

Mapping Systems of Human (In)security To Understand the COVID-19 Pandemic's Enduring Impact on Urban Violence

Alexandra Abello Colak

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Violence, Security, and Peace Working Papers

No.3 • September 2023

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This work was supported by the Leverhulme Trust

(Research Project Grant ECF-2018-370)

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Abstract

The pandemic exacerbated multidimensional threats to people's lives and wellbeing, with cities having higher concentrations of cases and more negative impacts from containment measures. In vulnerable urban communities already affected by poverty, marginalisation and historical inequalities, disruptions to daily life and socio-economic problems led to human security crises that increased risk factors of violence. Using evidence collected through participatory, collaborative research in Medellín, Colombia, this paper explores how the pandemic affected dynamics of urban violence. It also advances the notion of systems of human insecurity to unpack the complex and context-specific processes that produce human security threats and explains how they manifest in people's daily lives, affecting their exposure to violence. Using systems thinking to map mutually reinforcing forms of insecurity in vulnerable communities and explain how they relate to constellations of urban violence, this work captures people's complex experiences of insecurity on the ground. Capturing these experiences in this way represents a vital step in designing interventions capable of addressing the pandemic's enduring effects. This paper demonstrates the relevance and applicability of human security as an analytical and practical approach to addressing key global challenges.

Introduction

Most violent deaths worldwide do not occur as direct result of armed conflicts, political violence or terrorism, but due to interpersonal or gang violence, and economically motivated crimes (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2015; Small Arms Survey, 2013, 2021; UNODC, 2019).¹ Much of this violence takes place in cities in highly urbanised and fast urbanising regions of Central and South America, Southern Africa and the Caribbean (Small Arms Survey, 2013; Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2015) which concentrate higher rates of homicide and criminal violence (Mc Evoy and Hideg, 2018). However, rises in violent crime rates and insecurity also affect cities in the global North.²

In cities as diverse as Tijuana, London, New York, Kingston, Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town, which have recently experienced rising levels of lethal violence,³ surges in violence do not occur in most neighbourhoods, but rather in marginalised and underserved communities. They also disproportionately affect young male and female residents, who become victims of multiple forms of violence, exploitation by illegal groups, and punitive and often stigmatizing responses deployed by state and private institutions to tackle crime.⁴ With the share of people living in urban areas worldwide expected to reach 68 percent by 2050 (UN DESA 2019) and nearly three billion people living in informal settlements, addressing the dynamics and socio-spatial concentration of urban violence represents a serious and increasingly important challenge for social scientists and policy-makers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has lent additional urgency to the need for new knowledge and better responses to violence in cities, as over 95% of all COVID-19 cases were recorded in urban areas (UN-Habitat, 2020). The pandemic had an immediate and detrimental effect on the perpetration of some forms of violence. It produced dramatic rises in gender-based and intra-family violence worldwide (Carbonari, 2021; Rosenfeld et al 2021),⁵ especially during the early months of the pandemic. It also led to violence over food distribution in some cities, with people resorting to looting and rioting in a desperate attempt to access food (Weston, 2021). It exacerbated police violence against minorities and vulnerable groups in cities with already problematic community-police relations (Amnesty International, 2020; Harris et al 2021). It intensified xenophobia and identity-based violence, as well as opening up opportunities for criminal organisations to increase their coercive power over communities (GIATOC, 2020). In various cities across Europe, the Americas, Asia and the Middle East, stay-at-home policies and mobility

¹ From the total 596,000 people who lost their lives worldwide in 2018, the vast majority (409,000 people) were victims of intentional homicides (Small Arms Survey, 2021).

² In 2020, homicides rates in 29 cities in the United States were 30% higher than in 2019 (Rosenfeld et al 2021). In London, violent offences have also increased more than 60% since 2014 (Wieshmann et al. 2020). The number of teenagers killed in 2021 in London reached its highest level in more than a decade (BBC 2021).

³ In Cape Town, murder rates have increased by 64% over the last seven years leading to its inclusion in the list of most violent cities in the world. With a homicide rate of 138,26 and 134,24 in 2018 and 2019 respectively, Tijuana was considered for two consecutive years the most violent city in the world (CCPSCJ 2021).

⁴ Globally, young men between the ages of 15 and 29 account for the great majority of victims (82%) and perpetrators (90%) of armed violence (UNODC, 2019, 2011: 63–64; UNDP, 2013: 53, Frost and Nowak 2014: 2), and young women and girls who engage in multiple gang-related activities are routinely exposed to physical and sexual violence (Sutton, 2017; Beckett et al, 2013).

⁵ Ranging from 25% to 50%.

restrictions led to reductions in assaults and robberies (Nivette et al 2021),⁶ though the effect of these measures was short-lived and was not mirrored in data on lethal violence.⁷ The Americas as a region contains most of the cities with the highest homicides rates in the world, and it was also especially badly hit by the pandemic. Dramatic rises in homicides rates in this already violent region since 2021 (Hutchinson 2021; Muggah, 2022; Insight Crime, 2022) point to the need for a better understanding of how COVID-19 may have accelerated the reproduction of urban violence.

Cities were hit the hardest by the negative consequences of measures implemented to contain the virus. By bringing disruption to daily life and livelihoods, a global economic slowdown, and unprecedented pressure on institutions serving vulnerable communities and people at risk,⁸ the pandemic destabilized urban systems (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir 2020) and increased multiple risk factors of urban violence worldwide (PiOC 2021). In this context, a key challenge is to develop analytical frameworks and tools that enable a better understanding of the immediate and long-term impact of the pandemic on dynamics of violence in cities by taking into account the complex, dynamic and context-specific nature of urban violence, as well as the pandemic's multidimensional and differentiated consequences on people's lives.

