

NOREF Policy Brief

“Chronic violence”: toward a new approach to 21st-century violence

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Executive summary

This policy brief proposes the concept of “chronic violence” to characterise the crisis of escalating social violence that currently affects about one-quarter of the world’s population. Based on an extensive analysis of literature on Latin America, it advances six propositions to aid policymakers and other key stakeholders to recognise this significant – but largely ignored – phenomenon and to shift to a more productive approach that takes into account both its diverse drivers and its complex social consequences.

The brief argues that chronic violence:

- is provoked and reproduced by multiple factors, from social inequality to disjunctive democratisation;
- becomes embedded in multiple social spaces, undermines social relations, and provokes destructive behaviours that become perverse norms among vulnerable populations, some of which can be transmitted intergenerationally; and
- obstructs and undermines public engagement, citizenship and social support for democracy.

Because these complex dynamics are unlikely to be reversed in the near term, policymakers should:

- address chronic violence as a perverse, long-term “normality”;
- construct approaches that contemplate its multiple drivers and destructive social effects on vulnerable populations; and
- engage in an unprecedented effort of intersectoral and interdisciplinary learning and policy development to forge effective approaches to the destructive challenges that chronic violence poses to social relations and the practice of citizenship and democracy in many parts of the world.

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Introduction

A new kind of violence has emerged in the 21st century. According to the World Bank, a quarter of the world's population today "lives in fragile and conflict-affected states or in countries with high levels of violence in situations that are not neatly war nor peace, nor criminal nor political violence – causing damage that can last for generations".¹ It is a growing problem both for lower- and middle-income countries in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and for systematically excluded groups in wealthier countries – like undocumented migrants and certain marginalised groups in the U.S. and Europe.

While some stakeholders tend to assume that violence itself is the problem to be solved, others focus more on the diverse forces that provoke and reproduce it. This policy brief proposes a conceptual framework that contemplates both the multiple forces that reproduce chronic violence and their complex and perverse consequences in order to contribute to a new approach to this problem that addresses critical challenges that continue to elude or confound many key stakeholders.² Policymakers concerned with democratisation, for example, have difficulty accounting for why it is often accompanied by rising violence, as in South Africa, Honduras and El Salvador. Human rights advocates are perplexed by the popular backlash against human rights and due process among groups abandoned by states to defend themselves from everyday violence. In Mexico, security sector reform specialists keep hoping that by controlling drug trafficking violence will go down – despite clear evidence to the contrary. Diverse actors concerned with violence in various forms still maintain dualistic "black-or-white" views – of "perpetrators vs. victims" and "criminals vs. innocent citizens" – that ignore how long-term violence pushes everyone affected into the "grey zone". Finally, many researchers, policymakers

and practitioners still approach state, criminal and domestic violence as if they were distinct phenomena, although they are demonstrably intertwined and mutually reproductive.

We need new tools to understand and address this growing problem in an integral way. This policy brief presents six propositions about chronic violence that seek to challenge some prevailing assumptions about violence and to provide stakeholders with a new framework that contemplates both its multiple drivers and its social consequences. The ideas build on a paper written by the author for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. It reviews an extensive literature about Latin America (which has the highest levels of violence worldwide), with emphasis on Central America, Mexico, Colombia and parts of the Caribbean; identifies key drivers that reproduce "chronic violence"; and catalogues the consistent ways that it undermines social relations and endangers social support for democracy. The concept of "chronic violence" and the propositions that follow, however, appear to be relevant to other populations – from sub-Saharan Africa to the slums of Mumbai and Washington, DC.³ We begin by clarifying what will be meant by violence and "chronic violence" in Box 1.

Six propositions about chronic violence

Proposition 1: Chronic violence is provoked and reproduced by diverse factors, many of them mutually interactive. These include new patterns of social inequality and gender socialisation; disjunctive processes of democratisation; illicit trade and other adverse effects of globalisation; and the perverse effects of the mass media.

Social inequality has been a constant in Latin America, but it is lived in new ways today: 79.3%

1 World Bank, *World Development Report: Conflict, Security and Development*, Washington, DC, World Bank, 2011, p 2, http://wdr2011.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/WDR2011_Full_Text.pdf.

