household surveys such as national Violence Against Children Surveys help to provide foundational data to inform policy making and programmatic interventions.
- **Identifying baselines and targets to track progress** helps to stimulate and consolidate violence prevention and response measures. Making the best choices and investments in policies and programmes requires baselines against which progress can be measured. It also requires agreement on definitions and methods of measurement so that results can be compared across different jurisdictions and time periods. Experiences and efforts to protect children from armed violence in the community must be adequately documented, to enable lessons to be learned and positive experiences to be scaled up.
- **Support to rigorous evaluation studies** to provide information on whether policies and programmes are having their intended effect in protecting children from armed violence in the community are of decisive relevance. The need for evaluation studies is especially acute in low- and middle-income countries, where the prevalence of armed violence is highest.
- **Improved capacity and training for violence prevention professionals**, including on evidence-based research practices, development of performance measures and results-based programming, documentation of good practices

and widespread sharing of findings is crucial. Cross-sharing and fertilization of experiences, including training programmes promoted through partnerships with institutions in other countries are of special value, while acknowledging that the violence prevention workforce must have strong ties with local communities and local systems in order for policy and programmes to be tailored to reality, and to be made both effective and sustainable.

#### E. Engaging civil society and the corporate sector

- **Support for public awareness and social mobilization campaigns** on the risk factors and consequences of armed violence, on services available for victims and perpetrators, and on the rights of children and young people can be strengthened by engaging civil society and media organizations in producing high-quality information and mobilization campaigns.
- **Support to and enforcement of UN Guidelines on Business and Human Rights and the Children's Rights and Business Principles** remains essential to strengthen children's protection from violence, as well as helping to prevent and address risks.
- **Development of products and services to prevent and reduce violence and promote tolerance and respect** is required through partnerships between companies and governments, civil society and children to ensure corporations are acting responsibly in their product development and marketing. The media, electronics and toy industries are particularly well-placed to influence values and behaviour and should review existing products and services to consider their impact on children, and provide adequate and accessible information to children, young people and parents on ways of preventing and addressing incidents of armed violence.

## Annex: List of participants at the International Expert Consultation

List of participants at the International Expert Consultation on protecting children from armed violence in the community, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 6-7 July, 2015.

Information about the Expert consultation is available at <http://srsq.violenceagainstchildren.org/page/1355>

1. Alejandra Hernández
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6. Elinor R. Milne
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8. Franz Vanderschueren
9. Giovanna Rizzi
10. Hamilton Sandoval
11. Ivan Ramírez
12. Jorge Cardona
13. Jorge A. González
14. Julian Bustamante
15. Juma Assiago
16. Juan Salvador Aguilera
17. Judy Grayson
18. Karla Cueva
19. Leslie Gamero
20. Leyla Díaz
21. Luz Melo
22. Maria Climaco
23. María Andrea Matamoros
24. Marta Santos Pais
25. Marta Obando
26. Martin Appiolaza
27. Mayda De León
28. Migdonia Ayestas
29. Mónica Ramírez
30. Nadine Perrault
31. Nashieli Ramírez
32. Nicolás Espejo
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34. Rebeca Pérez
35. Rebecca Peters
36. Renata Giannini
37. Rosa Maria Ortíz
38. Víctor Barrantes
39. Vanessa Henríquez
40. Tania Martínez
41. Yuni Rodríguez
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