This article argues that assessing the impact of the pandemic in vulnerable urban communities through the lens of human security is crucial to addressing this challenge and to reducing urban violence in the aftermath of the global health crisis. The need for such an assessment is clear when we consider the pandemic-related increase in levels of human insecurity in communities already severely affected by violence alongside the established link between human insecurity and multiple forms of violence. Using systems thinking and primary data collected between 2020 and 2022 in Medellín, Colombia's second biggest city, the article advances the notion of *systems of human (in)security* to explain the complex processes involved in the production of insecurity and violence in urban contexts. It then goes on to use this concept to unpack the consequences of the pandemic in the vulnerable urban communities of Medellín. Using this city as a case study, the article demonstrates the pertinence and utility of human security as an analytical approach and as a framework to imagine urban recovery responses in the wake of the pandemic.

The first section of the article discusses what urban violence is and how it relates to human insecurity while also proposing a workable definition of systems of human (in)security. The second section then provides an analysis of the multiple forms of violence that affect people's lives in Medellín and how dynamics of urban violence have changed since the pandemic. The analysis includes a detailed exploration of how the pandemic exacerbated threats to people's lives, livelihoods and dignity across various dimensions while also outlining how these threats increased the vulnerability of residents to the influence of criminal groups. The article concludes with a discussion of

⁶ 35% and 46% respectively.

⁷ Reductions in homicides were much lower, with an average of just 14% across the 27 cities studied (Nivette et al 2021).

⁸ Such as hospitals and emergency medical services, police forces, courts, community-based groups, and civil society organisations.

how a human-centred and system-based analytical approach can help human security research shed light both on the challenges created by the pandemic in cities and on appropriate ways to tackle them.

Urban Violence and Systems of Human Insecurity

There is no agreed definition of urban violence (Moser, 2004; Muggah and Wenmann 2011; Pavoni and Tulumello 2020), but there is a consensus that sees it as a complex, context-specific, and multi-causal social problem (McIlwaine and Moser, 2006; Adams, 2011; UN-Habitat, 2008; World Bank, 2010). Urban violence is often associated with and measured by homicide rates and official records of violent crime. In reality, however, it encompasses many forms of direct, indirect, lethal, and non-lethal forms of violence which are not necessarily captured by official reports and may be perpetrated by a diversity of state and non-state actors. The individuals, organisations and institutions that perpetrate violence in cities have a wide range of often overlapping economic, social, political, and institutional interests (Moser, 2004; Winton, 2004; Krause et al, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon of urban violence by providing examples of some of the direct forms of violence that take place in cities based on the nature and motivations of the perpetrators.

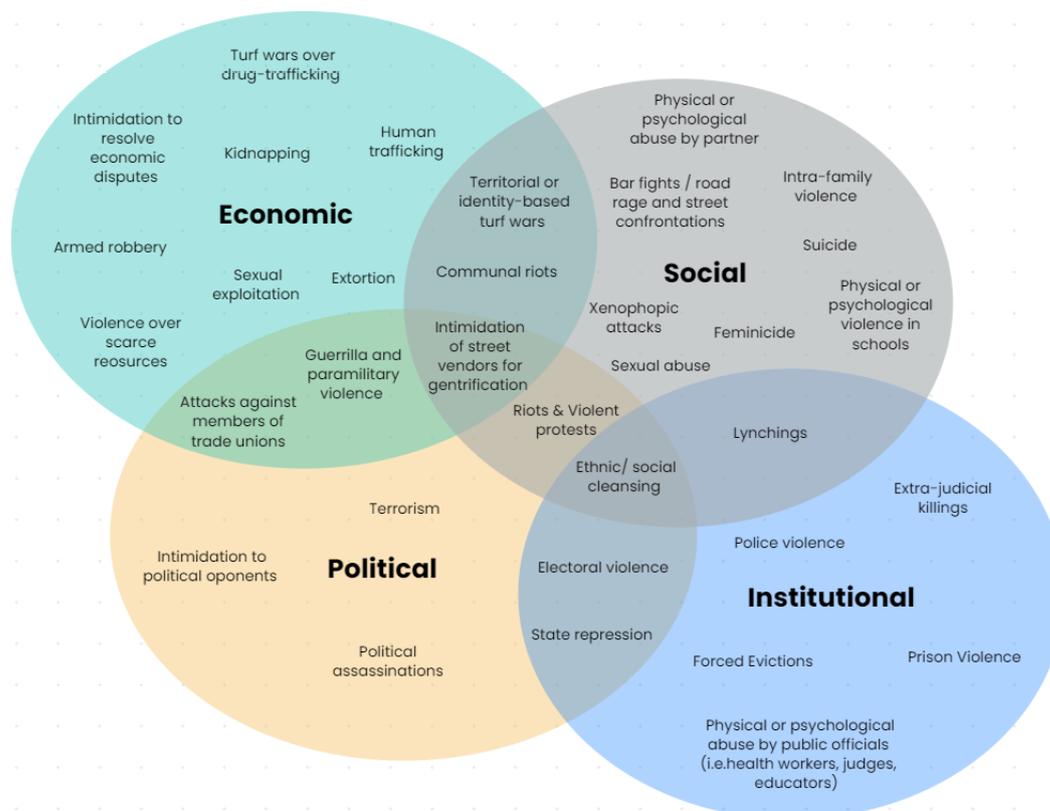


Figure 1. Examples of direct forms of violence in cities based on Moser's roadmap to categories and types of violence in urban areas (Moser, 2004) and the author's own research in Latin America and the Caribbean.

