A MANIFESTO FOR THE FRAGILE CITY

Robert Muggah

After more than a century of steady city expansion in northern countries, the direction of twenty-first century population growth is shifting southwards. Over the next five decades, Africans, Arabs, and Asians will migrate in unprecedented numbers to cities, especially to their slums. Many of these urban settlements are insecure, disorganized, and violent. These are fragile cities and such migrations can threaten their inhabitants, countries, and the wider neighborhood. The analytical focus on fragile cities offers a novel scale when compared to fragile and failing states. It is also one that is preoccupying national policymakers, military strategists, and development experts. Drawing on theoretical and empirical contributions from geography, criminology, and sociology, this article identifies four mega-risks shaping urban fragility—the transformation and concentration of violence, turbo-urbanization, youth bulges, and the relentless penetration of new technologies. It also considers successful approaches to reversing city fragility, including twinning fragile cities with healthier and wealthier ones, investing in hotspot policing, interventions addressing at-risk youth, support for inclusive and cohesive urban growth, and the targeted application of new technologies.¹

The potentially destabilizing effects of urbanization are considered to be among the most pressing global challenges of our era. More than half of the world’s population currently resides in a city, and the proportion will rise to at least three-quarters over the next three decades. Today there are over 500 cities with populations exceeding 1 million, including at least twenty-eight megacities with at least 10 million inhabitants. In 1950, there were just eighty-three cities with over 1 million people and only two megacities.² And it is not just city size, but rather, their growing influence that matters: just 600 cities account for two-thirds of global gross domestic product (GDP).³ The city, then, is at the center of global geopolitical, economic, and demographic transformation.

But not all cities are prospering equally. While cities like Seoul and Shanghai
are lifting off and serving as centers of national and regional growth, Mosul and Mogadishu are sinking into decay and disarray. Many of these fragile cities are emerging in rapidly urbanizing parts of Africa, Asia, and the Arab world, since the Americas and Europe have already completed their demographic transition. Indeed, the urban population of fragile and lower-income countries has increased by more than 325 percent since the 1970s.\(^4\) Military, development, and humanitarian strategists are preoccupied with these nodes of fragility and their implications for contagion, including spreading violence and displacement. Some security experts are convinced that so-called “feral cities” and their vast slums will serve as future landscapes of national unrest, civil conflict, and urban insurgency.\(^5\)

Animated in part by policy concerns, some scholars and practitioners are critically examining the causes and consequences of fragile cities. This burgeoning epistemic community consists of urbanists, geographers, criminologists, sociologists, and economists who are not just motivated by academic inquiry, but also searching for practical ways of preventing violence and promoting cohesion and inclusivity in the metropolis.\(^6\) Some of them are concerned exclusively with the causes and consequences of fragility in northern cities, while others are exploring insecurity in urban centers and their peripheries of the Global South. What many are finding is that, in spite of their many differences, there are common patterns of risk giving rise to city fragility that transcend temporal, spatial, social, and economic categories.

An emphasis on fragile cities offers a useful scale when compared to fragile or failed states. The first section of this article considers the form and character of the fragile city. Drawing on contributions from a wide array of social science disciplines, the next section considers four key mega-risks influencing urban fragility—the transformation and concentration of violence, turbo-urbanization, an expanding youth population, and new technologies. The final section highlights evidence-based approaches to reversing city fragility, including twinning fragile cities with more stable ones; data-driven, hotspot policing; interventions focused on at-risk youth; inclusive and cohesive municipal development; and the cautious and focused application of new technologies. In this way, the article considers the many opportunities to foster resilience in fragile cities, drawing attention to how local authorities are mobilizing to positive effect.
FRAGILE CITY RISING

Twenty-first century security, stability, and sustainable development will be decided in large, medium, and smaller-sized cities. The reason for this is straightforward: Most people are moving to the metropolis. While urbanization has proceeded for thousands of years, the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic uptick in patterns of rural-urban migration.¹ For the past hundred years, North American, Western European, and Latin American citizens moved in massive numbers to cities and suburbs. In the 1800s, just one in thirty residents of these regions lived in cities. Today, three in four live there. These regions, by and large, completed their urban transition—the spatial concentration of people organized around non-agricultural activities. Such is the dominance of the city in the West that commentators speak jubilantly of the triumph of cities, calling on mayors to rule the world.⁸

