



Understanding the tipping point of urban conflict:

Violence, cities and poverty reduction in the developing world

The case of Patna, India

Policy Brief

1.0 Conceptual framework

Cities are inherently conflictual spaces, in that they concentrate large numbers of diverse people with incongruent interests within a contained environment. This conflict is more often than not managed or resolved in a peaceful manner through a range of social, cultural and political mechanisms, but sometimes can generate violence when such forms of regulation break down or can no longer cope.¹ The broader development literature on urban violence suggests that it is a phenomenon that can be linked to the presence of certain specific factors, or combination of factors in cities. In particular, rapid urban growth, high levels of persistent poverty in cities, youth bulges, political exclusion, and gender-based insecurity have all been widely correlated with urban violence in recent years.

There is however a paucity of research concerning the causal mechanisms through which such factors might (or might not) cause the conflict inherent to everyday urban living to become violent. Getting to grips with this transition is clearly of critical normative importance, however, and it is this concern that lies at the heart of the present research project. We conceive of the moment of potential movement from conflict to violence in terms of a “tipping point”. The origins of this notion go back to the 1950s, but at its most basic, the idea posits that certain types of social phenomena can move from being relatively rare occurrences to very common ones in a rapid and exponential manner (Gladwell, 2000). In other words, it relates to

situations where a given social process becomes generalised rather than specific, but in a rapid rather than gradual manner. A tipping point therefore inherently embodies a dynamic temporal dimension, and can moreover apply to both increases as well as reductions in violence; we denote a process whereby situations of generalised violence move back to circumstances of managed conflict as representing a “reversal” of the tipping point of urban conflict.

1.2 Patna as a case study

Patna was chosen as a case study city due to its dual association with poverty and urban violence. The city has long ranked amongst the poorest Tier II urban settlements (i.e. between 1-5 million inhabitants) in India, and is located within the state of Bihar that has historically systematically displayed the lowest per capital income levels in India (Government of Bihar, 2011). Bihar is furthermore well known for its high levels of violence, which can take on a variety of forms, from Maoist insurgency to dacoity to communal and caste violence. Indeed, Bihar is reported to be the second most violent state in India in terms of murders, and Patna was notorious for being an extremely insecure city during the 1990s and early 2000s, to the extent that it was frequently referred to as the “crime capital” of India.²

Since 2005 and the accession to power of the reformer politician Nitish Kumar, however, both Bihar has undergone what is sometimes referred to as a “miracle”, whereby violence has been significantly reduced, and the state has engaged on a well-managed

developmental route associated with high economic growth and infrastructural improvement. Particularly symbolic of this transformation is the fact that Patna is now generally considered a peaceful and secure city, in sharp contrast to the past. To this extent, Patna constitutes something of a “counterfactual” case study of the tipping point of urban conflict, offering a view on how a situation of chronic urban violence can revert to one of managed conflict, and more broadly demonstrating “the contingency of assumptions that underpin particular theoretical constructs”, and facilitate “imaginative leaps in theory and hypothesis formation” (Lebow, 2010: 6).