These often interconnected forms of violence (Gupte and Commins, 2016) are not exclusive to cities, as they can also occur in rural areas. But when they occur in urban areas they are unavoidably related in their drivers, intensity, manifestations, and consequences to the layout of the city and the socio-spatial processes that shape urbanisation in a given context (Abello Colak et al, forthcoming). Consequently, recognising the “urban” character of these “violences” is vital to understanding and addressing them. Given the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon, it is more accurate to think of urban violence in terms of *constellations* consisting of multiple interconnected forms of violence that coalesce in cities based on their unique historical, socio-spatial, and institutional characteristics. These changing constellations of urban violence are unique to each city and reflect the variable intensity and persistence of the different forms of violence that occur in each context.

Identifying and classifying the violences that make up each constellation is key to tackling their causes, but this is a very challenging task. Each form of violence can have multiple structural drivers and immediate triggers. Constellations of urban violence thus do not result from linear relations of cause and effect. Rather they are a function of many factors and processes interacting simultaneously in a networked fashion not only across socio-economic, spatial, political, cultural, and institutional domains but also across scales, whether global, transnational, national, local, sublocal, or individual. Violence affecting young people, for example, is often attributed to the consolidation of gangs and their involvement in lucrative illegal economies that are regulated through high levels of violence, such as drug dealing, arms trafficking, and extortion. But this situation cannot be fully understood or addressed without taking into account the effects that persistent poverty, marginalisation, precarious access to basic services (including sanitation, education, health infrastructure, justice and protective forms of policing) have on young people’s psychology, daily choices and decisions (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers 2021; Currie, 2016) and on the ability of their families and communities to support them in their transition to adulthood.

Rather than a self-contained and bounded phenomenon, urban violence is the result of the functioning of complex and dynamic systems. Mapping those systems requires a holistic understanding of how different factors and processes interrelate and affect each other in a particular city, as well as how these interactions are constantly transformed. A key challenge to developing such a holistic perspective is that studies of drivers of urban violence have remained highly compartmentalised in disciplinary silos (Mitton, 2019). This has impeded dialogue between academics focusing on structural issues and those looking at individual- and community-level factors and processes. Macro-level analyses, for example, have identified strong relationships between inequality and violence (Fajnzylber et al 2002; Vanderschueren 1996; Currie 2016; Stewart 2008; Wilkinson 2004) and argued that precarious labour conditions, unemployment, deprivation, degradation of urban economies, expanding illegal economies, and marginalisation (Moser and Holland 1997; McIlwaine and Moser 2003; Mitton and Abdullah 2021) can trigger violence and insecurity in cities. Studies at the micro level have argued that communities with higher collective efficacy or social disorganization can respectively deter or increase violence and crime at the neighbourhood level

(Sampson and Raudenbush 2004; Morenoff et al 2001). The likelihood of particular individuals perpetrating violence is also strongly related to their exposure to adverse childhood experiences, as well as to weak parental supervision and lack of engagement at school (Averdijk et al 2016; Ross and Arsenault 2018; Lyon and Welsh 2017).

The notion of *systems of human insecurity* is useful to better understand the context-specific interplay of these structural, institutional, community, and individual factors, as well as how their effects on people's lives facilitate the production of violence in many of the cities most affected. *Systems of human insecurity* refers to a set of factors, actors and processes whose interaction sustainably produces intersecting and mutually reinforcing threats to people's lives, livelihoods and dignity, as well as limiting their capacity to access or develop mechanisms of protection from those threats. In cities, these systems emerge when unique and historically situated process of urbanization produce threats that affect people across several dimensions (economic, personal, community, political, environmental, food, health, and ontological), and when governance networks connecting state and non-state actors do not address people's complex security needs. Pugh's research shows that the characteristics of institutional networks involving NGOs, government agencies, and international organizations affect the capacity of vulnerable populations to access protection and rights, thus becoming a key determinant of the production of human security (Pugh 2021).

Systems of human insecurity work in a way that leaves critical masses of individuals feeling trapped by multidimensional threats and risks. These individuals' daily decisions are often determined by attempts to survive and to circumvent these threats in contexts where social, state, or international institutions lack the capacity or willingness to provide adequate protection. In Latin America and the Caribbean, considered the most violent region in the world, research shows that the complex interplay of economic and social inequalities, poverty, unemployment, changes in legal or illegal markets, criminal organisations, dysfunctional state institutions, conflicts over land tenure, racism, discrimination, harmful social norms, community tensions, dysfunctional family relations, and mental health problems can lead to intense and persistent experiences of human insecurity, especially among young people and women (Kloppe-Santamaria and Abello Colak 2019; Pearce and Abello Colak 2021). Such experiences result from localised systems of human insecurity. They involve not only fear of being harmed by property crimes and violent interactions with others in different spaces (i.e. home, school, street, public transport, police station), but also the constant anxiety of not finding a job or not knowing how to feed one's children next day; the fear of losing one's home or livelihood due to imminent environmental disasters or evictions; the aggravated distress of having to deal with negligent police forces after being extorted; or the humiliation of being discriminated against because of one's sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity (Angarita and Sanchez, 2019).

Feelings of insecurity are known to affect people's behaviour, attitudes, decision-making, and capacity to plan for the future (Bar-Tal and Jacobson 1998; Huddy et al 2007; Herington 2019). When these feelings are complex, multidimensional, and amplified by the state's failure to provide protection or by state repression, there are also profound

implications for people's attitudes to violence and for their decisions around engagement in activities that can make them more vulnerable to violence. Human insecurity can, for example, make people more willing to condone forms of violence like vigilantism, the extrajudicial killing of "undesirables", or violent forms of social control and "justice" exercised by illegal armed groups. It also makes people less willing to resist and denounce violences even if they feel these are unacceptable (Niño Vega et al, 2019; Parra Rosales et al, 2019). Human insecurity can also make young people more vulnerable to exploitation and recruitment by gangs, which can offer them an income, social recognition, and potential protection from other gangs or from police repression (Badillo et al, 2019).