Global urban population growth is not only continuing, it is dramatically shifting and speeding up. Over the next fifty years, Africans, Arabs, and—in particular—Asians will be moving to cities in staggering numbers. More than 90 percent of all population growth will occur in cities and the sprawling slums and shanty-towns of the South, adding another 2.5 billion people to urban settings by 2050.⁹ A few countries will drive this urban expansion: Nigeria will add 212 million new city residents, China another 292 million urban dwellers, and India some 404 million inhabitants.¹⁰ And while many citizens are migrating to large cities, intermediate and smaller settlements with less than half a million people are growing at the fastest rate. This spectacular move to southern cities is in direct contrast to past and future population growth rates in most northern cities. It took cities in North America and Western Europe centuries to grow to their current size. Some of them are now shifting into reverse as populations emigrate.

Whether in the North or South, the global turn to the city appears to be, by and large, a successful experiment. Civic planners in the world’s largest metropolises are learning how to construct safer, more cohesive, and livable spaces.¹² City life is widely considered to have many advantages over rural living, with urban residents typically living longer, gaining more education, and featuring higher living standards.¹³ Across the developed world, urban networks of “smart,” “digital,” or “intelligent” cities are emerging to confront not just local but international problems.¹⁴ Multinational firms such as Cisco, IBM, and Microsoft are actively pursuing contracts with municipal authorities to construct data fusion centers.¹⁵ This “networked urbanism” is seeking to anticipate and design-out crime, facilitate new kinds of participatory urban governance, strengthen the quality and quantity of service delivery, and build in greener management of the metropolitan commons.¹⁶ Political theorists such as Benjamin Barber are convinced that this move toward
empowering cities will inspire and consolidate deliberative democracy and build a more cosmopolitan global commons.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Figure 1.}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Cities with more than 5 million inhabitants, 2014.\textsuperscript{11}}
\end{figure}

\emph{Source: United Nations Population Division.}

Not all cities are moving in the same direction. To be sure, some of them are doing remarkably well.\textsuperscript{18} While a handful of megacities are thriving and alliances of cities are learning from one another, others are falling dangerously behind.\textsuperscript{19} In the weakest cities the social contract binding municipal governments to their citizens is falling apart and violence is on the rise. The erosion of these kinds of political settlements in some cities is both a cause and effect of wider transformations in national and municipal governance and spatial organization. In fast-growing cities of the Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Arab world, urban governance is divided increasingly between the haves and the have-nots.

The political, social, and economic divide between the wealthy and poor is frequently reproduced spatially in cities. For example, more than 110 million of Latin America’s estimated 558 million residents live in slums. Many of these informal settlements are considered no-go areas—or state(s) of exception, as described by Giorgio Agamben.\textsuperscript{20} They are at once confronted with limited public policing, basic utilities and services, while simultaneously subjected to extra-judicial controls and interventions by state authorities. Entire neighborhoods and sections of cities display a myriad of risk factors that limit the upward and outward mobility of their inhabitants.
residents and expose them to recurrent threats. Residents are literally trapped—physically, psychologically, and symbolically—across generations. It is no surprise that commentators talk apocryphally of a planet of slums and the coming age of urban guerrilla warfare.21

The most dangerous of them can be called fragile cities.22 These are discrete metropolitan units whose governance arrangements exhibit a declining ability and/or willingness to deliver on the social contract.23 The advent of the fragile city is not entirely a surprise. Arjun Appadurai anticipated the implosion of global and national politics into urban spaces.24 Novel or not, fragility is no longer confined exclusively to nation states and their borders but, rather, extends to their primate and intermediate cities and outlying metropolitan regions. With some exceptions, most fragile cities are currently located in the Americas, especially those south of the United States.25 A staggering forty-five of the fifty most dangerous metropolises are scattered across Latin America and the Caribbean.26 Acapulco, Caracas, Maceio, and San Pedro Sula are in some ways a harbinger of what is to come in the rest of the southern hemisphere. They will soon be joined by an array of cities in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific.

