

ISSUE BRIEF

Urban Violence in Nigeria: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations

SEARCH
FOR COMMON
GROUND

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At a Glance: Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, will host some of the fastest growing and largest cities on the continent in the coming decades. Nigeria is a bellwether of issues arising from rapid urbanization. For many, migration to cities brings the prospect of job opportunities and better lives. Yet, when this population explosion happens alongside poor governance, lack of urban planning and infrastructure development, and deep social divisions, conflict and violence prevail. Academics and practitioners in Abuja, Lagos, Kano, and Port Harcourt gathered to discuss urban violence in Nigeria's growing cities, and identified six key characteristics of and risk factors for urban violence and opportunities to prevent further escalation.

Demographic models show that by 2100, Africa will be home to some of the world's biggest cities.¹ Half of Nigeria's population already lives in urban settings, growing over 4 percent annually in the past two decades.^{2,3} At this rate, the population of Lagos is predicted to quintuple, from 15 million to over 80 million over the next 80 years.⁴ Climate challenges, rural insecurity, dropping commodity prices, unpredictable currency fluctuations, and widespread unemployment have compelled some Nigerians to move to cities in search of income. Once there, many do not find the opportunities they thought would be plentiful.

Ongoing violence in Nigeria contributes to urbanization and affects the physical safety of urban residents. For instance, insecurity caused by Boko Haram's armed insurrection, rampant organized criminal banditry, tensions between farmers and herders, and widespread identity-based conflicts have caused millions of Nigerians to flee their homes, many of whom seek refuge in Nigeria's cities. These rural crises increasingly affect urban residents. Clashes between motorcycle drivers from northern Nigeria and southern Nigeria have turned deadly in Lagos. In March 2022, criminal gangs operating out of Northwest Nigeria attacked the Kaduna airport and assailants bombed a train between Abuja and Kaduna.⁵ This impacted urban residents' safe transport into and out of cities. In Abuja, an increase in criminality more generally, due to a higher concentration of people with fewer opportunities for economic advancement, and peripheral attacks on communities surrounding Abuja lead to feelings of insecurity and instability in the capital city. This issue brief outlines the key characteristics and risks of urban violence that jeopardize the safety of those living in Nigerian cities.

Key conflict dynamics of urban violence in Nigeria

Urban violence in Nigeria faces many of the same driving forces as other types of violence in the country: (i) lack of effective governance to deliver services, and mitigate and resolve challenges of urban growth; (ii) unequal distribution of and competition for resources; and (iii) unresolved grievances and persistent identity-based divisions. According to convening participants, addressing urban violence needs proactive thinking now to mitigate some of the following distinctive challenges facing urban centers in the coming decades:

¹ David Hoornweg and Kevin Pope, "Population Predictions for the World's Largest Cities in the 21st Century," *Environment and Urbanization Journal* 29, no.1 (April 2017): 195-216, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0956247816663557>.

² "Urban Population Growth - Nigeria," *World Bank Data*. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.GROW?locations=NG>.

³ "Urbanization in Nigeria 2020," *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/455904/urbanization-in-nigeria/>.

⁴ Hoornweg and Pope, "Population Predictions," 195-216.

⁵ Eromo Egbejule, "Who are the 'bandits' terrorising Nigeria's 'Wild, Wild West'?" *Al-Jazeera*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/3/29/who-are-the-armed-bandits-of-northwest-nigeria>.