Given the strong and reciprocal relation between human security and urban violence, understanding the impact of the pandemic on cities and, more specifically, on their constellations of urban violence, requires an analysis of how COVID-19 affected the functioning of *systems* of human insecurity. The pandemic pushed 97 million people into poverty in 2020 (Mahler et al, 2021), disrupted the provision of basic services and generated a mental health crisis of global proportions. It also worsened socio-economic and spatial inequalities along divides of gender, age, socioeconomic conditions, race, and migratory status, amongst others (Buffel et al, 2021; Hassan et al 2021). The devastating loss of employment between 2019 and 2020, for example, disproportionately affected informal workers and youth.⁹ Women were the more likely to lose their jobs and take on additional caring responsibilities, whereas young women and girls were at higher risk of being the first family members to be pulled out of school and the last ones to return (ILO 2022). These historical problems, as we will see in the next section, produced heightened experiences of human insecurity for millions of people that were dependent on local conditions and on the capacity of governance networks and local support systems to cope with people's need for protection. The analysis of these dynamics in Medellín is done through systems mapping, an analytical strategy that captures the complex way in which human insecurity affects the constellation of violence in the city. This type of analysis relies on a holistic perspective of how different factors, processes, and actors interact with each other in a particular context and over time to create patterns of relations. The focus of the analysis and the means of identifying these relational patterns must be the experiences of those who have historically been most affected by urban inequalities and violence in this city.

Unpacking the Impact of the Pandemic in Medellín

Latin America and the Caribbean has been particularly affected by the growing problem of urban violence. Some 39 of the 50 cities with the highest levels of violence in the world are located in the region (CCPSCJ, 2022), and it has also been the epicentre of efforts to prevent violence and crime since the 1990s. One of the cities that has attracted the most attention is Colombia's second largest: Medellín. As a result of clashes between drug

⁹ 76% of informal workers worldwide (1.6 billion people) were impacted by lockdowns, and the number of young people out of employment, education or training (282 million) reached its highest level in 15 years (ILO, 2020, 2022).

trafficking organizations and state security forces, Medellín had the highest levels of lethal violence in the world in the early 1990s¹⁰. These confrontations were followed by a deadly urban battle between left-wing militias, right-wing paramilitary groups, and state forces for control of strategic neighbourhoods; this conflict saw the killing of more than 3,800 people in 2002 alone. Lethal violence associated with these clashes started to reduce in 2003 and reached its lowest levels in 2020, with a homicide rate of 14,4 per 100,000 people. This impressive reduction has taken place in the context of a wide range of national and local-level initiatives. In the early 2000s, the Colombian government launched a number of military operations that led to the permanent presence of security personnel in marginalised areas. Along with the negotiated demobilisation of paramilitary forces, this substantially reduced armed violence. In this context, Medellín's local government implemented a series of initiatives labelled "social urbanism"¹¹ (Maclean, 2015) which helped to highlight Medellín as a successful case of urban regeneration and to facilitate its consolidation throughout the 2000s as a global city capable of attracting capital and tourists (Abello Colak and Pearce, 2015).

Even though homicide reductions transformed Medellín into something of a model for other cities struggling with growing levels of violent crime, lethal violence is today still above what are considered epidemic levels. Non-lethal forms of violence and criminal coercion also blight the lives of hundreds of thousands of residents on a daily basis. Paradoxically, these high levels of coercion are one of the reasons why official reports of homicides have reduced in Medellín in the last decade. Criminal organizations have strengthened since the 1990s, and their forms of organisation have become more sophisticated. The most powerful criminal factions in the city have achieved such a high level of coordination that they can self-regulate their conflicts and exercise tight control over the city's 350 or so street gangs. This has resulted in a more strategic and less visible use of lethal violence by criminal groups, which has helped to keep homicides rates on a downward trajectory (Doyle, 2019). These groups have also adapted to the enlarged state presence in historically neglected neighbourhoods by establishing mutually beneficial relations with state actors on the ground, especially police officers, who in turn benefit from the coercive order that criminal groups impose in these neighbourhoods (Davila, 2018). Criminal groups have also found ways to benefit from the provision of services and new governance arrangements in these areas (Abello Colak and Guarneros-Meza, 2014).

Today criminal groups control 14 of the 16 communes that exist in Medellín (Blattman et al, 2021) where they extort residents, control the informal and formal economic activities that residents depend on for their livelihoods, organise use of public space, and manage the price of staple goods. These groups also profit from a lucrative system of illegal credits locally known as *pagadarios* (daily payments), which are the only form of credit available to the majority of residents. Further profits also flow from contraband, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, land speculation, and other illegal markets.

¹⁰ The city reached 381 homicides per 100,000 people in 1991.

¹¹ These included social housing projects, improvements in public transport and access to public services, and participatory urban upgrading in poor areas of the city.

Although forms of violent protection have existed since the consolidation of the powerful Medellín drug cartel that ruled the underworld in the 1980s (Bedoya et al, 2021), extortion now takes place on a massive scale and disproportionately affects residents of poor communities. Criminal groups use a wide range of forms of extortion not only to increase their profits, but also as a means of regulating residents' lives and imposing a coercive social order in these areas (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2018). These groups demand payments for "providing security", but also for mediating conflicts, preventing forced recruitment of teenagers, and ensuring that infrastructure and social projects, including those funded through public funding, can take place (Observatorio of Human Security, 2018).

