

Crimes of the Child

UN-HABITAT Report finds urban criminals start young

Children of poverty are becoming criminals as young as the age of 10. These young people are also statistically most at risk of becoming the victims of crime, according to a new UN-HABITAT Report: *"The State of the World's Cities – 2004"*.

As poverty levels soar world-wide, so does the number of homeless young people. The numbers of street children have been steadily increasing in many countries, particularly those in developing regions whose cities cannot keep up with urbanization. When children don't or can't go to school; don't have legitimate jobs, don't have an actual home and suffer from the illnesses and disaffection that go with their situation, they are more than likely going to turn to illegal activities to support themselves. Youth gangs are mushrooming, especially in Latin American and African countries, where rapid urbanization is straining families' ability to meet the social and economic needs of young people.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, guns, youth gangs and urban violence, are issues of major concern. Latin America's cities and urban areas have the highest gun ownership rates – 19.7 per cent on average. This combination of mounting social exclusion of youth and a high availability of firearms is proving to be a lethal one in the region.

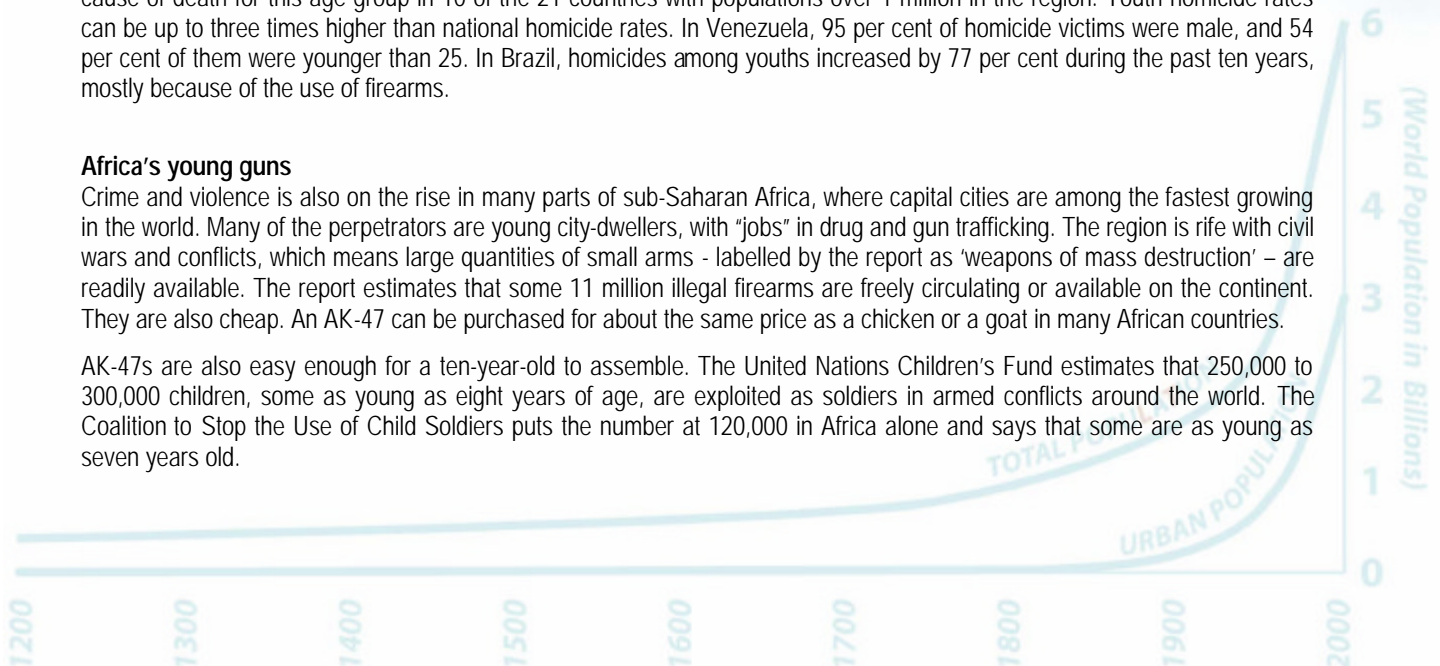
Young people resort to gangs as a means of survival and as a feeling of belonging to 'substitute families'. The drug trade provides lucrative work and traffickers have little difficulty in recruiting poorly educated youth who have few prospects for formal work. Street children are often recruited as drug couriers. In Brazil delivering drugs is estimated to create jobs for approximately 20,000 child couriers, many of them as young as 10. A young courier's salary is often higher than that of their parents, earning them respect from their peers and a feeling of importance in the community.