- Increased pressures on host communities have created cycles of mistrust and resentment towards migrants.** Many escalations of conflict in Nigeria have happened in rural areas, resulting in internally displaced populations fleeing towards cities for refuge. Host communities see increased competition for already scarce public resources and employment opportunities and are often ineligible for programs focused on supporting migrant communities. At the same time, crime and illicit activities are increasing in their neighborhoods, often as a result of these limited opportunities for income generation. Migrants and refugees are often critiqued as being the source of instability or conflict. Interestingly, migrants and refugees make up less than one percent of Nigeria's total population, below the global average of 3.6 percent and the lowest percentage of any country in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).⁶ Identity-based divisions, stoked and perpetuated by media, play into the hostilities between host and migrant communities.
- Communities on city margins, socially and/or geographically, are seeing upswings in petty crime and organized criminal activity.** Urban communities facing poor infrastructure, congested housing, and limited energy sources tend to have the least access to law enforcement and justice. Unequal distribution of resources and limited provision of government services result in competition and even hostile confrontations. Direct attacks on peripheral communities - such as those affecting the airport in Kaduna and the train outside Abuja - which are often claimed by armed groups like Boko Haram or the Islamic State - West Africa Province (ISWAP), demonstrate a link between urban crime and the broader violent extremist and insurgent conflicts affecting rural areas. Neighborhoods with the most acute need of public safety infrastructure and oversight, such as areas near abandoned construction sites, often receive little government attention and become sites of criminal activities. According to convening participants, urban citizens from underserved communities in Lagos have noticed an increasing number of light weapons in their neighborhoods. Those in Port Harcourt observed that low-income and waterside neighborhoods see greater instances of violence and petty crime due to insufficient police presence. Additionally, people living in informal urban settlements are particularly vulnerable to health challenges, food insecurity, and negative or illicit coping mechanisms, as they receive little government attention or services;⁷ this became especially obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the lack of a functioning social security system left urban poor communities in Lagos desperate for food and income support.⁸
- Criminal activities offer "fast cash" for young people with perceived low risk.** Convening participants point to the ready availability of illicit activities offering fast rewards for young people, including drug trafficking, extortion, or intimidating opposition voters on behalf of political parties for income. In Port Harcourt, there are increasing numbers of young *keke napep* riders with weapons extorting people at bus stops. Cybercrime groups target young people in Lagos, including university students, and offer to train them into "Yahoo boys" (cyber scammers) by framing it as a low-risk income-generating activity. Sometimes, those recruited are largely unaware these activities are illegal. Government initiatives to grant alternative opportunities to young people, like the Nigeria Youth Employment Action Plan, have been inconsistently implemented. In some places, like Lagos, young people and migrants are excluded from some community development associations.
- Vigilante and community-defense groups have emerged outside of government control, putting civilians at risk.** Nigeria's police force consists of over 350,000 officers, but about half serve as bodyguards for government officials and VIPs.⁹ Alleged police corruption, abuses committed by security forces against civilians, and suspected police involvement in organized crime result in low levels of trust toward security actors among urban citizens in Nigeria. Vigilante groups proliferate, some of which are community policing groups established or even sponsored

⁶ Karen Hargrave. "Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Nigeria country profile," London: ODI (October 2021).

www.odi.org/en/publications/public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-nigeria-country-profile

⁷ World Food Programme, "Urban focus Nigeria: COVID-19 economic impacts on essential needs for urban and slum households in Nigeria," April 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-0000127178.pdf>.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Between Hunger and the Virus: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on People Living in Poverty in Lagos, Nigeria," July 28, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/07/28/between-hunger-and-virus/impact-covid-19-pandemic-people-living-poverty-lagos>.

⁹ International Crisis Group, "Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity," Africa Report No. 308, April 21, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/308-managing-vigilantism-nigeria-near-term-necessity>.

by state governments due to the absence of state police.¹⁰ The status of these groups as outside formal government control, as well as their strong identity group ties, partisan nature, and access to weapons, exacerbate security issues, human rights violations, gender-based violence, and intercommunal tensions. These community-defense groups have been common in Nigeria amidst the insurgencies in the Northeast. For instance, armed anti-Boko Haram groups, such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), fill a public safety vacuum and act as semi-state security forces. They are now becoming more prominent in urban settings. While not always a vigilante group per se, citizens are taking up security efforts in the absence of effective state-provided protection, often unsuccessfully. In Port Harcourt, initiatives such as neighborhood watches and amnesty programs hardly curb violence due to corruption, politicization, and inadequate collaboration between the city government and civil society.

- **Protests, mass mobilization, and mob activity happen largely in urban centers.** In a context with poor state-citizen relations, mass gatherings of people risk inciting violence or violent retaliation. Frustration with government corruption, repression (such as the national government's ban on Twitter and other social media in response to civil unrest¹¹), and abuses result in mass protests in urban areas. The End SARS (Nigerian police force's Special Anti-Robbery Squad) movement in 2020 congregated tens of thousands of people in the streets of Lagos.¹² During the End SARS protests, security forces and police responded by firing on and killing unarmed people in Lagos, further contributing to anger and resentment toward security forces.¹³
- **Elections are major triggers of violence in urban centers.** Recent Nigerian elections involved escalations in hate speech, negative media campaigns, targeted killings, intimidation of voters and political opposition, hijacking of electoral materials, and vandalism, all largely concentrated in urban centers. Observers point to certain politicians' active manipulation of community grievances as a driver of these dynamics, compounded by insufficient early warning and early response (EWER) mechanisms. In 2019 in Abuja, Lagos, and Port Harcourt, groups of agitators attacked polling units, threatened voters, and disrupted the presidential election. During those elections, 361 people across Nigeria died as a result of electoral violence.¹⁴ Over 40 incidents of violent attacks and vandalism against Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) offices occurred across Nigerian cities since 2019.¹⁵

"The conflict going on in the cities is more than in other places ... By 2050, two-thirds of our population will be urban-based. Let's better plan our cities ... We need to, as a country, go back to the drawing board."