In this context and despite the dominant narrative that the city has overcome the problem of violence, the constellation of urban violence in Medellín encompasses a wide range of violences that remain obscured by reductions in homicides and which disproportionately affect residents of neighbourhoods affected by higher levels of poverty. Some of these violences are perpetrated by criminal organizations in an effort to protect their illegal businesses and ensuring social control of communities; such violences are rarely reported to the authorities. For example, forced displacement, intimidation, and beatings are often used against residents who do not pay debts stemming from informal loans or extortion. These actions are also used to punish those who jeopardise criminal interests by reporting crimes to the authorities and those who break the gang-imposed rules in certain neighbourhoods (no stealing, no raping children, and no consuming drugs in unauthorised areas, for example). With criminal organizations restricting use of lethal violence over the last two decades, these other, non-lethal forms of violence have become key in maintaining social, economic and territorial control of communities. Criminal groups also use violence and illegal fines to mediate intrafamily and interpersonal conflicts within communities. There is evidence that criminal groups also perpetrate forced disappearances, a practice used for decades in this city and other parts of the country as a reliable means of avoiding punishment. Disappearances tend to increase after criminal groups agree truces and pacts.¹² Beyond these forms of organised violence that benefit the interests of criminal groups, the complex constellation of violence in Medellín includes interpersonal violence, gender-based violence (including feminicide), physical and psychological violence against the elderly and children (including sexual abuse), suicides, and violence in schools.

This article analyses changes in dynamics of violence in Medellín prompted by the pandemic. To do this, it draws on data collected from April 2020 to May 2022 through collaborative and participatory research carried out with the Observatory of Human Security in Medellín and three grassroots organizations (Corporación Convivamos, Corporación Cultural Nuestra Gente and Corporación Mi Comuna).¹³ The data was collected in neighbourhoods in the northeast and west-central areas of the city using a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and online questionnaires with residents. This data was supplemented by interviews with municipal officials and

¹² In 2019 the National Institute of Forensic Medicine recorded a rise in the monthly average of reports to 37.5 cases in the months following establishment of one of these criminal pacts (Lombo, 2020).

¹³ A report with policy recommendations and proposals for civil society was published in 2021 (Abello Colak et al, 2021).

community leaders, participant observation and collection of secondary data. The neighbourhoods where data was collected are the most densely populated and were particularly vulnerable to the pandemic. They had the highest number of COVID-19 cases during 2020, as well as the highest concentration of people living in poverty. Historically they have also been amongst the most affected by violence since the 1990s.

Mapping the System of Human Insecurity and the Changing Constellation of Violence

Medellín's local government had a proactive response to the pandemic which included early preparation of the city's health system; massive collection of citizens' information through big data and local censuses in vulnerable communities; a specially designed platform to trace the virus; and firm enforcement of a national lockdown and mobility restrictions. It also included a special "epidemiological blockade" which sealed off an entire community of 3000 impoverished residents in the north-east, an area with a high number of COVID-19 cases. During this blockade, public health officials, police officers, soldiers and anti-riot police forced residents to stay indoors for two weeks with continuous surveillance from a low-flying helicopter.

As in other cities in the Global South where strict stay-at-home orders were implemented, in Medellín the spread of the virus and the measures used to contain it had differentiated consequences for inhabitants of communities historically affected by poverty, inequality, and problematic relations with state institutions and illegal armed actors. In densely populated areas where a high proportion of residents work in the informal economy, lockdowns led to a sudden and widespread increase in the precariousness of people's economic situation and living conditions. People experienced a drastic drop in income resulting from loss of employment, wage cuts, and an inability to pursue the economic activities on which they depended for their livelihoods. In neighbourhoods in the north-east, the share of people reporting that their household's economic situation had worsened rose to 44%, and the share of people eating less than three meals a day increased to 30% (Medellín cómo Vamos, 2020). Combined with rising prices of basic goods and utilities, a lack of savings, weak access to credit through the formal financial system, and insufficient access to aid programmes, the critical fall in incomes brought about by the pandemic contributed to an increase in economic and food insecurity for many residents.

These forms of insecurity meant not only that people could not cover basic needs, but also that the institutions that provide vital services in these areas were unable to offer sufficient protection from the consequences of the pandemic. While local authorities provided unconditional cash handouts, food packages, and complementary food-aid vouchers, these proved insufficient both in terms of the number of recipient families and the ability of the packages to meet the needs of larger families.¹⁴ The insufficiency of the aid provided heightened community tensions, giving rise to occasional violent conflicts between residents and Venezuelan migrants, who also sought access to food

¹⁴ Interview, female community leader, 20/11/2020; focus group, residents, 3/11/2020.

packages and emergency aid. Community organisations, which are vital providers of services in these areas, also mobilised to try to fill the gaps in aid provision. However, their capacity was also stretched by reductions in funding and logistical obstacles to accessing the most vulnerable families in the midst of the public health crisis.

The situation in these communities during the pandemic threw into clear relief the functioning of the localised system of human insecurity that produces multidimensional, intersecting, and mutually reinforcing threats to people’s lives, livelihoods and wellbeing in certain urban areas of Medellín. Economic and food insecurity, coupled with fear of catching the virus and difficulties emerging from living in low-quality and overcrowded housing, had a profound impact on people’s physical and mental health. As an illustration, of 137 residents interviewed, 127 reported having experienced anguish, anxiety, high levels of stress, worry, anger, fear and despair. But deterioration of residents’ health was not easily addressed; with access to medical care already extremely difficult due to pressure on the health system from skyrocketing rates of COVID-19, there was also an increase in the number of people experiencing health insecurity. Figure 2 illustrates the interconnected factors and processes that intensified and massified experiences of health, economic, and food insecurity in vulnerable communities during the pandemic.