And yet city fragility is not inevitable. Take the case of Rio de Janeiro, long considered the paradigmatic fragile city. The city’s gang and police violence is legendary.27 More than 4,000 people are killed in Rio state each year, including over 1,200 in the capital city alone.28 After years of experimentation, the situation began to change from 2009 onward. Political leaders at the state and municipal level began investing in new approaches to law and order and social investment. A pacification program was launched involving more than thirty-eight permanent police installations in low-income and violent areas. The intervention introduced proximity policing techniques to more than 9,500 of the city’s 43,000 military police.29 The impacts were dramatic. Murder rates dropped precipitously—by 65 percent as of 2012.30 Investment began flowing back in and residents began returning from self-imposed exile. Although monumental problems remain, the city started turning itself around.

Rio de Janeiro is not the only city to begin transitioning out of fragility. In just over a decade, neighboring São Paulo went from being one of the most dangerous cities in Brazil to one of its safest, as its homicide rate has plummeted by 70 percent since the late 1990s.31 While still facing major challenges, cities like Ciudad Juárez, Medellín, and New York experienced similar declines in lethal violence over the past few decades.32 Across North America and Western Europe, cities are becoming safer with homicides dropping by more than 40 percent since the 1990s.33 While debates rage about the most statistically significant determi-
nants of urban violence prevention, there are some emerging areas of consensus in relation to long-term prevention, especially among public health, criminology, and urban planning specialists. Interventions focused on early childhood and youth assistance show demonstrated results, as do strategies to promote urban regeneration, environmental design, and housing improvements. Improved institutional coordination and coherence at the city-level is also positively associated with the delivery of improved safety and security, especially when accompanied with robust and real-time data collection.34

MEGA-RISKS OF FRAGILITY

Notwithstanding the apparent spread of city fragility, comparatively little is known about the factors that give rise to it in the first place. Why do some cities flourish, while others fall behind? What explains these apparently sudden and dramatic reversals in urban violence? Urban specialists and criminologists have puzzled over these questions for years. The answers are various. Most of the literature is generated by North American criminologists intent on testing micro-level theories of city crime. Some have shown convincingly how specific areas within cities offer intrinsic opportunities for criminal activity as a result of political neglect and the absence of state presence together with highly localized economic decay.35 Other insights from social disorganization theory connect higher crime rates with neighborhoods exhibiting a higher density of offenders, a higher percentage of rental housing, and large social housing projects.36 Indeed, the probability of becoming a violence entrepreneur also increases if the individual is raised in a high-crime affected area.37 In this section, the focus is less on micro-level theories but rather on four key structural risks shaping city fragility—the hyper-concentration of violence, turbo-urbanization, youth bulges, and new technologies.

The world’s leading social scientists and public health experts are generating new insights into why some cities resist fragility and others do not. Some of them point to the hyper-concentration of violence and its contagious properties.39 They are finding that urban violence tends to concentrate in particular places and spaces.40 In most cities, the vast majority of violence takes place on just a few street corners, at certain times of the day, and among specific people.41 This thesis is well proven in the United States, and is now being demonstrated in other upper-, middle-, and low-income cities around the world. The case of Bogotá stands out, as it was once considered the world’s most dangerous city. Criminologists and economists there detected that virtually 100 percent of all lethal victimization is concentrated in less than 1 percent of the capital city’s streets.42 Meanwhile, in Barranquilla, it is concentrated within 1.9 percent, Cali within 3.8 percent, and Medellín within 3.2 percent.43 Whether in Bogotá, Detroit, or Karachi, homicide
and violent assault is often restricted to micro-locations. Diagnosing and tracking these characteristics of violence are essential to preventing it over time.

