RESEARCH BRIEF

APRIL 2016

Is social cohesion the missing link in preventing violence?

What is the relationship between social cohesion and violence? Can social cohesion act as a protective factor against violence in the developing world?

This research brief reviews the information that has emerged from a three-year international comparative study in South Africa and Brazil investigating the relationship between violence, social cohesion, inequality and poverty. The project was conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa and funded under the Safe and Inclusive Cities Progamme of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada.

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SOCIAL COHESION AS A SOLUTION TO VIOLENCE?

There is a widespread debate internationally about the relationship between inequality, social cohesion and violence. Evidence from western/northern societies suggests that social cohesion—or the lack of it—can be an important factor in explaining why some societies (cities, neighbourhoods) are prone to violence while others are not. Cohesive societies are seen to be able to work together and intervene on behalf of the common good. This would mean that individuals could act to prevent transgressions and to curb criminal or violent behaviour before it escalates. It is asserted that if policies are able to assist to create such collective efficacy in societies, then violence could be prevented.

This study finds that this relationship is not as clear-cut, at least not in cities in the global south such as Cape Town or Rio de Janeiro. While social cohesion can assist communities cope with violence when it manifests as civic co-operation, it can also become a source of violence when it manifests as vigilante and gang violence. These localised forms of cohesion undermine national democratic cohesion. Thus, policy-makers should be careful when designing policies and interventions based on social cohesion and collective efficacy as a means to prevent violence, because it can be both a protective factor and a driver of violence.

Testing the social cohesion hypothesis in the global south

The research aimed to identify the link between violence, inequality and social cohesion. Specifically, it attempted to test if increased social cohesion and collective efficacy is associated with reduced violence in contexts of high inequality, such as those found in the global south. In order to determine if the western/northern take on the relationship between social cohesion, inequality and violence could be extended to societies in the global south, the study compared two southern cities with high levels of inequality and violence: Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro.

The research teams analysed Brazilian and South African statistics on poverty, inequality, and violent crime in addition to perceptions of crime and fear of crime. Researchers also deepened their investigation in two communities to understand how violence reduction

Social cohesion can be defined at many levels, i.e. national, regional or local. At a national level in South Africa, for instance, **social cohesion** is broadly understood as 'the factors that hold society together' (The Presidency, South Africa, 2004). This includes a broad array of social characteristics that are seen as contributing to connectedness and solidarity within society.
Social cohesion combined with collective action oriented toward the public good is known as '**collective efficacy**' (Sampson, 1997:918).

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programs impacted on social cohesion and were in turn influenced by these communities' social cohesion and collective efficacy. The interventions studied were the Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) programme in the township of Khayelitsha in Cape Town, and *Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora* [Police Pacifying Units] (UPP) intervention in two *favelas* (informal settlements) in Rio de Janeiro, *Cidade de Deus* and *Tabajaras/Cabritos.*

RESULTS

SOUTH AFRICA

Violent crime, poverty or exposure to economic inequality

The analysis of violence, poverty and socio-economic inequality across South Africa reveals the continued uneven distribution of violent crime, poverty and inequality as a result of spatial and social segregation under apartheid. The research sought to reflect people's 'lived experience' of inequality as they go about their daily lives by measuring their *exposure* to socio-economic inequality. While absolute poverty is highest in the rural areas, the highest levels of *exposure* to inequality occur in the metropolitan areas, which are characterised by a mix of affluent and poor areas.

Areas with high levels of poverty *and* exposure to inequality—that is, where there is a frequent daily experience of inequality—are most vulnerable to social unrest and violent crime. The research found therefore that poverty alone was not associated with the highest levels of violence, it was only when poverty was combined with a high 'lived experience' of inequality that there was a strong link to violence. Khayelitsha, where the ethnographic fieldwork for this study was conducted, is one such area.[1]

Fear of crime and social cohesion

Notwithstanding these patterns of deprivation, the data suggest that South Africans are resilient, in the sense that fear of crime does not reduce their levels of social cohesion. The analysis showed that despite South Africa's divided past, fear of crime or an actual experience of victimisation does not appear to have a sizeable impact on interracial trust. Fear of crime had a small impact on whether people believed that neighbours treated each other with respect and consideration in public and whether they felt threatened by people of other race groups.

However, fear of crime in South Africa has the most significant impact on civic cohesion or trust in government institutions, rather than more conventional horizontal indicators of social cohesion such as social trust between citizens. Therefore, while fear of crime is not significantly depressing existing stocks of social trust, there are signs that it is undermining evaluations of democratic functioning and confidence in key political institutions.[2]

A case study of Khayelitsha

Focused research in Khayelitsha revealed that informal networks are strong but that they reveal the two sides of the relationship between social cohesion and violence. On the one hand, social cohesion manifests as civic cooperation. The study found many examples of mutual help and solidarity in Khayelitsha based on the South African ethos of *Ubuntu* (we are human through others) i.e. what Sampson calls collective efficacy.

On the other hand, civic cooperation manifests as vigilantism against those perceived to threaten community identity or peace (usually suspected criminals or 'foreigners'). Or it is expressed in gang violence. Willingness to help neighbours, which is a traditional measure of social cohesion, therefore did not lead to a reduction of violence or divisions in the community as hypothesised in international literature.