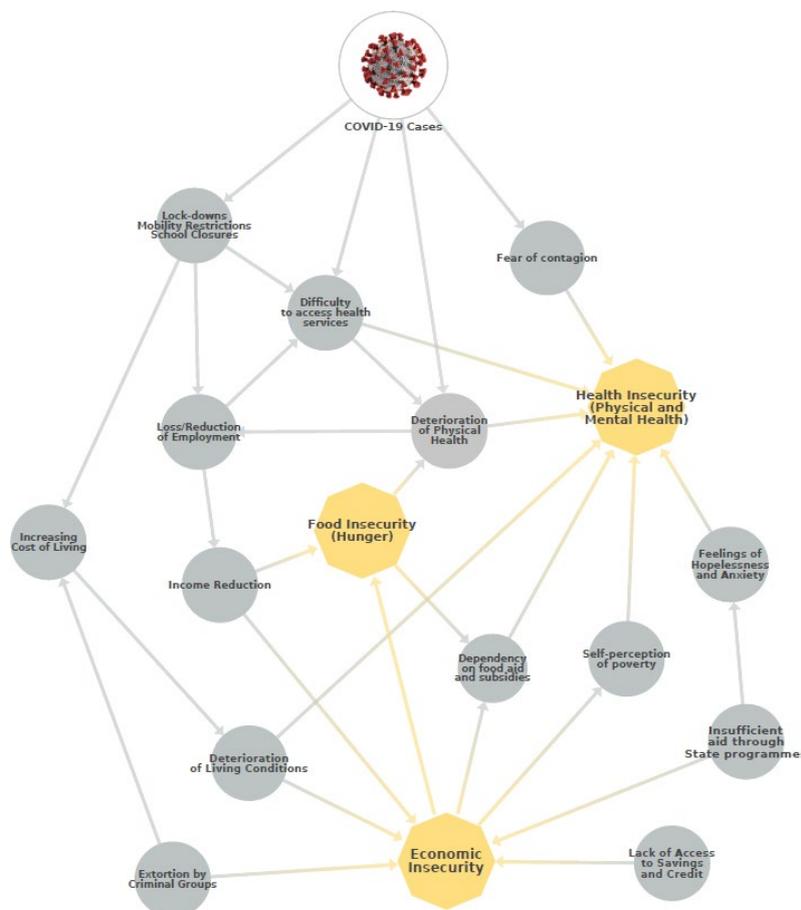


Figure 2. Deterioration of human security in vulnerable communities as a consequence of the pandemic.

The functioning of systems of human insecurity and their influence in dynamics of urban violence are not only defined by the particular configurations of relations between multiple factors and processes, but also by the historical, social, and institutional context through which these factors are interwoven. In Medellín, it is necessary to analyse the consequences of a rapid deterioration of human security in the context of the historical influence of illegal armed groups in poor communities. Also relevant are the relationships between these armed groups, state institutions, and residents, which have remained problematic despite repeated intervention from the state. Taking this context into account enables a better understanding of how the localised system of human insecurity impacted on dynamics of lethal and non-lethal violence from the start of the pandemic.

In early 2021, an official working at the Family Commissaries' Office in the north-east explained that every day they were receiving between 30 and 40 requests for emergency childcare interventions and around 30 requests for family-conflict interventions.¹⁵ This represented an exponential increase on the number of cases they had been dealing with before the pandemic. Both residents and officials serving these communities agreed that economic, food, and health insecurity had increased tensions and conflicts at the household¹⁶ and community levels, leading to changes in service demand. Aside from experiencing this overwhelming level of demand, these front-line institutions handling conflicts, dealing with rights violations, and providing access to justice and protection for victims also faced a 29% reduction in their budget in 2021, further undermining their capacity to meet the needs of a growing number of victims. Despite the urgency of the support needed, people had to wait more than two months for a first appointment to see an official and discuss their cases. By the end of 2021 the number of official complaints about sexual abuse or family and partner violence in the city had reached their highest level for six years (Medellín Como Vamos, 2022). This included a significant rise in reported cases of sexual abuse against minors, particularly those aged between 6 and 14 (Poveda, 2021). While the proportion of homicides linked to organised crime and competition for illegal markets continued to decrease during the pandemic, feminicides and violent deaths associated with interpersonal and intrafamily conflicts increased by 52% and 83% respectively in 2021.¹⁷

Given that gang members play a key role in regulating and mediating intrafamily and interpersonal conflicts in these communities, the insufficient capacity of state institutions encouraged more residents to turn to local gang leaders in search of quick solutions, thus increasing the likelihood of violence and coercion being carried out by these groups. Residents recalled, for example, various times during periods of lockdown when gang members intervened to stop violence against women by battering – and in one case by lynching – their abusive partners.¹⁸ In these cases, residents had either decided not to request the help of police officers or the officers had not arrived on time.

¹⁵ Interview, municipal official, 4/4/2021.

¹⁶ In 2020, calls to emergency lines for reporting cases of intrafamily violence increased by nearly 97%.

¹⁷ These increased 52% and 83% respectively in 2021, as compared to 2020 (Mata 2022).

¹⁸ Focus group, residents, 12/4/2021; interview, female community leader, 12/3/2021.

Women struggling to provide for their children have also increasingly turned to gangs to force absent fathers to provide maintenance payments.¹⁹

The number of suicides and suicide attempts has also increased as a result of extreme economic and health insecurity. In 2021, there were 2,079 reported suicide attempts, with 69% of these carried out by women (Personeria de Medellín 2022). Although there has been an upward trend in the number of suicides nationally in Colombia since the pandemic, the situation is particularly worrying in Medellín. In 2021, it became the city with the second highest number of suicides in the country, and it also has the second highest rate of suicide attempts. Figures for suicides specifically among young people and children have also increased. Residents attributed most suicide attempts in their neighbourhoods to economic problems or conflicts with relatives and partners, which are also the main triggers identified by local authorities. While there were cases in which relatives and community leaders tried to prevent suicides by contacting state institutions, these institutions were not able to intervene in time, leading to a widespread perception the state response had been insufficient.²⁰

Other forms of violent crime that worsened after the onset of pandemic are sexual exploitation and human trafficking. The risk of falling victim to these crimes has increased for women and children from these neighbourhoods, with Venezuelan migrants being particularly vulnerable.²¹ Residents and community leaders reported an increasing number of people resorting to survival sex, as well as the appearance of local houses devoted to prostitution, including through exploitation of minors. Coercion and deception by criminal actors and pressure from relatives to bring home money “by any means necessary” have seen women and girls being recruited into prostitution or forced to sleep with local clients; some are even taken to other regions where leaders of criminal groups exploit them for days.²² The problem is exacerbated by these urban areas becoming tourist attractions, with criminal groups offering children and young women to tourists as part of entertainment packages that include sexual services and drugs. Women and girls are also being recruited for webcam sex work.²³ Though this was often presented as a safer option given the absence of physical contact with clients and the possibility of “working from home”, webcam models from these neighbourhoods often end up being exploited.