2.0 Research methods

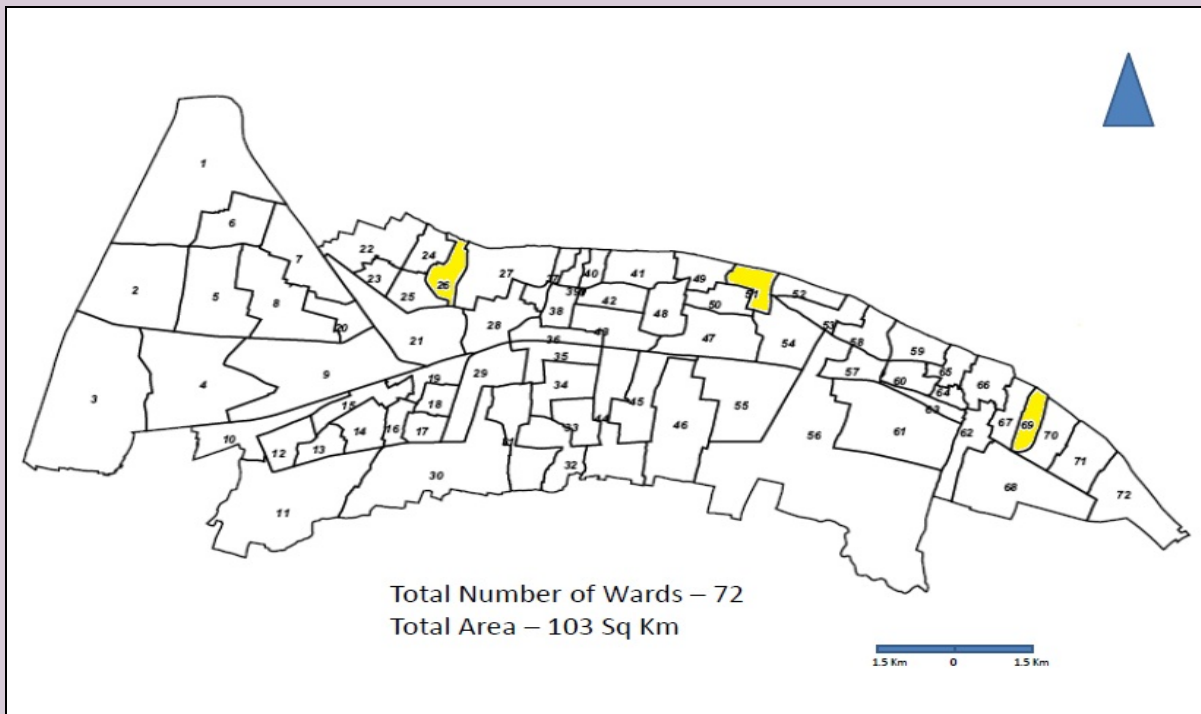
Research was conducted by a joint University of Manchester-Institute for Human Development team made up of Dennis Rodgers, Shivani Satija, Balendushekar Mangalmurty, Sagarika Chowdhary, and Alakh Sharma, in three phases between April-July 2011. The first phase of the research involved obtaining secondary data concerning crime and violence in Patna from a range of sources including the National Crime Records Bureau, the Patna Police, the Patna Municipal Corporation, as well as surveying media reports on crime and violence in the city. This suggested that contrarily to the general rhetoric concerning a “miraculous” reduction in violence, overall crime rates in both Bihar and Patna have actually increased since 2005.

At the same time, the statistics also show a variable trend regarding violent and non-violent crimes. While violent crimes such as murder, kidnapping, or robbery have declined significantly since 2005, non-violent crimes such as theft and burglary have increased. Disaggregated crime data collected from local police stations in the city highlight a significant spatial variability in this trend across the city, however. This can potentially be attributed to a range of factors including the segregated spatial distribution of caste and religious groups within Patna, the city’s uneven and deficient infrastructure, as well as the city’s economic boom and private property development, Hindu-Muslim tensions, and rising rural-urban migration.

The second phase of research entailed primary data collection through qualitative fieldwork. Three wards deemed representative of the generally urban dynamics of the city were chosen on the basis of a range of socio-economic indicators, as well as their variable crime trends, and the factors identified in the media research. These were wards 26, 51 and 69 (see map 1).³ Within each of these, one or two slum settlements were chosen, insofar as 72 percent of the population of Patna lives within areas identified for slum upgrading, reconstruction or resettlement (Government of Bihar, 2006: 32), and also to allow for an exploration of the relationship between conflict, violence, and poverty.

In ward 26, two slum settlements, Buddha Colony Thana Ke Aage basti and North Mandiri basti, made up respectively of 12 and 42 households, were chosen. In ward 51, the New Ambedkar Colony area was chosen, which was made up of three slums: New Ambedkar Colony, the Musahartoli slum, and the Dhom Khana slum, composed respectively of 303, 17, and 14 households. Finally, in ward 69, the Mansoorganj Musahartoli slum, made up of 100 households, was chosen.