According to the UN-HABITAT report, youth are central to the increasing violence in most cities. Youth gangs often use violence to meet their social and economic needs, further adding to already high levels of violence in their communities. About 29 per cent of homicides in Latin America are among youth 10 to 19 years of age – and in fact, homicide is the second leading cause of death for this age group in 10 of the 21 countries with populations over 1 million in the region. Youth homicide rates can be up to three times higher than national homicide rates. In Venezuela, 95 per cent of homicide victims were male, and 54 per cent of them were younger than 25. In Brazil, homicides among youths increased by 77 per cent during the past ten years, mostly because of the use of firearms.

Africa's young guns

Crime and violence is also on the rise in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where capital cities are among the fastest growing in the world. Many of the perpetrators are young city-dwellers, with "jobs" in drug and gun trafficking. The region is rife with civil wars and conflicts, which means large quantities of small arms - labelled by the report as 'weapons of mass destruction' – are readily available. The report estimates that some 11 million illegal firearms are freely circulating or available on the continent. They are also cheap. An AK-47 can be purchased for about the same price as a chicken or a goat in many African countries.

AK-47s are also easy enough for a ten-year-old to assemble. The United Nations Children's Fund estimates that 250,000 to 300,000 children, some as young as eight years of age, are exploited as soldiers in armed conflicts around the world. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers puts the number at 120,000 in Africa alone and says that some are as young as seven years old.



More than two-thirds of the population of many African cities is between the ages of 12 and 25. Most of these young people live in informal settlements without basic facilities, services and security.

In 1992, the Organization of African Unity (OAU, now the African Union, or AU) estimated that there were about 16 million street children in Africa and that the number was expected to double to 32 million by the year 2000. The number of what they called 'children in especially difficult circumstances' was expected to increase from 80 to 150 million. The number of street children in Zambia doubled from 35,000 to 70,000 between 1991 and 1994, while the number in Nairobi exploded from 4,500 to 30,000 during the same three-year period.

Breeding disaffection

If socially included, poor slum children could become contributing citizens in mainstream society. But their almost complete lack of access to social capital, such as education, breeds a culture of resentment, distrust and defiance among youth. Several young and ex-offenders in Nairobi claim to have committed their first offence as young as between the age of 12 and 15 (30 per cent), or between age 16 and 19 (23 per cent), according to the report.

This finding compares with a similar survey of youth in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where the average age for committing a first crime was 14 years of age. In some cases young people join gangs to "get respect" in a community. But in others, such as those in Dar es Salaam, youth often band together for the purposes of finding community. This was alluded to by street children and youth in that city, who said that gangs helped each other on the street and worked together – for example, to find a place to sleep, rather than necessarily to use drugs or sell stolen goods.

In Nairobi, respondents to a Youth and Crime Survey revealed that peer groups were often their second 'families', where they learned norms and values, while 27 per cent claimed that they had been members of a gang and 20 per cent said that they were still members. Young offenders and ex-offenders said that theft was the most common form of crime for which they had been arrested, followed by assault (23 per cent), drug possession (10 per cent), mugging (10 per cent) and manslaughter (7 per cent).