Recruitment of children and young people by gangs, a historical phenomenon in Medellín, has also increased since the start of the pandemic. As they struggled to continue their education in 2020²⁴ and their families tried to meet basic needs, children and young people became more vulnerable to exploitation from criminal groups that like to use them to sell drugs, collect extortion payments, and serve as lookouts.²⁵

¹⁹ Interview, municipal official, 12/04/2022; interview, community leader, 10/04/2022.

²⁰ Focus group, residents, 10/03/2021.

²¹ In 2022, a rise in cases of sexual exploitation led the Mayor of Medellín to impose a curfew for minors (under 18 years old) in five communes.

²² Focus groups, residents, 09/03/2021 and 19/04/2022; interview, community leader, 13/04/2022.

²³ All young female participants in focus groups and interviews had received deceptive job offers, either via social media or in person, or knew friends and family members who had been contacted.

²⁴ School dropout rates increased from 2.8% to 5% in 2020 according to Medellín’s Secretary of Education.

²⁵ Focus group, residents, 09/03/2021; author’s field note diary, 18/04/2022.

Participants recognised that young people and children in vulnerable households felt the pressure to help their families earn money and thus had fewer incentives to stay in school. Although the local Ombudsperson's Office issued a warning regarding the increase in cases of child recruitment, estimating that 58000 minors were at high risk of being used or drawn into criminal groups (Personeria de Medellín, 2020), no initiatives were implemented to prevent gang recruitment in 2020. Community organisations offering safe spaces for children and young people in these areas tried to continue activities virtually, but their capacity to engage the most vulnerable groups was severely diminished.²⁶ Young Venezuelan migrants in particular have become extremely vulnerable to recruitment, and they are increasingly targeted by criminal groups in Medellín and other parts of Colombia (Insight 2022).

The kind of survival strategies residents were forced to use to deal with increased economic and food insecurity made them more vulnerable to criminal organisations and violence. For example, more people were forced to resort to illegal credit and informal friendly loans. Given that criminal groups are heavily involved in the regulation of illegal credit schemes and that residents often turn to these actors to enforce payment of debts, the massive scale of informal borrowing driven by the pandemic has increased people's vulnerability to threats and forced displacement. Throughout 2020, gangs continued to extort and collect on debts from residents; in neighbourhoods where families were unable to pay off their debts in cash, some suffered dispossession of property and were forced to move to other areas.²⁷

Extortion and forced intra-urban displacement are rarely reported to the authorities because many people distrust state institutions and fear retribution. However, official data shows that both crimes have continued to increase.²⁸ In 2021, there were 1,940 reported victims of forced displacement in the city, representing a 15% rise compared to 2020 (Personeria de Medellín 2021). Most victims (63%) are residents from communities in the north-east, centre, and southwest of the city. This phenomenon, which particularly affects women, is strongly connected to other forms of violence and exploitation. Interviews with residents and data from the Municipal Ombudsperson's Office confirm that the main reasons why people are forced out of their neighbourhoods are: sexual abuse by members of criminal groups; refusal to establish romantic or sexual relations with such members; refusal to "buy" services and products offered by these actors, including payments for protection from violence; reporting crimes committed by these groups; and failure to pay outstanding debts to loan sharks.

These forms of violence that disproportionately affect women and young people, coupled with the incapacity of state institutions to respond, lead to a further deterioration of people's personal security, even when there are substantial reductions in lethal violence. In 2021, Medellín registered its second lowest homicide rate in 40 years. But by affecting the complex system of human insecurity that produces multidimensional threats to popular and community wellbeing, the pandemic will ultimately have a long-

²⁶ Interview, community leaders, 15/04/2022.

²⁷ Focus group, community leaders, 11/03/2021; author's field note diary, 08/03/2021.

²⁸ Official reports show that the number of reported cases of extortion in 2021 increased compared to 2020. Incidence of this crime has increased 81% in the last five years (Acero, 2022).

lasting effect on the constellation of violence in Medellín. Figure 3 maps the interconnected and mutually reinforcing relationship between human insecurities (economic, food, and health), and the multiple violences that affect people’s daily lives in vulnerable communities. By taking into account the multidimensional consequences of the pandemic from the perspective of residents and the historical, social, and institutional context in which these emerge, it is possible to better understand the systemic way in which the pandemic has affected the constellation of urban violence in the city.

