

## **Slow Genocide: The Dynamics of Violence and Oppression in Refugee Camps and American Ghettos**

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### **Abstract**

It is often assumed that life in the United States is so comfortable that those living in ghettos in American cities are certainly much better off than the poor of other countries, particularly Third World countries. In this paper, we compare levels of inter-personal and inter-group violence in two contexts, American inner city ghettos and refugee camps in Central America and Africa. We compare the cycles of violence (initiation, escalation, dehumanization, routinization and authorization), victim and perpetrator stereotypes of one another and responses to conditions of chronic violence (gang formation, punitive contact with A legitimate@ authorities, institutional responses to complaints about violent victimization), and broader societal stereotypes of ghetto and refugee camp dwellers. Our argument is that life in an American ghetto and life in refugee camps are plagued with similar patterns of chronic violence with similar causal origins.

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The initiation, escalation, and dynamic progression of inter-personal and inter-group violence are all important elements in a broad understanding of political oppression. Oppression comes not just from the perpetrators of violence, but from the aftereffects that in subtle and pervasive ways destroy individuals= and groups= abilities to imagine an alternative condition of life and to recognize ways of achieving change. In this paper, we begin an exploration of the impact of chronic violence in two conditions: (1) United States ghettos where the impact of chronic violence on citizens living in poor urban areas represents the pervasiveness of the oppressive effects of violence in a country proud of its wealth and the mythology that everyone has a chance of living the good life; and (2) refugee camps in which the causes and consequences of chronic violence are not surprising and are readily recognized by the international community. A comparison of these two conditions and the level of violence experienced at the individual and community level over extended periods of time appears to result in similar long term outcomes.

Although tremendous attention is given by those in the international community to the rise of violence that results in mass killings and genocide, little attention is then paid to the “ordinary violence” (i.e., domestic violence, rape, assault, and murder) that occurs before and after the genocide, and results in what we call a “slow genocide.” Slow genocide is the emotional and physical harm done to survivors of violence over time that leads to extreme hardship and premature death for many. The emotional and physical harm resulting from witnessing or participating in violence and the continuing experiences of living in unsafe and violent communities, perpetuates a cycle of violence that oftentimes affects multiple generations.

Unfortunately, the disruption to entire communities that happens due to failed states or years of poverty and racial segregation are not temporary situations for refugees or for those who live in inner city ghettos. A review of the literature on life in refugee camps and life in U.S. ghettos, settings that most would consider to be very different, show alarming similarities in patterns of ordinary violence and trauma inflicted on citizens that often seems paralyzing to those who live there and to those who attempt to help them. We argue that the effects of constant exposure to ordinary violence is both a precursor to, and an outcome of, mass violence. A broader understanding of the perpetration of violence at the individual and community level begins to explain how ordinary violence works to keep refugees and ghetto residents trapped in cycles of violence that may erupt into individual or mass killings over time. Without an understanding of how ordinary violence perpetuates the circumstances that lead to mass violence, state responses to the violence will quell the extreme violence, but will generally fail to achieve long term peace.

### **The Dynamics of Violence**

The dynamics of the initiation and escalation of violence has received increasing attention in a variety of fields in the social sciences. Violence at the individual and group levels show similar patterns of behavior that appear to result in similar outcomes. For instance, interpersonal violence, particularly domestic violence against women, repeats itself within relationships through an identified Acycle of violence@ (Walker, 1979) that includes the building of tension, an explosively violent episode, and then a cooling down period that terminates the cycle, until the tension begins to build again. Within this cycle, perpetrators use other means to

maintain power and control over the victim and to justify their violence (Barnett and LaViolette, 1993). Misogyny, male privilege, isolation, economic control, use of children, threats, coercion, intimidation, and aggression are used to keep victims emotionally, physically, and economically dependant upon the abuser. Scholars have also linked a broader social context (patriarchy, male gender instability, and more recently militarism) of the negative images and stereotypes of women by men, to justify much of the violence committed against women (see Lorber, 2001; Mageo, 2005; Schwartz and DeKeseredy, 1997 for reviews). Interestingly, the dehumanizing nature of many of the images and stereotypes of women and how they are used to justify violence toward women are very similar to the dynamics used by in-groups to justify violence against out-groups in larger conflicts.

A number of political images or stereotypes have been associated with extraordinary impulses toward violence, particularly those in which the other individual or group is seen as inferior in capability and sophistication. The anti-Semitic image is one, as is as the image of the rogue (essentially a bad child which needs to be punished), the degenerate (a weak willed if technically strong in capabilities group that is associated with opportunity), the colonial client and when circumstances allow, the enemy (Cottam & Cottam, 2001; Cottam, Dietz, Mastors & Preston, 2004 ).

