

Safety and security:

Research summary



Context

Insecurity, crime and violence have a profound impact on the lived experiences of African city residents, producing significant fear and suffering, often burdening women, children and disadvantaged communities specifically. Perceived and real threats of violence, whether structural or interpersonal, or exposure to violent crime can limit mobility, impacting education, livelihoods and general wellbeing. The prevalence of urban insecurity also shines a spotlight on the histories – and current and often restricted capacities and governance approaches – of city authorities and national leadership. The forms of political settlement adopted shape patterns of violence, responses to insecurity, and potential reform coalitions. Safety and security are intimately tied to the urban realities of African cities.

Cities are sites of significant growth, through natural increase, conflict/displacement-induced migration, economic investment and demographic, infrastructural and spatial expansion. Contestation over land as the pressure for housing grows, and the possibilities for wealth generation emerge, and significant levels of underemployment in urban centres, often mean rising inequalities and insecurity in cities. Cities are often where political battles are fought, where refugees are housed, and where dreams and expectations are fostered.

Responding to insecurity and urban violence is an urgent agenda, and one that multiple governments at varying scales are seeking to address. Coalitions across and within community groups, and between informal security providers, the police and schools are critical sites for future reform.

Focus cities and research methods

Six cities were included in this study, each with their own distinct experience of insecurity.

- > **Freetown**, Sierra Leone's capital, is at the forefront of national political contestation. Its rapid growth is impacted by displacement-induced migration from the 11 years of civil war.
- > **Nairobi**, the capital of Kenya, is frequently the site of heightened insecurity tied to land conflicts, elections and state repression.
- > **Mogadishu** is Somalia's capital city, and is a fragile city, troubled by decades of civil war, and with a political context characterised by unstable elite bargains and strong clan competition.
- > **Maiduguri** is the capital of Borno State in northeast Nigeria, shaped by a decade of Boko Haram insurgency and a significant population of internally displaced people (IDPs) alongside weak governance structures.
- > **Lagos**, Nigeria's commercial capital, is rapidly growing in terms of its urban population, with significant levels of insecurity for many ordinary residents.
- > **Bukavu**, one of the Democratic Republic of Congo's largest cities, has been growing rapidly since the 1990s, tied to migration, including of refugees. Proximity to Rwanda shapes its history of insecurity.

Research was conducted in collaboration with other domain teams, and the political settlements and city of systems teams. The lived experiences of lower-income communities were central to the understanding of safety and security, and teams drew on a mixed methods approach to gather data, including interviews, security diaries, surveys, media reports and community consultations.



Key findings

Moving beyond headline statistics or generalist overviews of insecurity, the research findings challenged singular readings of violence within African cities through an everyday insecurities approach. The lived experience approach adopted in the city studies revealed differentiated accounts and notions of insecurity. Findings showed that safety and security relate to political, personal, social, health, financial, environmental and psychological dimensions.

In **Bukavu**, environmental insecurity included erosion on the slopes, fires and unsanitary conditions, while social insecurity related to concerns about the proliferation of strong alcoholic beverages, the presence of brothels, issues of witchcraft and fetishisms, social mechanisms of extortion, and unregulated gambling. While criminality and gang violence were identified as the prime problems in parts of **Freetown**, in an informal neighbourhood located next to the sea, a primary safety challenge was flooding. Incidences of robbery, assassinations, rape and sexual violence against women and young girls, accusation of witchcraft, especially among children and women of the third age, abduction and kidnapping were widely reported in **Lagos, Mogadishu, Maiduguri, Nairobi** and **Bukavu**.

Using ACRC's political settlements framework, city studies illustrated the varied complex intersections between politics and (in)security operating across urban, regional and national scales. These included different configurations of key actors, who often shaped access to resources, controlled land and determined security strategies. The framework helps identify the ways in which key political elite leadership, along with patterns of political contestation (violent and electoral), displacement and specific neighbourhood dynamics, help to shape security outcomes in cities. Poverty directly exacerbates residents' vulnerability to insecurity, as does gender, ethnicity or displacement. Among the areas of city-level interconnectedness are contexts of informality; the complete absence of, or presence of poor-quality infrastructure; land markets and urban insecurity; and the intersections between youthhood and insecurity (including impacts on and the role of education).