2 Tani Marilena Adams, *Chronic Violence and Its Reproduction: Perverse Trends in Social Relations, Citizenship and Democracy in Latin America*, Washington, DC, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/chronicviolence>. A Spanish language version is available at <http://iars.org/de-interes-general/documentos/violencia-cronica/>. For purposes of brevity this brief employs only limited footnotes. For the full references and bibliography that support this paper, please refer to the full article in footnote 2.

3 See, for example, Henrik Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2006; William Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012; Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*, New York, Random House, 2012; P. Bourgois & J. Schonberg, *Righteous Dopefiend*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009; Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1988; S. Popkin et al., *The Hidden War: Crime and the Tragedy of Public Housing in Chicago*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Box 1: From a "commonsense" understanding to a systematic conception of violence

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2010) defines violence as "behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something".

To transcend the limits of this notion, the World Health Organisation (WHO) gives the following definition: "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation".⁴

The term "chronic violence", which builds from the WHO definition of violence, is "measured across three dimensions of intensity, space and time, where

- rates of violent death are at least twice the average for the country income category;
- these levels are sustained for five years or more; and
- acts of violence not necessarily resulting in death are recorded at high levels across several socialization spaces, such as the household, the neighbourhood, and the school, contributing to the further reproduction of violence over time."⁵

of Latin Americans live in cities, double the rate of 1950, and 92% are literate. These trends mark how the social structures of agrarian societies have given way to new globalising realities. In urban areas, people with radically different levels of privilege live in proximity, but are fiercely segregated. Simultaneously, new kinds of knowledge and realities have reached every nook and cranny of the region via the mass media, the Internet and increased migration.

Today, 55% of Latin Americans perceive themselves to be part of the lower class, and only 37% see themselves as belonging to the middle class.⁶ Forty-six percent of economically active Latin Americans work in the informal sector.⁷ Even

among employed workers, 38% were worried about losing their jobs in 2010.⁸ The perceived gap between aspirations and livelihood options – relative deprivation – is reported repeatedly: "Not even God remembers us", declared a resident of a slum in Buenos Aires. This is a big shift from the 1960s, when developmentalist, progressive and revolutionary ideologies flourished in a predominantly rural continent where people contextualised their lives primarily within local and national realities.

Field researchers describe how many people today see themselves as "social zeroes" or "second-class citizens". They recount how the resulting shame and entrapment can transform into rage and a perverse search for respect – especially among young men. Fernando Vallejo's novel *Our Lady of the Assassins* illustrates this experience:

How can anyone murder for a pair of trainers? you, a foreigner, will ask. "*Mon cher ami*", it's not because of the shoes. It's about the principles of justice we all believe in. The person who is going to get mugged thinks it's unfair that they robbed him because he paid for them; the one who robs him thinks it's unfair that he doesn't have a pair himself.⁹

4 WHO (World Health Organisation), *World Report on Violence and Health*, Geneva, WHO, 2002, p 5, http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/world_report/en/.

5 J. V. Pearce, "Violence, power and participation: building citizenship in contexts of chronic violence", IDS Working Paper no. 274, Brighton, IDS, 2007, p 7. The propositions presented in this report build on this initial definition of chronic violence proposed by British political scientist Jenny Pearce, who addresses this issue from other perspectives in various other articles, e.g., J. V. Pearce, "Introduction: researching democracy and social change with violence in the foreground", IDS Bulletin vol 40, no. 3, 2009, pp 1-9; "Perverse state formation and securitized democracy in Latin America", *Democratization*, vol 17, no. 2, 2010, pp 286-306; J. V. Pearce & R. McGee, "Violence, security and democracy: perverse interfaces and their implications for states in the Global South", IDS Working Paper no. 357, Brighton, IDS, 2011.

6 Marta Lagos y Lucía Dammert, "Lanzamiento informe: la seguridad ciudadana: el problema principal de América Latina", *Latinobarómetro*, 2011, <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latino/LATContenidos.jsp>.

7 UN Development Programme and Organisation of American States, *Nuestra democracia*, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010, pp 90-98.

8 *Latinobarómetro*, 2010, p 11, <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latino/LATContenidos.jsp>.