Poverty-crime cycle also evident in developed regions

In Europe, rates of both juvenile violence (robbery, assault, rape and homicide) and non-violent juvenile crime rose sharply during the mid 1980s and early 1990s across EU countries, accompanying rising rates of unemployment, poverty and lack of social integration of immigrants from former communist countries. While, as with adults, offenders and victims of youth crime were far more likely to be male than female, the rate of adult crime during this same period did not increase in parallel to youth crime.

The World Health Organization's (WHO's) 2002 Report on Violence and Health states that there have been more recent declines in youth crime, including violence, in the developed world, although it was estimated that 199,000 youth murders took place in 2000. Surveys from a number of countries indicate that some 6 to 7 per cent of young males commit between 50 to 70 per cent of all crime and 60 to 85 per cent of all serious and violent crime.

In the case of indigenous, ethnic minority or recent immigrant youth, who are much more likely to be excluded from the social benefits enjoyed by their affluent white age mates, exclusion breeds the kind of disaffection that eventually leads a young person to crime, says the UN-HABITAT report. Safety, security and overall quality of life tend to be lower in urban areas that are primarily inhabited by ethnic minorities. For example, many African-Americans have been polarized in US inner-city areas that are plagued by poverty, poor housing and drug use. These deprived, neglected and excluded areas have experienced the largest increases in youth crime, violence and homicide.

The report points out that children who live in slums are also likely to be the victims of systemic racism and discrimination, and as such, are more likely to be the victims of crime, as well as to be over-represented among offenders apprehended by the criminal justice system. Aboriginal youth have long been heavily over-represented in the Canadian, Australian and New Zealand welfare and criminal justice systems, as have been other ethnic minorities such as Black, Hispanic and Asian populations in developed countries, such as the US, England and Wales, and Canada.

Aboriginal children make up only 5 per cent of Canada's youth, but they account for 34 per cent of all male and 41 per cent of all female young offenders in some Canadian provinces. Only 4 per cent of the youth population in Queensland, Australia, in 1995 were Aboriginals or from the Torres Strait Islands; yet they were involved in one third of juvenile court cases. Sixty per cent of Youth at Risk programme clients in New Zealand are Maori or Samoan. American blacks accounted for 15 per cent of that country's population in 1997, yet they made up 26 per cent of those arrested.

Interventions prove useful & available

Australia's National Crime Prevention body and the Attorney General have begun programmes targeting the specific needs of youth in public spaces, homeless youth and young Aboriginals. Nordic countries such as Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden strongly invest in social and health policy in order to prevent crime, marginalization and exclusion in the long run. Local school, social service and police committees have been set up in Denmark since the 1970s to develop comprehensive projects that prevent youth crime by bringing together efforts of social, health, education and recreation services with the police.

In England and Wales, the Social Exclusion Unit has developed a national strategy that gives special attention to the needs of socially excluded children and youth; offspring initiatives of this strategy also complement those of the government's overall Crime Reduction Strategy.

The national governments of both Belgium and France established local security contracts during the late 1990s that promote local partnerships to solve community problems. Aside from attempting to tackle overall crime and security issues, these local partnership projects also target high-risk youth – for example, by providing youth from disadvantaged areas with high rates of unemployment training in social mediation.

In Tanzania, the Safer Cities Dar-es-Salaam project was initiated in 1997 by UN-HABITAT, the International Centre for Prevention of Crime and the United Nations Development Programme. The initiative was aimed at coordinating and strengthening local institutional crime prevention capacity, in partnership with stakeholders and communities. The project focused on changing attitudes; promoting a culture of adherence to the law, and reducing youth unemployment and delinquency through skills training and cultural activities. Several neighbourhood watch groups were established, attracting the voluntary services of 200 unemployed youths (both young men and women). The groups have been successful in stopping burglaries, catching thieves and recovering stolen property. In return, each client pays a monthly token fee.

Such programmes offer a promise of change in the societies where they have been adopted. But, in most developing countries, where social support systems do not exist, life for young guns is unlikely to change.

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