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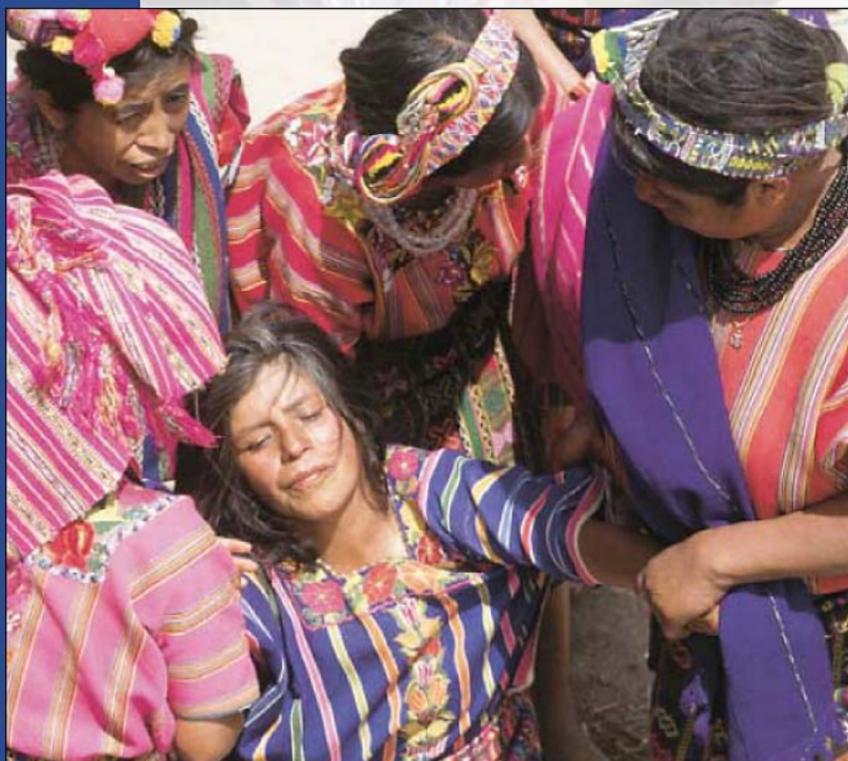


CONFLICT PREVENTION AND  
POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION

# Violence in a Post-Conflict Context

*Urban Poor Perceptions from Guatemala*

CAROLINE MOSER AND CATHY McILWAINE



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# Executive Summary

**I**n 1996, the government of Guatemala and the guerrilla army, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), signed the final Peace Accords. This ended both the United Nations-monitored peace process and 36 years of internal armed conflict. The civil war caused untold internal and external displacement in the region and the deaths of over 150,000 people, the majority of whom were from indigenous groups. The legacy of conflict, which includes increasing urban violence, social exclusion, and weak levels of social capital, presents challenges for the country's post-conflict peace-building agenda.

As the current government seeks to implement the Peace Accord agreements, the consolidation of democratic governance, the alleviation of the legacy of internal armed conflict, and the strengthening of the rule of law are the primary focus of political analysts and civil society groups alike. The perceptions of violence by people living in poor communities have received less attention. This report addresses this issue by providing the results of a participatory study of violence conducted in low-income, urban communities in Guatemala.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The study documents how people living in poor urban communities in Guatemala perceive violence. Specifically, it identifies

the categories of violence affecting poor communities, the costs of different types of violence, the effects of violence on social capital, the interventions employed by people to deal with violence, and the causes and effects of social exclusion.

To describe the relationships that produce and sustain this cycle of violence, and to begin to identify interventions to break it, the study develops a violence–capital–exclusion nexus which is an analytical framework linking different types of violence both to society’s capital and to the exclusion of its poor population. To incorporate the rarely heard voices of the poor, the study uses participatory urban appraisal methodology, which emphasizes local knowledge and enables local people to make their own analysis of the problems they face and to identify their own solutions.