9 Fernando Vallejo, *Virgen de los sicarios*, Bogotá, Alfaguara, 1994, p 68.

Such attitudes can fuel a militarised sense of *machismo*, manifested by the value assigned to a gun by security guards or paramilitary soldiers; the conspicuous displays of expensive properties and vehicles; the power gained by joining a gang or becoming a *sicario* (hit man); and by increasingly brutal relations with women. A similarly aggressive "we'll do it ourselves" attitude occurs among frustrated citizens who decide to lynch suspected criminals in popular outbreaks of mob violence provoked by the failure of governments to protect them.

Danish anthropologist Henrik Vigh's concept of "social death", developed in Guinea-Bissau, describes the experience of young men facing "the absence of the possibility of a worthy life" in contexts of chronic economic crisis. Death is not physical, but social, and youth becomes a "social moratorium" for people unable to transition "normally" to adulthood.¹⁰ As also occurs in parts of Latin America, migration or illicit activities like drug trafficking become prime options.

The complex nexus among democracy, flawed democratisation and violence commands attention, since it can no longer be assumed that political democracy produces a rule of law that is inherently democratic. This is one result of the Washington Consensus, which led to the formation of new democratic states that are – as one colleague put it – structurally anorexic. Reliance on market-driven approaches and international aid, and the incapacity to provide basic rights and services, impose the law, and control illicit activities have weakened the legitimacy of these new states. Non-state and illegal pluralisms fill the vacuum – from NGOs and private security companies to neighbourhood patrols and narco-communities – which further undermines the possibility of unified state governance. Certain state actors, moreover – especially police, deeply flawed justice systems, and in some countries the military – directly provoke and reproduce violence themselves.

Finally, as Pearce and McGee note,

state-security-oriented responses to violence can also undermine key democratic principles, vitiate political representation and erode

the meanings and practices of democratic citizenship so that classic understandings of state formation – with their legitimate monopolization of violence – fall apart.¹¹

In Mexico, for example, between 2007 and 2010, as the government's anti-drug war intensified, cartels and local criminal organisations increased ten-fold, while the communities with 12 or more executions per year quadrupled.

The "dark side of globalisation" is evident in the deficiencies in governance of an increasingly globalised world economy that permits illicit transnational operations to flourish beyond the reach of even the most powerful states. This has spurred asymmetrical processes of capital accumulation, and increased divergence in income levels and inequality between and within nations and specific social groups. Drug trafficking is an important example. Colombian and Mexican traffickers move \$18-29 billion annually, dwarfing the budgets of the pass-through countries of Central America and the Caribbean by several orders of magnitude.

The mass media play a central role in reproducing and amplifying violence, making fear today "an elemental part of the new processes of communication", as Martín Barbero notes. In contexts of social fragmentation, he notes also how "television becomes a place of coming together, of vicarious encounters with the world, with people, and even with the city in which we live".¹² The media's perverse role helps to explain the fact that actual levels of violence are often lower than the social perceptions documented by pollsters.¹³

Proposition 2: Chronic violence undermines social relations and provokes perverse social behaviour that is naturalised among vulnerable groups and becomes a perverse norm that can be transmitted intergenerationally.

Below is a summary catalogue of the social consequences of the drivers of violence discussed above, as well as a range of specific social effects

11 Pearce & McGee, "Violence, security and democracy", 2011, p 7.
12 Martín Barbero, "The city: fear and the media", S. Rotker, ed., *Citizens of Fear: Urban Violence in Latin America*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2002, pp 27 & 29.
13 *Latinobarómetro*, 2011.

10 Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War*, 2006, pp 103 & 104.

and coping mechanisms that are consistently identified among populations that are vulnerable to chronic violence. While the responses of specific populations must be analysed case by case, this summary provides us with a more complex and nuanced understanding of what living under such conditions does to people.

The "grey zone", a term coined by Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, is a central dynamic of life in a context of chronic violence.¹⁴ When people are dominated by chronic fear or repression, the differences between right and wrong, the innocent and the criminal, and moral and immoral become blurred.