**Figure 2.**

*Murder rate per 100,000 inhabitants in 2012.*

![Map showing murder rate per 100,000 inhabitants in 2012.](image)

*Source: Global Study on Homicide, UNODC.*

What is more, rapid urbanization also correlates with rising crime and violence. Urban geographers are finding that it is not so much the size or even the density of cities that predicts criminality. After all, Tokyo, Seoul, and Shanghai are among the largest and arguably safest cities in the world. And while there may be cultural and sociological factors explaining the relative safety of some expanding Asian cities, it is the speed of city growth—turbo-urbanization—that influences the virulence of insecurity. The case of Karachi stands out. This Pakistani behemoth expanded from roughly 500,000 inhabitants in 1947 to more than 21 million today. And while generating more than three-quarters of the country’s GDP, this megacity is today considered one of the most violent in the world. Other fragile cities like Dhaka, Kinshasa, and Lagos are now forty times larger than they were in the 1950s, and similarly dangerous. In contrast, it took New York more than 150 years to get to 8 million people.

Demographers also note a relationship between the concentration of young people and violence in cities. Many low- and middle-income metropolises are affected by a surge of youth that is only getting larger. In some of the most fragile ones, 75 percent of the population is under the age of thirty. This means that the mean age of residents of Bamako, Kabul, Kampala, and Mogadishu hovers
at around sixteen. By way of comparison, the average age of Berliners, Romans, and Viennese is forty-five.\(^5\) It is not just youthfulness that predicts city fragility, however, but a specific demographic of young people. Being unemployed, under-educated, and male puts one more at risk of both killing and being killed.\(^5\) There is a contagious dynamic to violence between these so-called “hot people,” as some noted epidemiologists have discovered.\(^5\) Violence is often transmitted among a select group and can follow predictable patterns. The reverse is also true: The presence of well-educated and employed young people in specific neighborhoods—the creative class—is associated with positive dividends, including public safety.\(^5\) In the United States, for example, states with higher college enrollment rates and a higher proportion of residents with high school diplomas experience lower violent crime rates than states with lower college enrollment rates.\(^5\)

**Figure 3.**

Percentage of population living in urban areas.\(^6\)

Other factors shaping fragility in cities are new technologies and connectivity. Across fragile cities in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, cyberspace is fundamentally rewiring the ways in which groups, individuals, and states engage with politics, economics, social action, and governance. In Latin America and the Caribbean—a region experiencing among the highest rates of urban violence on the planet—more than half of the population is now online, and connectivity is expanding faster than in any other part of the world.\(^6\) Most of that expansion is taking place among the young—digital natives with ambitions to change and better their lives—and
more than 75 percent of the region’s population lives in major cities. Urban civil society is also moving online, evidenced in a groundswell of blogs and networked social movements ranging from YoSoy132 and Blog del Narco in Latin America to digital protests raging from Cairo and Istanbul to Budapest and Kyiv. The 2013 street protests in key Brazilian cities may signal a new popular awakening, as digital natives flex their collective political muscles and translate online action in over 300 cities into real-time street violence.62

Figure 4.

![Percentage of the population under the age of 30, 2012.](image)


Not surprisingly, digitally savvy criminals and radical groups are also colonizing Latin American, African, and Asian cyberspace, as evidenced in the stark rise in cyber-enabled criminality across all these regions. In Latin America, for example, the regional narco-economy and associated urban youth gangs use social media platforms to organize and advertise their activities, recruit members, intimidate authorities and citizens, extort money, and hire contract killers.64 Similar patterns of digital criminality are emerging in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and also parts of Africa, including Nigeria and South Africa. Across it all, states—but also cities—are struggling to cope with an ever-more chaotic digital environment and open new channels for consultation and participation. Government responses vary widely. Most involve a complex mix of leveraging cyberspace to enhance governance while adopting cyber-security policies, laws, and capabilities to police and impose order on this promising, but also risky and
volatile, space.

**REVERSING URBAN FRAGILITY**

The consequences of city fragility are far-reaching. They include the fragmentation of public and private urban space, the depletion of social capital and cohesion between neighborhoods and neighbors, and the reproduction of new manifestations of insecurity and fear. Cities such as Caracas, Johannesburg, Recife, Manila, Mosul, and San Salvador are giving rise to Manichean landscapes of “safe” privately administered gated communities and their “violent” and public peripheries. The chronic nature of insecurity in these and other cities, described memorably by Dennis Rodgers and Bill O’Neill as “infrastructural violence,” is quite literally reshaping their built environment. Their fragility is intimately connected to the wider structural dynamics of urban agglomeration, as well as to the interests of—and power relations between—competing groups.