Fieldwork was undertaken in nine predominantly low-income “communities” located in six cities and towns. These communities are representative of Guatemala’s urban and geographical areas and of the different experiences of violence that took place during the internal armed conflict. These communities, identified by pseudonyms, included four settlements in or near the capital, Guatemala City (Concepción, Nuevo Horizonte, La Merced, and San Jorge, Chinautla); three communities in the western highlands, one of the geographical areas most affected by the civil war (Sacuma in Huehuetenango, Limoncito in San Pedro Sacatepéquez, San Marcos, and Gucumatz in Santa Cruz del Quiché); one settlement in the plantation region of the southern lowlands (El Carmen, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa); and a border-town community in the eastern lowlands (Villa Real, Esquipulas). Two of the communities were comprised of mostly indigenous populations—San Jorge, Chinautla, and Gucumatz, Santa Cruz del Quiché—although indigenous people were included in all the other research locations.

## Types of Violence

Violence-related problems emerged as the single most important type of problem facing the urban poor. Within this category, social violence was identified as a predominant issue in many communities. Lack of social capital was identified as a problem more

often than lack of human capital. Lack of physical capital was identified as less of a problem, and lack of natural capital was perceived as a low-level priority.

Focus groups in the nine communities listed a startling average of 41 different types of violence, which were grouped into three interrelated categories: political, economic, and social. Social violence, including alcohol-related and sexual violence, was cited most often (51 percent of all types of violence), followed by economic violence, pre-eminently gang-related violence and robbery (46 percent), and political violence, such as police abuse (3 percent).

Perceptions of violence varied across cities and demographic groups. Robbery and delinquency emerged as especially important in Limoncito, San Marcos, and El Carmen, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Intrafamily violence was prevalent in San Jorge, Chinautla, and gang violence was seen as a major problem in Villa Real, Esquipulas. Incidence of political violence was cited most often in Gucumatz, Santa Cruz del Quiché, and Sacuma, Huehuetenango, which are highland towns with large indigenous populations that are particularly affected by the armed conflict.

Perceptions also varied by demographic and ethnic group. Elderly people were most concerned with infrastructure deficiencies, and indigenous elderly people focused on the loss of traditions and the lack of respect among youth. Adult women shared these concerns, but also discussed educational and health concerns and intrafamily violence, while adult men focused on infrastructure and rarely mentioned the latter concerns. Young people were especially concerned with problems related to gangs, particularly with drug-related issues. Young women also emphasized sexual violence and assaults. Children also discussed sexual abuse and problems associated with their schools. In terms of ethnicity, indigenous people tended to stress poverty and discrimination to a greater extent than did the *ladino* population.

## The Legacy of Violence in Guatemala

Underlying the contemporary manifestations of violence in Guatemala is the legacy of armed conflict. In the post-conflict con-

text, where political violence has declined and economic and social violence increased, all three types are interrelated. One important issue in this context was the *cultura de silencio* (culture of silence) that permeated communities, closely linked with fear and terror of civil war. While indigenous and *ladino* groups were both affected, indigenous people in particular highlighted continuing discrimination, especially in terms of widespread poverty and exclusion, as well as the erosion of indigenous cultures. Another important issue to emerge was the rape of women, both inside and outside the home. The alarming preponderance of rape among all communities had important roots in armed conflict. During the 1980s rape had been used as a political “tool of war,” generally against indigenous women. Finally, the war has led to transformations in household structures, especially an increase in female-headed households. These were especially common among displaced indigenous people in the communities in Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa and Guatemala City who had fled from the highlands during the 1980s.

### **Costs, Causes, and Consequences of Violence**

Different types of violence are interrelated in a highly complex and dynamic way. Social violence within households and families, for instance, may erode social capital, leading young people to drink, take drugs, and join gangs, which in itself may lead to economic violence, such as robbery and killing, or to sexual violence, such as rape. Understanding each type of violence is, therefore, critical to understanding the nature of the problems facing people living in poor communities.

#### *Families, Households, and Social Violence*

Intrafamily violence was endemic in the Guatemalan communities and was closely associated with other types of violence. This was true regardless of ethnicity, income level, or geographical location with high levels in all communities. Participants identified numerous types of violence perpetrated within the home, including incest, sexual abuse, and physical abuse. These were

associated with various contingent factors, such as the changing economy, the unemployment rate, alcohol and drug abuse, family disintegration, and issues associated with male *machismo* and female submissiveness.