Fueled by interest in mass killings, genocide, ethnic cleansing and a variety of other horrific group on group violence, an important literature has examined additional factors leading up to rampant violence along a Acontinuum of destruction@ wherein “initial acts that cause limited harm result in psychological changes that make further destructive actions possible” (Staub, 1989: 17). Drawing from theories of cognitive categorization, stereotyping, and Social

Identity Theory, it is argued by many scholars that people must organize their environments into simplified categories in order to manage the complexity of reality, that they form stereotypes of others, including political images or stereotypes (e.g. enemies, allies, colonial clients, rogues, etc.), and that their need to belong to groups and derive positive identity from those groups causes them to compare their in-groups with out-groups. When that comparison is negative, conflict and competition can result. The natural propensity to form in-groups and out-groups, to stereotype out-groups, and to engage in comparisons, can be peaceful, or, under conditions of high threat or opportunity, it can lead to a predisposition toward aggression or violence. Once initiated, conflict escalates rapidly when the out-group is dehumanized and when violence against them is routinized and authorized by power holders, society, and institutional structures.

Added to these situational characteristics and the issue of the legitimacy of violence is the role of the political and social institutions as agents capable of and willing to redress grievances of victims. In many countries, and, we will argue, in urban America and refugee camps internationally, those with the authority to address grievances either are not able, or willing, or are not perceived to be able or willing, to effectively protect victims and potential victims from perpetrators (Barnett and LaViolette, 1993; Browne, 1987; Raphael, 2000). This adds to the implicit legitimacy of violence (no one can or will stop it) and it adds to the degree of trauma and sense of helplessness that victims and potential victims experience.

Life in contexts in which violence is common place is filled with trauma. Studies of trauma-induced stress show a number of different patterns of psychological and behavioral reactions. Trauma produces hypervigilance, chronic anxiety, insomnia, nightmares when sleep is possible, and a variety of tension related physical problems (Herman, 1992; Barnett and

LaViolette, 1993; Rapheal, 2000). Life is constricted in the sense that daily survival is the focus of victims of trauma, and their sense of the future is surviving until tomorrow. People who have experienced prolonged imprisonment (political prisoners, kidnap victims, domestic violence victims) also experience a loss of their past. Isolation and fear make an acknowledgment of their past lives intolerably painful, so they disassociate themselves from it (Herman, 1992; Rapheal, 2000). Chronic trauma also disempowers people so that they become incapable of planning actions that would change their circumstances, take advantage of opportunities, make opportunities, and offer an alternative future. In interpersonal violence this form of Ahelplessness@ can be a self-protective mechanism because perpetrators of violence may be on the lookout for changes in behavior that would indicate resistance to their demands (see Barnett and LaViolette, 1993; Rapheal, 2000).

In addition to producing chronic trauma, the contexts of violent living situations reproduce themselves. The more accustomed people are to resolving conflict with violence, the less they are likely to learn non-violent responses to conflict and the more legitimate the use of violence becomes. Moreover, the legitimacy with which violence is used is further augmented when the stereotype of the victim is of someone who is weak, incompetent, the cause of social or personal ills, less than human, and disposable (Staub, 1989, Grossman, 1995; Cottam & Cottam, 2001). Situations of chronic violence are also situations in which the gradual escalation of violence is less likely to be noticed, particularly by perpetrators and bystanders (Staub, 1989; Cohen, 2001; Browne, 1987). This is particularly the case when violence periodically and regularly increases. If there are regular pogroms against a particular group, they become part of normalcy.

Added to these violence-perpetuating factors is the attraction that violence holds for many people, particularly in cultures that prize certain forms of violent behavior. Heroism in war is highly valued in many cultures, including the United States (Hedges, 2002). The commission of acts of violence cause adrenalin to flow and leads to the paradox of causing perpetrators great excitement and, in the long term, post traumatic stress as a consequence of the horror of their unacceptable actions (Grossman, 1995). The attraction of violence can be seen in journalists' accounts of covering combat (Loyd, 1999), soldiers' memoirs (Hynes, 1997), studies of child soldiers (Singer, 2005), and gang violence (Shakur, 1993). The attraction that violence holds is in part a result of physiological changes caused by intense adrenalin flows and the camaraderie of shared experience between those who perpetrate the violence and survive (MacNair, 2002).