Each slum case study involved a walking tour of the slum in order to observe its physical features, and identify potential issues about which to ask questions and through which to begin discussions. The latter involved a mixture of focused group discussions (FGDs) and one-on-one interviewing with slum dwellers. Interviews were also carried out with local ward councillors, NGO workers, priests and imams, and local Police officers. The primary objective of the FGDs and the interviews was to explore both the potential sources of conflict as well as violence trends in Patna from a local-level perspective, as well as the links between them. In each slum, FGDs were carried out with mixed groups and various interest groups (e.g. women, youth, and locally significant groups such as landowners, Scheduled Caste, Muslims, etc.), while interview were conducted with locally prominent individuals (e.g. a local landowner, a school teacher, etc.), or else to follow up on key issues with a particularly articulate focused group discussant.

Map 1: Case study wards

Source: DFID India (Patna office)

The third phase of the research involved administering a census survey to all 771 households in the four slums studied. 86% of households (664) were successfully surveyed, and the sample was overall deemed representative. The survey focused on conflict and violence, but also included questions about the socio-economic status of households. In this respect, the four slums contained a total population of some 4,300 people, for an average household size of between 5 and 6 persons per household. Over 90% of survey respondents reported having been living in their slum settlement for more than 10 years. 52% of the slum population was male, and 48% female. Over 70% was under the age of 30, with 15-29 year olds – i.e. youth – making up 30 percent. 80% of the slum population was scheduled caste, 11 percent backwards caste, and 5 percent forward caste. Almost 80% of households were Hindu, and 20 percent were Muslims. In terms of education, 80% of the households claimed that all their male members had completed their primary education, while 48% of households reported that their female members had not received any schooling at all. 80% of those who work are unskilled, with daily wage work

constituting almost 60% of all occupations. The modal monthly household income was between 2,501-5,000 INR, although there was significant variation between slums. 59% of the households did not have any access to drainage, and 22% reported that their members had to resort to open defecation.

3.0 Major research findings

Although the different slums studied displayed specific characteristics and trends, a number of common violence trends emerged. Firstly, Nitish Kumar's accession to power in 2005 was perceived by 88% of households as having constituted a turning point in Patna's history of violence, which was generally considered to have declined significantly. At the same time, however, 76% of survey respondents claimed that conflict and violence continued to be a regular and significant feature of life in their slum. This paradox can be explained by the fact that the reduction in violent crime in Patna has been achieved through forms of highly targeted policing, which have had both intended and unintended consequences.

In particular, the Nitish Kumar government proudly – and rightly – publicises its track

record of having broken the back of organised criminality in Patna through campaigns of targeted repression against known criminals, the introduction of “fast track” trials, increasing both the powers and the resources of the Police, cracking down on gambling – widely controlled by, and financially important to, organised criminal groups – as well as liberalising alcohol production and sales in order to undermine the widespread so-called liquor “mafias” (in 2007). An unintended consequence of this latter measure, however, was that it was universally reported in FGDs and interviews as having led to the proliferation of wine shops and increased alcohol consumption in slums, concomitantly increasing violence, including in particular domestic violence against women.

Certainly, women were identified as the principle victims of violence by some 75% of survey respondents, with alcohol consumption identified as the principle cause of violence by 57% of respondents. At the same time, domestic violence tends to remain contained within the slums, contrarily to the brutality of organised crime in the past, which was spatially more spread out and affected a greater proportion of the city’s population, including in particular the upper and middle classes. This was however clearly also a function of the fact that the Police were reported to persistently fail to intervene in cases of drunk and disorderly behaviour – and much less domestic violence – unless this spilled over into public spaces outside of the slum (in addition, women universally reported that the dearth of women officers in local Police stations meant that they did not feel comfortable going to report incidents of domestic violence). This kind of variable policing was also reported to be happening with regard to youth, who claimed that they were subject to regular forms of “stop and search”, as well as general low-level harassment by the Police, who would systematically seek to break up any gathering of more than 2-3 youths, especially on street corners or boundary roads.

The targeted nature of Policing was also visible more generally in their contrasting reaction to two other forms of violence-

generating conflicts reported in the slums studied. On the one hand, land tenure insecurity was identified as a major source of conflict in several of the slums studied, both intrinsically as well as due to the threat by private developers encroaching on slum land. Such conflicts were reported to often lead to violence, albeit generally a one-way violence by landowners or private developers – or more accurately, their hired *goondas* (thugs) – against slum-dwellers. The Police was universally reported as never intervening against such violence.