Social silence, social amnesia, avoidance and social forgetting help vulnerable groups to cope, but weaken their capacity to critically understand their realities and act accordingly. Tactics increasingly prevail over strategies and presumptions prevail over knowledge. Often documented as wartime coping strategies, these mechanisms today represent critical adaptations to everyday peacetime violence. As a Salvadoran woman explained:

Learning how to live means only talking about good things, nothing dangerous. It is better not to talk about dangerous things because, in the first instance, you don't know who you are talking to, and another thing is that you can't do anything. If you speak just for the sake of it, when they look for revenge, how do you defend yourself?¹⁵

When illicit actors rule, silence can be imposed from above, provoking tacit complicity between the silencers and the silenced. The vacuum caused by silence is often fed by "crime talk" – popular discourse fed by sensationalist mass media that reinforces stereotypes and scapegoating of the marginalised, and spurs more violence.

Increased tolerance and acceptance of violence and illegality. Growing exposure to violence provokes people to increasingly accept and practise it, as Levi observed.¹⁶ In Medellín, a recent

survey found that over 70% of citizens approved of using violence on behalf of their families, or for political and economic gain. The more that people operate outside of the law, the more "normal" this becomes: Naim's concept of "illicit trade" points to how illicit activities increasingly implicate all members of society.¹⁷

Domestic violence is the most prevalent – and most overlooked – form of violence. In Guatemala, El Salvador and Colombia, between one-third and a majority of women suffer physical and verbal abuse, often intensified by alcohol or drugs. Violence toward children is probably higher, but is virtually invisible because it is more socially acceptable. The link between domestic and public violence and its transgenerational nature is well documented.

The brutality of violence also appears to be growing, both by illicit groups driven by increasingly high stakes and militarised struggles over markets and territories, and by irate citizens who take justice into their own hands. Atrocities previously associated with the most extreme crimes against humanity in places like Cambodia, Guatemala or Rwanda today constitute everyday forms of violence in some places – especially Mexico, Guatemala (again) and Colombia. They may also express the inverted morality and outrage described earlier.

Scapegoating and xenophobia increase as citizens seek to assign often-obscure causes of violence to specific agents who can be held responsible – young people with tattoos, for example, or outsiders. This fuels violence at multiple levels via lynchings and other lethal threats carried out by vulnerable communities in their own defence, through hardline policies against gangs and "delinquents", and from the reactions of those accused of violence.

Certain religious beliefs provide protection, predictability and moral reassurance in contexts of chronic insecurity. Pentecostalism in both its Catholic and Protestant versions offers firm rules, social containment and protection that are often otherwise lacking in members' lives – and can also provoke more conflict with people outside the

14 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 1988.

15 Mo Hume, "The myths of violence: gender, conflict and community in El Salvador", *Latin American Perspectives*, vol 35, no. 59, 2008, pp 71-72.

16 Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 1988, pp 36-69.

17 Moisés Naim, *Illicit*, New York, Doubleday, 2005, pp 240-241.

group. The heavy Catholic spiritualism of gangs and drug traffickers from Mexico to Colombia, focusing on the all-forgiving Virgin Mary, offers moral and spiritual justifications for the extreme actions of these groups.

New aesthetics and cultural values associated with extreme levels of consumption also feed the dynamics described in this policy brief – from those displayed in the securitised homes of the upper classes to the dark glasses and designer sneakers sported by security guards in Central American capitals and the extravagant consumption displayed by drug lords and their minions. As one observer noted:

The aesthetic code of the drug trafficker ... is part of his identity... ostentatious, exaggerated, disproportionate and laden with symbols which seek to confer status and legitimize violence [However, it] no longer belongs only to the drug trafficker, but forms part of popular taste, and is viewed with positive eyes and copied, ensuring its continuity through time and across cities.¹⁸

Proposition 3: Chronic violence obstructs public engagement, endangers the practice of citizenship and weakens social support for democracy.

The social responses that follow interact with the practices just described and directly threaten the social infrastructure needed for democracy.

Increased social isolation and the reduction of public spaces are constants in violent environments. While wealthy people retreat into gated communities, those living in dangerous areas retreat from public spaces into their homes. The first trend isolates rich from poor, while the second isolates neighbours from one another, thus undermining community relations and conditions for social action. In these vacuums, the mass media gain new power.

Trust in the state decreases, as does support for due process and human rights. Vulnerability to violence most undermines social support for democracy when people do not believe governments can protect them: 76% of Latin

Americans in 2010 expressed little or no confidence in political parties, while 64% did so for the judicial system and 63% in the case of the police. Disjunctive democratic regimes, moreover, come to be seen as “the enemy” – but for very different reasons than occurred with their authoritarian predecessors. When the law fails to protect citizens, they increasingly question why they should uphold democratic principles like due process and human rights, which often appear to protect criminals more than their victims. Thus, hardline security measures find growing support and legitimacy among all social classes – not just the most vulnerable – and younger generations show higher levels of approval of violence than their elders.