It is also culturally based in the glorification of hypermasculinity. War and other acts of extreme violence are overwhelmingly perpetrated by males against other males and then extrapolated to women. Militarism, the use of coercion and force to resolve conflict, tends to favor masculine attributes. Masculinity is generally associated with power, independence, control, a lack of emotion, heterosexuality, and aggression (see Kilmartin, 2000). Although men, like women, share a wide range of personal attributes, the belief that real men can only act according to narrowly defined masculine attributes, limits men, women, and our communities to narrowly defined responses that incorporate male attributes and male only responses to resolving conflict. Therefore, when male gender identity is destabilized, or challenged through social change, a social distancing from women often occurs (women are perceived as weak or polluted) or the use of aggression increases against whatever the perceived threat (see Mageo, 2005). An attachment to hypermasculine sex role stereotypes then promotes the use of violence to resolve

conflict versus negotiation, mediation, diplomacy, caring, or other nonviolent types of conflict resolution.

Young people, especially men, with little education are particularly vulnerable to the effects of violence, both as victims and as perpetrators. As studies of child soldiers demonstrate, the young and vulnerable can be turned into the most vicious killers when forced into combat, whether in civil wars in failed states, or in urban gangs in U.S. cities (Singer, 2005). As Herman argues, those who are already disempowered or disconnected from others are most at risk (1992: 60) and these people are also least likely to have social support and resources to help them recover from trauma (see Clear and Cadora, 2003). It is this lack of support, the continuing threat of violence, and the inability to establish emotional or physical safety that connect the life experiences of those who live in refugee camps and those who live in ghettos in the United States.

### **Patterns of Violence in Refugee Camps and U.S. Ghettos**

The patterns of violence in urban areas of the US and in refugee camps are surprisingly similar in the types of violence experienced, the impact on the victims and perpetrators who live in conditions of chronic violence, the consistency and cyclical nature of the violence, and the stereotyping and justification for violence against particular groups and individuals. The living conditions for both groups contribute to an environment full of ordinary violence that perpetuates a lack of physical safety and increased levels of emotional trauma and constant fear. These conditions leave both individuals and groups weakened in their ability to escape or stop the violence over time.



Although refugee camps emerge out of extreme circumstances that actively drive people to flee violence, ghettos might be seen as places that slowly accumulate people who are economically left behind from the greater society. In spite of these differences, the history of segregation and poverty in the US can be examined as being similar to the circumstances that create refugee camps internationally. The US has a long history of slavery, racial segregation, and economic deprivation encouraged by a capitalistic society that economically uses and disadvantages ethnic minorities and women (see Lorber, 2001). These historical racial and economic biases have arguably confined many to ghettos in which there is little likelihood of escape (Wilson, 1987). In addition, the US possesses a cultural of violence (see Eller, 2006, Hedges, 2002) that is witnessed through many historical atrocities such as slavery, civil war, genocide of native Americans, and the internment of Japanese citizens during WWII, to name a few. These incidents of institutionalized or mass violence continue to influence contemporary culture and the disenfranchisement of many groups. Therefore, ghettos emerge as a predictable outcome similar to refugee camps internationally that provide a US illustration of slow genocide.

The United States is also well known as the most violent of the western industrialized nations. As Eller (2006, p. 267) argues:

America has few of the characteristics related to nonviolence and many of those associated with violence. It is a large, complex, differentiated, intensive agricultural, state-level, competitive, male-dominated society, whose behavior is marked by the group- (integrative), ideology-, identity-, and interest-based factors that contribute to violence. Perhaps more than anything else, we find a high level of abnormal violence and an acceptance that violence is a good way to respond to certain kinds of situations

and problems.

It is this culture that begins to eliminate the notion that US ghettos are different from refugee camps and allows for the analysis of how chronic violence, whether in war torn states or in a nation perceived to be at peace with itself, influences the cyclical and pervasive nature of violence.

### **Violence in US Ghettos**

In 1987 William Julius Wilson argued in *The Truly Disadvantaged* that neighborhoods with extreme concentrations of poverty have the structural conditions that lead to high rates of crime. Those conditions include high unemployment, disrupted families, isolation from working and middle class neighborhoods, poverty and social disadvantages. Others (e.g. Sampson, 1987; Krivo & Peterson, 1996; Shihadeh & Steffensmeier, 1994) agree, and argue that extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods lack methods of social control that would mitigate criminal activity, have socialization mechanisms that encourage the modeling of criminal activity, and that this, in turn, forces potential victims to use violent actions to defend themselves against perpetrators. In addition, these neighborhoods lack informal mechanisms that prevent crime such as two parent families, neighborhood watch groups, adults who monitor the activities of young people, and social networks including churches, schools and recreation centers that link individuals to wider social institutions and foster mainstream values (Krivo & Peterson, 1996: 622).

Violence tends to be higher in black ghettos, although why that is the case remains unclear. Krivo and Peterson's 1996 study of extremely disadvantaged black and white

neighborhoods in Columbus, Ohio found that, compared to less disadvantaged neighborhoods, these neighborhoods experience particularly high levels of *violent crime only*. Shihadeh and Flynn (1996) argue that the racial segregation of black neighborhoods and their social isolation contributes to high levels of violence. Not because these communities have some intrinsic weakness in their adaptation to negative structural conditions, but because these unprecedented levels of isolation converge a set of multiple disadvantages into a single ecological space (p. 1329).