**Figure 5.**

Percentage of the population who use the Internet, 2012.

There is nothing path-dependent about city fragility. Time and time again erstwhile fragile cities and neighborhoods rebound and ultimately transform for the better. Their inhabitants and institutions often exhibit extraordinary capacities of adaptation and resilience, offering insights to those prepared to listen. Yet comparatively little is known about how fragile cities cope and rebound from shocks and sustained violence. The ways in which both formal and informal urban systems
reproduce order and service functions in fragile settings is under-examined, as are
the livelihood strategies and patterns of solidarity adopted by residents within
them. Indeed, a closer inspection of the resilience of fragile cities will no doubt
yield profound insights into how fragility might eventually be arrested.66

While it takes time and investment, there are examples of how city fragility
may be turned around. For every city that has failed, there is another that has
managed to reinvent itself. Even cities showing extreme symptoms of fragility have
undergone remarkable improvements in some sectors. There is growing awareness
in public policy circles of the combination of measures that, if implemented with
fidelity, can stem fragility. Even where they may be committed, mayors and their
advisors are not always sure how best to coordinate or align their efforts, much less
mobilize resources. A manifesto assembling the best evidence to date could come
in handy for mayors and urban planners in the North and South alike.67

Reversing fragility will require initiating a conversation between cities about
their common problems. Mayors like Enrique Peñalosa of Bogotá (1998-2001),
(2005-2013) of Los Angeles offer examples of how a radical change of approach
is possible.68 They purposefully borrowed scientific ideas and practices from
around the world and deftly worked with different layers of government to design
multi-sector violence prevention strategies. There are encouraging examples across
North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean of mayors that actively opened
up channels to communicate with violence-plagued communities. Their goals
are to interrupt gang violence but also to introduce social policies addressing
wider criminal stains, under-serviced communities and households, and extreme
economic inequality. This kind of dialogue is essential for developing shared
priorities and ensuring scarce resources are deployed effectively.

Another way to kick-start innovation is to join fragile cities with healthier
and wealthier ones. Since at least the 1950s, “twinning” projects have inspired
solidarity and exchange, including between North American and European cities
demolished during World War II. Initiatives such as Mayors for Peace, Cities
for Peace, and the Municipal Alliance for Peace in the Middle East assembled
hundreds, if not thousands, of cities to share ideas and good practices.69 Big foun-
dations are also getting into the act by contributing to the Millennium Towns
and Cities Campaign, the New Cities Foundation, the United Cities and Local
Governments network, and a new Global Parliament of Mayors, among others.70

One of the most powerful ways to counter fragility in cities is by focusing on
hot spots. Place and space matter fundamentally when it comes to predicting and
preventing violence. Hot-spot policing requires investing in real-time data collection
and problem-oriented law enforcement.71 What is more, hot-spot policing does not
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simply create displacement of crime down the street or to neighboring communities. Indeed, evidence across the United States demonstrates that the neighborhood effects are positive and adjacent communities actually benefit from this type of policing. New technologies, including innovations such as Compstat and Domain Awareness Systems, are increasing the capability to predict and ultimately prevent urban crime. Given the surveillance implied by such approaches, however, there are also growing concerns about how “future crime” prevention can potentially infringe on individual privacy.

Reversing city fragility also requires devoting more resources to mitigating violence committed by “hot people.” Young, unemployed males with a record are statistically more likely to repeat such an offense when compared to others who have not committed a crime. Indeed, about 0.5 percent of people generally account for up to 75 percent of homicidal violence in New York and other U.S. cities. But rather than locking up and stigmatizing young males in fragile cities, they should be valorized. What is more, a hot person’s community can be exceedingly influential in preventing violence. Mediation efforts to interrupt violence between rival gangs is widely practiced across the Americas. Also, targeted education and recreation projects together with specialized counseling for single-parent households are all proven remedies.