Photo 1: Buddha Colony slum unilaterally fenced off by property developers, February 2012



On the other hand, however, the Police were generally reported to actively and rapidly intervene in relation to another major form of conflict in the slums, namely over access to water or toilets, both of which were in short supply in all of the slums, either because they had never been installed, were no longer functional, or had been captured by individuals or groups who monopolised their usage. The means through which they did so varied, and ranged from informally providing access to water pumps within Police stations to slum-dwelling women, as well as regularly patrolling water access points and the few functioning toilets in the slums. This particular Police reaction was clearly to a large extent because antagonisms over these issues frequently polarised along caste and communal lines, and the violence they generated therefore had the potential to spill out beyond the slums.

To this extent, Police patrolling in Patna since 2005 can be characterised as having become

very much targeted at containing conflicts that can lead to forms of violence that might spill beyond slums rather than eliminating violence more generally. Or as one interviewee memorably put it, Patna has evolved from being the “Jungle Raj” during the 1990s, to the “*Daroga* [Police] Raj” in the present.⁴ While effective in terms of city-wide levels of violence, at the level of the slum it can be argued that such targeted policing has led to an intensification of certain forms of conflict and violence. Although there has undoubtedly been a reduction in major forms of violent crimes such as murder, robbery, or kidnapping in Patna since 2005, there has also been a rise in more hidden forms of violence, including in particular domestic violence, especially in slums. Conflict and violence is furthermore spatially distributed very differently to the past.

Photo 2: Deficient infrastructure in Mansoorganj Musahartoli, May 2011



When seen from this perspective, while Patna is now clearly a much safer city for the middle and upper classes, the notion that it has witnessed a reversal of its tipping point of urban violence is clearly wrong, and what has happened instead is a transformation in patterns of violence in the city. The obvious question that this raises is how sustainable the current situation is, and when seen in this light, one of the most obvious issues to consider is the fact that although many of the conflicts and the violence affecting contemporary Patna have clearly been contained, most of their underlying causes have not been tackled. Ultimately the violence currently afflicting the city can be associated with its non-inclusive governance, well reflected in patterns of selective policing.

4.0 Policy Recommendations

A number of policy recommendations can be made on the basis of the project research findings. These range from very specific to more general suggestions, as well as from very practical to more strategic proposals. Some of them involve greater costs than others, and partly because of this, but also due to reasons of political expediency, have less chance of being implemented. Table 1 below summarizes the **six key policy recommendations** that have emerged from the research, ranking them in order of increasing cost and decreasing likelihood of implementation from a political perspective.

The first policy, ***institutionalising access to hand pumps in Police stations for slum-dwelling women***, simply suggests extending a measure that has already been implemented informally in some Police stations in the city, including Buddha Colony and Malsalami police stations. This was very popular with female FGD participants in both the Buddha Colony and Mansoorganj slums that we studied, who appreciated the safe environment that the Police station provided for washing and water provision. This is a very practical, low cost measure that would be easy to put into practice, although it would only benefit the women of slums located nearby Police stations, and is furthermore a preventative measure that does not attempt to solve the underlying cause of the gender-based insecurity that it aims to mitigate.

A second measure that would intend to directly impact on the major cause of domestic violence that was identified by both men and women in the slums studied is the suggestion ***to better regulate alcohol production and sales, and increase tariffs on alcohol*** more generally. As has been demonstrated practically in a range of contexts around the world, prohibition does not work, but ensuring that production and sales are properly regulated, as well as increasing the price of alcohol have both proven to be effective means of reducing consumption. It builds on Nitish Kumar’s stated objective of “intentionally raising the price of liquor so poor people who barely have money to feed their families do not blow their income on alcoholic drinks”.⁵

Table 1: Key Policy Recommendations

	Policy Recommendation	Cost	Likelihood of implementation from a political perspective
(1)	Institutionalise access to hand pumps in Police stations for slum-dwelling women	Low	High
(2)	Regulate alcohol production and sales better, and increase tariffs on alcohol more generally	Low	High
(3)	Establish a mobile women's officer units to visit slums on a rotating basis	Medium	High
(4)	Infrastructural improvements:		
	a) Build more toilets and water access points in slums (BUT must include regular monitoring of good functioning AND prevention of capture by particularistic interests)	High	Possibly
	b) More inclusive city-wide planning (introduce participatory planning processes – which will involve building community halls, providing civic awareness programmes, and devolution of authority by the state)	High	Possibly
(5)	Violence reduction strategies should not be based on containment but more inclusive forms of prevention	High	Unlikely
(6)	Regularising, enforcing, and protecting land tenure and ownership	Very high	Unlikely