- Researcher in Nigeria, November 2021

Opportunities and recommendations for enhancing security, quality of life, and social cohesion in cities

Convening participants point out that reducing urban violence in Nigeria requires immediate action.

- **Support security sector reform and build on security mechanisms that are working to deliver protection and justice to people.** Community-centered security platforms, such as a peace architecture approach, that take a multistakeholder approach to security, rather than relying on security forces alone, have prevented future conflicts, improved security outcomes, and brought accountability and oversight to security force abuses. The Nigerian government and donors can adopt this approach and scale it at the state and federal levels. Train security

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, "Vigilantism in Nigeria."

¹¹ Anietie Ewang, "Nigeria's Twitter ban follows pattern of repression," *Human Rights Watch*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/07/nigerias-twitter-ban-follows-pattern-repression#>.

¹² "Nigerian Protesters Shut down Africa's Largest City, Escalating Standoff with Government." *The Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/nigerian-protesters-shut-down-africas-largest-city-escalating-standoff-with-government-11603125398>.

¹³ Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: Officials Indicted in Abuses of Protesters," November 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/19/nigeria-officials-indicted-abuses-protesters>.

¹⁴ Sampson Chimene Obiam, "The Nigerian State and Electoral Violence: An Analysis of the 2019 Presidential General Election in Nigeria." *IOSR Journal of Humanities And Social Science* 26, no. 3 (March. 2021): 53-61,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350107268_The_Nigerian_State_and_Electoral_Violence_An_Analysis_of_the_2019_Presidential_General_Election_in_Nigeria.
¹⁵ Kabir Yusuf. "41 INEC Offices attacked in Two Years," *Premium Times*, May 30, 2021, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/464658-timeline-41-inec-offices-attacked-in-two-years.html>.

forces in nonviolent communication and de-escalation tactics, tools and opportunities for community engagement, and strategies for collaborating with civilians. Additionally, broaden the scope of security-sector reform and reintegration programs to include vigilante groups and armed youth.

- **Donors can forge multi stakeholder partnerships for coordination on urban security.** There are massive investments in Nigerian cities from multinational and domestic corporations to governments to multilateral organizations. There are over 30,000 companies in Lagos alone. The success of these investments is dependent on the trust to operate securely. Convening partners can help connect the stakeholders interested in urban security to find ways to improve community safety and infrastructure as well as improve the economic operating environment.
- **Promote and resource efforts to reduce and prevent elections-related violence.** Elections-related violence occurs predominantly in Nigeria's urban centers and often falls along ethnic and religious lines. Disinformation and inflammatory rhetoric exacerbate tensions and can trigger violence if left unaddressed.
 - Influential Nigerian, diaspora, and other international figures should encourage and amplify public commitments for peace made by political parties, religious leaders, and other influencers ahead of the 2023 elections.
 - The Nigerian government and donors should invest in early warning and early response mechanisms, rumor management, and hate speech reduction ahead of the 2023 elections. This could include existing social cohesion efforts led by religious or other local leaders, such as interfaith dialogues, emphasizing de-escalation, or prevention of violence.
 - Donors should remain committed and continue investing in peace and security during and after presidential election cycles.
- **Align diplomatic, development, and defense resources and strategy to build peace across Nigeria.** Nigeria holds important political and social influence throughout the region and is a major political and economic partner for public and private institutions. Yet, the responses of Nigeria and its partners to fragility and violence in Nigeria have been reactive rather than proactive in addressing the many conflict situations across the country. The violence in Nigeria's cities is closely linked to insecurity in rural areas and social grievances affecting Nigerians across the country. There needs to be a holistic approach to violence and stability in Nigeria, forged by Nigerians and supported by international partners, that permeates all areas of diplomacy and economic ties between Nigeria and its partners.
- **Facilitate collaboration between young people and government to create a stronger prevention and response architecture for future crises.** Local Government Area (LGA) and state-level government can include young people, especially from marginalized communities, as partners to design livelihood and development initiatives. Donors can remove barriers from funding mechanisms to allow more informal youth groups to access resources.
- **Donors investing in climate resilience and sustainable development should integrate peacebuilding tools to maximize their impact on reducing violence.** Invest in initiatives to spark employment, promote shared interests between host communities and migratory groups, and build livelihoods. Private companies can help address underlying environmental and economic drivers of conflict and increase their profits through investment in resilient agricultural and livestock development, value chain infrastructure, and renewable energy.
- **Support initiatives to improve comparative, multi-disciplinary research that links policy and practice to combat urban violence.** Donors and research institutions can facilitate communities of practice and knowledge sharing on best practices and urban development models to reduce urban violence within Nigeria, but also with comparison to other countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.