Implications for urban reform

The safety and security domain research findings highlighted opportunities and challenges that could shape reform efforts in African cities in three key areas pertaining to what constitutes (in)security, integrating plural security governance systems and the possibilities of transforming formal and/or informal security platforms into reform coalitions.

The varied notions of what constitutes insecurity in the cities – from flooding to insecure tenure, witchcraft, gang violence, theft, and so on – showed that insecurity goes beyond crime. This implies that safety and security challenges are the result of a range of dynamics that cannot be resolved at the level of policing, or security forces, even if there are well designed and locally owned reforms that can be undertaken. Therefore, reforms ought to target the sources of insecurity as much as they target security institutions. For instance, reforms aimed at improving conditions in informal settlements could in/directly produce short- or long-term changes in the experiences and/or perceptions of safety and security in African cities.

The studies found that many organised efforts to address insecurity are provided by actors and local institutions beyond the state. Capturing the strength of the local knowledge, local legitimacy, and local commitment of these informal actors by the state and/or municipal authorities is one potential area for expansion and upscaling. Localisation may also enhance community policing efforts and meaningful engagements between local police and community groups. One potential challenge, though, is that these non-state/informal security actors are often not recognised by legal frameworks in these cities; even though they may be more popular and enjoy more patronage than the police. Usually, reform efforts initiated by the government are directed at state institutions like the police with little or no results leading to divided opinions on whether to abolish the police (as in **Nairobi**) or to introduce more reforms. In some cities, such as **Lagos**, providing better resourcing for the police was identified by some city residents as desirable. However, investing in more state-sponsored security is unlikely to prove transformative or ultimately to enhance safety for the majority low-income residents. Since policing and security forces are fundamentally the face of the state, reforms in safety and security are likely to prove difficult without addressing the ways in which specific political settlements are structured. These arrangements often either use state resources to retain elite power or mobilise youth and other groups to either enforce or contest specific elements of the settlement.

Although the research did not identify transformative actions by reform coalitions in relation to safety and security, findings acknowledge the key role played by residents in African cities in maintaining safety, as well as the need for more consistent engagement between the police and local communities.

In **Freetown**, a wide range of actors support community security and perceive some scope for creating momentum for reform. Initiatives like the Local Policing Partnership Boards (LPPBs) and Community Service Volunteers (CSVs) were identified as viable community security structures. Similar platforms, like the Social Justice Centres, drug control committees and the Police Community Relations Committee, were identified in **Nairobi** and **Maiduguri** as arenas that facilitated dialogue, learning and co-production of security. These platforms could potentially be strengthened into coalitions that could catalyse change in safety and security in these cities.

With regards to overlaps between other domains and the safety and security domain, youth and their role in crime and violence, as both perpetrators and victims, dominates most of the cities studied. The research identified street children as particularly vulnerable, but also as a source of insecurity. Children and youth involvement as perpetrators must thus be viewed in relation to high levels of unemployment, the mobilisation of youth by political elites, and as a function of wider structural forces shaping African cities, and analyses must avoid the vilification of youths. With the realisation of this overlap between youths and safety and security, the **Lagos** city research argues that there is a need to improve security through the empowerment of marginalised youths. Youths, particularly young male adults, were the dominant members of informal security provision in cities like **Maiduguri**. This finding amplified the agency of youths as security providers in fragile cities.

Land markets and their role in underpinning insecurity across many African cities also emerged as a key interconnecting theme. The control of land is often enforced through (in)/formal security arrangements and is central to political claims in cities like **Lagos**. In **Bukavu**, the research identified a rise in conflicts over land in the city, tied to illicit sales and purchasing of plots. An analysis of power configurations in these cities suggest that reforms in the land sector must include a wider array of actors to reduce the forms of violence or threats of violence that create and sustain insecurity.

Figure 1: Cities covered by the safety and security domain research



About this summary

This is a summary of a Working Paper, written by the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) safety and security domain leads: Patience Adzande, Paula Meth and Stephen Commins.

Read the full paper

Photo information (by order of appearance):

1. Informal security providers in Maiduguri, Nigeria - Patience Adzande; 2. A landslide in Bukavu, DRC - Diana Mitlin

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