At the same time the research showed that the state, which should help foster social cohesion, was significantly absent from the regulation of daily life. There was a general lack of adherence to or identification with the law among residents, while the police appear to significantly lack legitimacy and are widely viewed as corrupt.

VPUU, an internationally funded violence prevention initiative has made an important contribution to urban upgrading through infrastructure development, particularly in the Harare area of Khayelitsha. However, the intervention interacts with existing forms of social relation and organisation in complex ways. In particular, VPUU's emphasis on the formalisation of entrepreneurial activities and public space did not appear to resonate with local norms among informal traders and community members.

While VPUU establishes its own forums for consultations around implementation, these are run parallel to existing state and non-governmental structures, complicating already fragile community engagement processes. This may have contributed to a perception that there is inadequate interaction between VPUU structures, the community and the municipality. In some instances, this has resulted in shortcomings in the programme's implementation. Inadequate engagement with residents and the complex social and economic context in which they live, might explain, for example, why certain social spaces have not been sustainable, such as a business development hub and why the community has not always effectively used some upgraded spaces, such as formal retail areas, a community hall and a soccer field.[3]

BRAZIL

Homicide, poverty and inequality

The incidence of homicide is strongly associated with demographic and socioeconomic variables, especially income distribution and access to quality education. The research revealed that these variables often have a lag effect i.e. their impact on homicide rates is only felt after a significant amount of time. For example, the income of the poorest quintile of the population in 1991 was correlated with municipal homicide rates in 2010. Therefore, the way in which we intervene now to address socio-economic deprivation, will have a significant dividend later. Interestingly public expenditure on cultural activities appears to associated with lower homicide rates in Brazil. This may be associated with building social cohesion. As in South Africa, there is a strong association between slums or informal set-

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tlements and the risk of homicide in Rio de Janeiro. Poor citizens are the most vulnerable to homicide.[4]

Fear of crime and social cohesion

Social cohesion may be associated with a feeling of security, in certain circumstances and in certain areas. However, these effects seem to be far from universal and robust in the Brazilian context. It was found that high levels of social cohesion are not always associated with a reduction in fear of crime and may even be associated with an increase in fear of crime through 'talk about crime' in social networks. Two dimensions of social cohesion appeared to have weak links to reduced fear of crime i.e. trusting one's neighbours and willingness to help a neighbour, as well as the ability to distinguish neighbours from strangers in the street. This speaks to questions of familiarity in local environments. However, limited national level data on social cohesion and fear of crime means further research is required.[5]

A case study in *Cidade de Deus* and *Trabajaras*

Paradoxically the research found that successful violence reduction may in certain instances undermine social cohesion. In *Trabajaras*/*Cabritos* the UPP intervention increased security but decreased social cohesion as the area became gentrified and the bonds between neighbours declined when new, wealthier residents moved into the area. In addition to being unknown to locals, newcomers were unfamiliar with the traditions and informal rules of the community.

In *Cidade de Deus* the UPP also improved security conditions. However, these improvements have declined from 2014 with drug gangs still a strong presence in the area while the community remains distanced from the police. The research found that UPP complicated existing forms of social cohesion as the power to regulate daily lives is now shared between the police and the drug dealers. UPP is also seen as having a negative effect on existing social organisations by taking over the roles of community organisations and appropriating funding previously directed to them. In this sense, the arrival of UPPs might be undermining social cohesion in the community.[6]

CONCLUSION

In both Brazil and South Africa, it is important not to romanticize social cohesion. Collective efficacy may exist—that is, people may work collectively to pursue what they believe is the common good (security, justice)—but this collective action may be violent and unpredictable. Importantly, while social cohesion—and collective efficacy in particular—can help to reduce violence, it is not necessarily a mechanism for violence prevention; in some cases, it may have the opposite effect.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from the research project suggest these changes would lead to improvements in policy and programming to prevent violence.

1. Investigate **how social cohesion works in developing countries** so that assumptions based on how it operates in the northern context do not negatively influence developing world programming.

2. **Unpack** social cohesion as a concept when developing policy. Break the idea down to identify violent and non-violent forms of cohesion so that specific elements can be targeted when designing interventions.

3. Take into account **informal mechanisms** of social regulation when designing interventions. Informal mechanisms, both positive and negative, such as volunteer security guards and vigilante groups, are critical for understanding how social cohesion works. This knowledge helps guarantee successful interventions that are relevant to the local context. Recognise and seek to strengthen, rather than bypass, local institutions and local traditions.

4. **Involve communities** democratically in violence prevention initiatives. This includes integrating them in the design and conceptualisation of interventions so that programmes resonate with local norms and systems of regulation. International models of violence prevention should be drawn on as a resource rather than uncritically implemented. These approaches may need to be revisited, revised or reformulated in the light of local conditions. Interventions may be useful for increasing security and reducing violence, but without the democratic participation of the people affected, they risk being unsustainable and potentially causing harm.

5. **Learn more** about local operating environments before interventions are implemented. Conducting contextualised qualitative and quantitative analyses in every community before interventions such as VPUU in South Africa, or Brazil's UPP are rolled out, would contribute to these programs' success. These investigations should include analysis of demographic and social conditions in addition to informal networks, mechanisms of social regulation and formal and informal power structures. This will help to ensure interventions are appropriately attuned to the environment in which they are to be implemented.

[6]Doriam Borges
[6]Ignacio Cano, and Pablo Nunes

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