Another measure that aims to positively impact on the causes of gender-based insecurity is the suggestion *that mobile women's officer units be established to visit slums on a rotating basis*. Although by law each Police station in Patna is required to have a women's affairs officer, budgetary restrictions as well as the Police's organisational culture mean that this is rarely the case. This was often brought up during FGDs and interviews with women in the slums as a major obstacle to their reporting instances of domestic violence, and putting together mobile women's officer units to regularly visit slums on a rotating basis would be a relatively cost-effective and practical means of providing slum-dwelling women with access to female police officers, and was in fact a recommendation that was well-received by the Patna Police.

Infrastructural deficiencies emerged as one of the major causes of conflict in all of the slums studied. On the one hand this was due to the lack of toilets and water access points, but on the other hand, it was also the result of these

either being dilapidated or having been taken over by individuals or groups who did not let others use them. At a very basic level, *building more toilets and water access points in slums*, so long as these are regularly monitored, both with regard to their good functioning and to prevent their particularistic capture would certainly help change this situation. A more sustainable solution, however, would involve *the introduction of more inclusive participatory planning processes in slums*, to allow slum-dwellers to ensure that their needs are properly prioritised, but also to allow them to take responsibility for their implementation.

As the experience of such initiatives in Brazil has demonstrated, their implementation involves more than just an institutional devolution by the state, but also infrastructural transformations such as the building of community halls in slums to provide physical space for debate and exchange, as well as the promulgation of civic awareness programmes to inform slum-dwellers of their rights, and a

commitment by municipal authorities to engage with slum dwellers (see Lopes de Souza, 2001). As such it requires both resources and political commitment, but as has been shown in the case of Brazil, the returns on investment – so to speak – are very positive in the long run (Abers, 1998).

The next policy recommendation, that **violence reduction strategies should not be based on containment but rather more inclusive forms of prevention**, points to the fact that sustainable violence reduction can only be based on more inclusive and participatory forms of governance that aim at promoting equitable outcomes for the city as a whole rather than a select group within it. As such, it raises issues relating to the political economy of the city and the way that rich and poor engage with each other. This is a critical concern; the current pattern of targeted policing aimed at containing violence in the city slums suggests a predominantly antagonistic vision of this relationship, which only reinforces stereotypes and stigmatisation.

The final policy recommendation, regarding the need to **regularise, enforce, and protect land tenure and ownership**, is obviously a process fraught with political difficulties, and would need to be linked to a broader process of urban land redistribution. This of course also relates to the broader political economy of the city, but is unquestionably necessary if Patna is to be constituted as a fairer and more just city. The historical experience of agrarian

land reform in Bihar may be a potential guide to how political obstacles might be overcome.

5.0 References

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6.0 Endnotes

¹ In the context of this research project, "conflict" therefore refers to situations where individuals and groups have incongruent interests that are contradictory and potentially mutually exclusive but contained, while "violence" refers to the actualization of conflict through the forcible imposition by an individual or group of their own interests to the disfavour of other individuals or groups' interests.

² See <http://archive.oneworld.net/article/view/91983>.

³ It should be noted that the Patna wards have been regularly increased and reorganised over the past two decades. In 1991 Patna had 37 wards, in 2001, 42 wards (the original 37 wards plus 5 outgrowth area wards), then it increased to 57 (new and reorganised) wards in 2007, and since 2011 it now has 72 (once again new and reorganised compared to the 57 ward structure).

⁴ At the same time, although participants frequently complained about the selective responsiveness of the Police, and sometimes claimed that some Policemen were involved in minor forms of extortion relative to local businesses, it is important to note that nobody that we talked to raised any issues relating to putative instances of Police brutality, in stark contrast to what is widely reported to be common Police practice in the rest of Bihar (see ACHR, 2009), and there was little fear of the Police.

⁵ See <http://www.patnadaily.com/index.php/news/6660-nitish-speaks-of-ills-of-alcohol-consumption.html>.

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