Non-state forms of justice fill the vacuum caused by state incapacity. These range from lynchings and other de facto impositions of justice by local groups to the employment of private security guards (both legal and illegal), who today significantly outnumber police region-wide. In one Guatemalan community, while everyone had clear ideas about justice, this was viewed either as a “divine” function or something that citizens meted out with their own hands. Virtually no one mentioned justice as a state function.

Growing dependence on para-state entities. Where state governance fails, other governance mechanisms fill the vacuum. Drug traffickers – e.g. La Familia in Mexico, or, previously, Pablo Escobar in Colombia – assert state-like territorial control and can accumulate social legitimacy by providing goods and state-like services in communities that they come to control. In lesser and diverse ways, gangs offer “protection”, rules, and a sense of belonging for youth inadequately protected by families, communities, and the state itself, as do Pentecostalist churches, some NGOs, and gated communities for wealthier citizens.

What are the implications for policymakers?

The dynamics described above – that chronic violence is driven by diverse and deeply entrenched forces, is embedded and reproduced in multiple social spaces, and can be transmitted intergenerationally – have significant implications for policymakers.

¹⁸ Adriana Cobo, “Is ornament a crime?”, 2009, http://www.pages-magazine.net/2006/daily_pages.php.

Proposition 4: Chronic violence is unlikely to be reversed in the near term and hence must be addressed as a long-term, perverse kind of "normality".

Proposition 5: Chronic violence must be addressed through intersectoral and interdisciplinary approaches.

Policy approaches need to take into account the fact that chronic violence is driven and reproduced by multiple drivers and affects wide-ranging aspects of everyday life (from parent-child relations to how people resolve conflicts with neighbours, practise religion, organise collectively and perceive their governments). Unilinear analyses and approaches to this problem are likely to continue to have limited utility.

Proposition 6: Chronic violence obliges stakeholders to engage in an unprecedented process of interdisciplinary and intersectoral learning, exchange and experimentation in order to construct effective approaches.

Critical questions at stake include:

- When the rule of law is—or becomes—chronically deficient, how do affected populations govern themselves? Which (democratic) civic principles lack public support? Which practices are non-existent, or are destroyed or become illegitimate? Which practices emerge in their stead?
- What are the links between formal and informal justice systems and conflict resolution practices, and the reproduction of violence?
- In what ways do some national and international efforts promoting security sector reform, economic development, democratisation, citizen security and the rule of law actually reproduce violence themselves?
- Since chronic violence is a long-term challenge, what policies and practices might enable vulnerable groups to better protect themselves from violence in ways that strengthen social relations, civic responsibility, and, ultimately, the practice of citizenship and the possibilities

for democracy?

- What possibilities and limits do vulnerable groups face in addressing these problems without external intervention? What micro-level human capacities – empathy? consciousness? resilience? – are critical to this task?
 - What might be the role(s) of external interventions – by international agencies, states and/or NGOs – in promoting such processes among vulnerable groups?
 - What kinds of interventions might help vulnerable groups to develop these transcendent practices without permanent external intervention?
- How can we move beyond this summary description of the dynamics of chronic violence to build a more systematic understanding of the complex and diverse ways in which this phenomenon affects specific populations?

To begin to explore these questions, the Latin American Working Group on Chronic Violence and Citizenship has been launched by a group of regional and international stakeholders – including development agencies, independent scholars and research organisations, civil society organisations, and affected populations. Over a year, it will (1) convene key stakeholders in a series of task force meetings to explore what this phenomenon means for international and national policy, social action, and research; (2) identify, design and launch critical research into initial questions; and (3) engage in a collective effort to craft a strategic proposal for policy reform and innovative social action informed by strategic research over the longer term. While the working group is focusing initially on Latin America, various participants are interested in exploring its relevance to sub-Saharan Africa and certain marginal populations in the U.S. It is housed at the Myrna Mack Foundation in Guatemala and the Center for Global Studies at George Mason University in Arlington, Virginia.

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