Intrafamily violence was perceived as undermining how households functioned internally in terms of constructing and maintaining norms, values, and trust. It also led to the erosion of social capital networks between households and reduced the human capital endowments of children and young people. Critically, violence in the home was perceived as leading to violence outside the home.

Violence was perceived as permeating the spectrum of social relations within poor urban communities, with the critical nexus being households and families. With trust in the home severely eroded by violence, children and youth spend long periods of time in the street with their friends. This resulted in young men often looking to the *maras* (gangs) as a source of support and young women engaging in sexual relations at an early age.

### *Alcohol Consumption and Social Violence*

By far the most critical cause of social violence in all communities was alcohol consumption, especially among men. Both legal alcohol (mainly rum and beer) and illegal alcohol (mainly paint thinner and home-made *kusha*) were consumed, the latter mainly by indigenous people. Significantly, acute levels of alcohol consumption were common in all communities with tolerance levels much higher related to drinking than to drug consumption in all communities. While some indigenous groups reported especially high levels of alcohol use linked with trauma and poverty, alcohol abuse was widespread across the communities, regardless of ethnicity.

The most frequently cited causal factors for alcohol abuse were intrafamily violence and conflict, family disintegration, parental example, poverty, and disillusion with employment prospects. Peer pressure and *machismo* also played a part in causing alcohol consumption. The major consequences of alcohol abuse in the home were intrafamily violence and economic hardship, cited in

all communities. Outside of the home, economic violence, such as robbery, and sexual violence were perceived as effects of alcohol abuse.

### *Drug Consumption and Economic Violence*

Drug consumption was common particularly among men and members of the *maras* and included a wide range of drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, including crack. It was perceived as a leading cause of economic violence in all of the communities, as well as a cause of high levels of social violence. However, drug-related problems were few compared to those resulting from alcohol, although they were seen as being integrally related to the problem of the *maras*.

Alcoholism among parents, intrafamily violence, family disintegration, and poverty were frequently cited as causes of drug consumption. Peer pressure and *machismo* within gangs also contributed to consumption. The major consequences of drug consumption included economic violence, such as robbery, and high levels of sexual violence, particularly rape. Drug-related problems also contributed to the generation of fear in the communities, affecting indigenous and *ladino* communities more or less equally.

### *Maras, Robbers, Delinquents, and Violence*

Violence perpetrated by gangs dominated reports of economic violence and included robbery and assault. However, *maras* were also associated with street and gang fighting, as well as sexual violence (predominantly rape). Many considered sexual violence to be the most serious problem associated with the *maras*. The most common members of gangs were young men, although some female-only gangs existed, and male-dominated gangs sometimes had female members. While less widespread, *maras* existed among indigenous populations as well as *ladino*. *Mara* members perceived their gangs as a positive support structures—important local social organizations that had spread widely in the last decade, largely influenced by young people returning from El Salvador, Honduras, or North America. Although *maras* were associated

with robbery and delinquency, robbers and delinquents were also significant actors involved in violence in their own right. While *maras* were involved in economic and social violence, these other groups mainly perpetrated economic violence.

### **Community-Level Social Institutions and Perverse and Productive Social Capital**

Study participants identified 322 social institutions across the nine research communities. These included institutions that benefited the community (productive social capital) and institutions that benefited their members, while hurting the community as a whole (perverse social capital).

Despite the large number of local organizations, all nine communities lacked institutional diversity. The majority were service delivery organizations, with churches the main membership groups. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) also played an important role in communities, especially those with predominantly indigenous populations, and were often more trusted than community-based organizations. Cognitive social capital was also very weak in all communities, regardless of the ethnicity of community members. There was notable mistrust and lack of solidarity, with widespread small-scale conflicts in all communities. Underlying this weakness was fear—a legacy of the armed conflict.

State and government institutions, especially the army and the police, were widely distrusted. However, trust in the police varied across communities, depending on whether or not the reformed police force (the National Civil Police, PNC) had been installed. Generally levels of trust were far higher in the new police force than in the preceding police system, and the PNC was cited as responsible for the reduction in economic and social violence in some communities. Linked with this overall mistrust in justice systems and widespread impunity, is the fact that both indigenous and *ladino* community members continually reported the need to take justice into their own hands through social cleansing and lynching.