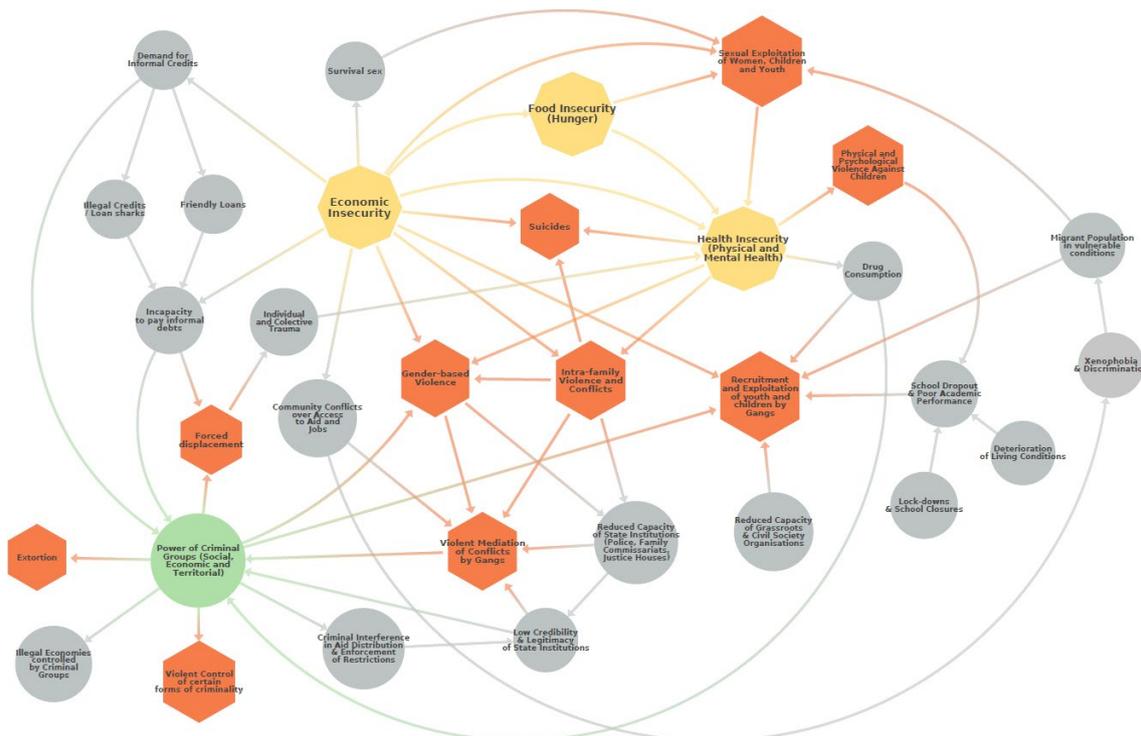


Figure 3. Changes in the constellation of urban violence in Medellín as a result of a deterioration in Human Security.

Mapping the working of the localised system of human insecurity during the pandemic also reveals how the critical deterioration of human insecurity contributed to the consolidation of the power and influence of criminal groups in these areas. Such groups not only benefited economically from the higher price of illegal drugs and from new business opportunities that emerged with the implementation of lockdowns,²⁹ they were also able to increase their credibility as the main regulators of social order in these communities. Beyond the violent mediation of conflicts that these groups continued to carry out, they also intervened in the distribution of food packages and emergency aid in some areas, allowing them to pose as benefactors of the community. By pressuring the community boards responsible for distributing state support during lockdowns, or by forcing shopkeepers and local supermarkets to provide “donations” to be distributed to

²⁹ For example, organisation of clandestine parties and illegal distribution of alcohol.

the most vulnerable residents, these groups were able to distort and instrumentalise provision of services and resources during the public health emergency. Paradoxically, these groups' effective authority is often reinforced by police officers, who have learnt to use these actors' power to keep the most visible forms of violence and crime under control. During the lockdowns, police offices in some areas asked gang leaders to enforce restrictions, arguing that residents follow their orders and respect them more; in one neighbourhood, officers even put gangs in charge of distributing aid packages.³⁰ These ambiguous relations between state and criminal actors have led to the configuration of a hybrid form of governance in these areas (Davila, 2018; Arredondo et al 2019; Abello Colak and Van der Borgh, 2018) that reinforces the power of criminal groups while simultaneously eroding state legitimacy.

Conclusion

Examining the impact of the pandemic in Medellín through a human security lens demonstrates the importance of using a human-centred perspective to study the complex, multidimensional, and interlocking consequences of the pandemic on different groups and communities. This kind of perspective reveals the way in which the pandemic created or accelerated processes that threatened human security and fuelled multiple forms of violence in cities. These multi-scalar processes involve structural factors such as inequality, poverty, and dependency on precarious employment; factors at the individual level such as adverse child experiences and deterioration of mental health; and factors at the institutional level such as critical reduction in the capacity of state institutions and other key governance actors to provide services and protection.

Over the last two years, these processes have taken place with their own particularities in many other cities, creating highly volatile contexts where social unrest, violence, and criminality become more likely and more difficult to handle. This article demonstrates that an analytical approach combining human security with systems mapping can help to capture the dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship between human security and urban violence. Yet this kind of approach can also take into account each city's particularities and provide insights that facilitate the development of urban recovery strategies. Mapping the localised system of human insecurity in Medellín has shown, for example, how a deterioration in economic, food, and health insecurity led to the consolidation of criminal groups' influence over vulnerable communities and to increases in violence that particularly affect women and young people. This demonstrated that systems of human insecurity can sustainably produce multidimensional security threats to certain groups and reproduce violence even in cities that successfully integrate into the global economy and experience reductions in homicides, which have become the key indicator of urban violence in public and policy discourse.

The evidenced presented here suggests that the pandemic will have a lasting effect on dynamics of urban violence and security in cities. Applying system-based analyses of

³⁰ Focus group, residents, 10/03/2021; interview, community leader, 04/05/2021.

dynamics of human insecurity and violence can shed light on the type of responses and policies that are best placed to address the destabilising impact of the pandemic in different urban contexts that have their own historical and socio-spatial particularities. This will require, however, the use of research methods equipped to capture the contextualised complexity of these phenomena through different perspectives and by prioritising the daily experiences of those who are most vulnerable and most affected. In other words, it demands that human security research advances towards the methodological operationalisation of the normative principles that inform the notion of human security, particularly its focus on people's experiences, their needs, and their agency in the construction of safer cities.

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Asa K. Cusack

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