Far and away the most far-reaching and sustainable strategy to promoting safer cities involves purposefully investing in inclusive public spaces, social cohesion, and mobility. City planners and private investors must avoid the temptation to reproduce spatial segregation, social exclusion, gated communities, and cities of walls. They must insist that the public good prevails over the private interest. Investments in legacy goods, especially reliable public transportation, open public spaces such as parks, and pro-poor social policies, including conditional cash transfer programs, and cities that incorporate equality can generate real dividends in terms of safety.

There are many examples of how to design-out crime emerging from global cities, such as Amsterdam to Los Angeles. Arguably the most stunning case is Medellín. During the 1990s, Medellín was the murder capital of the world. But a succession of mayors led by Alonso Salazar and Sergio Fajardo turned things around by devoting more attention to tackling the poorest and most dangerous comunas, or neighborhoods. The slums were purposefully connected with middle-class areas by a network of cable cars, bus transport systems, and first-class infrastructure. Homicidal violence declined by almost 80 percent, and Medellín

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was declared the “City of the Year” in 2012, beating out New York and Tel Aviv. Internet penetration and information communication technologies are already closing the digital divide between and within cities. The investment in and availability of new technologies in cities is attracting talent and consolidating their place as hubs of innovation, creativity, and connectivity. A new generation of southern smart cities such as Kigamboni (in Dar es Salaam), Cite le Fleuve (near Kinshasa), Tatu and Kozo Tech (next to Nairobi), and Hope and Eko (outside of Accra) are capitalizing on the technology revolution. India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi also recently announced that his government would create 100 new smart cities over the next two decades. Law enforcement agencies are likewise harnessing predictive analytics, remote sensing, and body cameras to positive effect by targeting specific locations, times of the week, and individuals. And activists and hackers are already beginning to crowdsource their security solutions. Although there are invariably dilemmas associated with making cities more intelligent, smarter cities are safer cities.

CONCLUSION

Cities are today centerstage in decisions relating to counter-insurgency, stabilization, crime prevention, and development. This debate is not without precedent: Urbanization and security promotion have a shared heritage. For more than two millennia, the clustering of populations into cities, towns, and villages was accompanied by efforts to pacify urban residents and shield the center from violence at the periphery. Historians documented the many ways in which cities are connected to the acquisition of security and safety by the elite at the expense of the poor. In the process, cities are being recast as sites of international engagement. Their sheer density, vulnerability, and unpredictability are described as requiring new paradigms of intervention. Critics are justly concerned with the tendency of the wealthy to “secure” cities and their upper-income suburbs for the exclusive benefit of the elite and middle class against the urban poor. Notwithstanding important exceptions, there is comparatively less focus in policy and practice on addressing structural factors that give rise to fragility, much less in developing more inclusive social contracts, responsive services, and resilient systems of urban coexistence.

If fragile cities are to be turned around, public authorities, businesses, and civic groups need to get to grips with the emerging mega risks, but also the many available solutions. This means starting a conversation about what works—and what does not—when it comes to promoting healthy cities. The dramatic surge of the world’s population to cities during the last and current centuries is one of the most stunning demographic reversals in history. The fight for security and development, however defined, will be won or lost in fragile cities of the Global South. Successful
mayors there will harvest lessons from around the globe of ways to reverse fragility. The more enlightened among them already do so.

NOTES

1. This paper draws from a TED talk given by the author in October 2014 and released in January 2015. Additional data and citations on fragile cities are available at www.ted.com.


12. There is a growing array of scholarly groups devoted to mapping what works in safety and violence prevention, including in cities across North America. These include http://www.blueprintsprograms.com; http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/lib/?go=monograph; http://www.crimesolutions.gov; and http://www.toptierevidence.org.


Alliances such as the Global Safer City Network and the European Forum for Urban Safety are nurturing international partnerships between dozens of cities—including megacities—and exporting new models of public security.


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55 Urdal.


Ibid.


Ibid.

See, for example, the work of CureViolence around the world at http://cureviolence.org/partners/international-partners/.


Muggah, “Are Smart Cities a Bright Idea for the Global South?”


Muggah, “Deconstructing the Fragile City.”