In the US the most violent acts are criminal acts of violence such as aggravated assault, rape, murder/manslaughter, and armed robbery. These crimes are intertwined with other patterns of violent behavior such as gang banging, the sale and use of illegal substances, which fuels robbery and property crimes, violence in families and in schools, and prostitution. Even non-violent property crimes can create fear, and a perception that the environment is dangerous.

In 2002 there were 16,000 murders in the US (one every thirty three minutes), over 95,000 rapes (one every six minutes), and 894,384 assaults (one every thirty-five seconds) (Eller, 2006: 269). A picture of the different degrees of violence in urban areas compared with suburban or rural areas can be seen in comparisons of murder, rape and assault rates in several big US cities compared to the national average. Table 1 shows the comparisons for Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and the national rate per 100,000 in 2004.

**Table 1: Murder/Manslaughter, Rape, and Aggravated Assaults Rates per 100,000 (2004)**

Crime	National rate	Philadelphia	Baltimore	Oakland, CA
Murder/ manslaughter	5.5	22.2	43.5	20.6
Rape	32.2	67.4	28.7	64.9
Aggravated Assaults	291.1	661.2	1128.7	648.4

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics Crime and Justice Data Online.

These rates are high compared to those of the small cities of Moscow, Idaho (population of 19,000) and Pullman, Washington (population 25,000), both rural, agriculturally based, college towns, where the authors live or work. In Moscow, the murder, rape, and assault rates for 2004, were 4.5, 13.6, and 67.8 and for Pullman they were .0, 35.2 and 43.1.

These data show considerable violence in urban areas, but they are far from complete. First, the data cover the entire metropolitan district of the cities, not the rates of crime in urban ghettos or public housing, where it is concentrated. Second, the Uniform Crime Report data only reflect reported crimes to the police. Many additional rapes and aggravated assaults occur, not to mention unreported instances of domestic abuse and simple assault. Violence is, in short, commonplace and a regular part of life in urban ghettos.

The perpetrators and victims of crime tend to be those who live in poor parts of large urban areas. They are disproportionately black, young (between the ages of 12 and 24), and male (Clear and Cadora, 2003; Eller, 2006:273). Patterns of victimization, however, differ for men and women. Although women are less likely than men to be victimized by violent crimes reported to the police, when they are victimized they tend to be attacked by someone known to them such as an intimate, family member, or acquaintance, whereas men are more likely to be

attacked by strangers. Women, because of the intimate nature of the violence perpetrated against them through domestic violence and rape, are less likely to report their victimization to the police. This is especially true for women of color and poor women (Rapheal, 2000; DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2002; Renzetti and Maier, 2002). Some have argued that women's failure to report the violent crimes against them to the police, and the cultural dismissal of violence within the home as serious, gives an inaccurate picture that suggests that violent crime is primarily committed against men ([http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cvict\\_c.htm#vtrends](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cvict_c.htm#vtrends)).

Exposure to violence in these urban areas is rampant. In the mid-1990's, when violence reached a peak in the United States, studies of several urban areas found the following patterns:

- § A 1993 study of children in a Washington, D.C. neighborhood found that 45% had witnessed muggings, 31% had witnessed stabbings, 37% had seen dead bodies (Richters & Martinez, 1993).
- § In a New Orleans study, also in 1993, 91% of 9 to 12 year olds interviewed saw violent incidents (cited in Randolph, Koblinsky & Roberts, 1996).
- § The Department of Veterans Affairs notes several studies of exposure to violence in high violence urban areas which found 39% of children having witnessed a homicide. A study of a moderately violent neighborhood in Washington D.C. found 59% of fifth and sixth graders being victims of violence and 97% having witnessed violent acts such as shootings, muggings, or drug trade. The report also notes that a variety of studies have found that between 39% and 70% of adults have been exposed to traumatic events, most of which were serious crimes (Department of Veterans Affairs, [www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/specifics/fs\\_comm\\_vioence.html](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/specifics/fs_comm_vioence.html)).

Constant exposure to violence within families and social settings in which few support systems exist to deal with individuals or their communities has serious ramifications on the emotional health of those exposed to violence. The impact on children of experiencing violence includes depression, fear, anxiety, numbing, difficulty concentrating, denial, difficulties in

school, poor impulse control, aggressive behavior, and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kotlowitz, 1991; Martinez & Richerts, 1993; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Randolph, Koblinsky & Roberts, 1996). The impact on the entire community, however, is equally important. Community violence increases everyone's fear and feelings of threat. Adolescents in particular may become angry, fearful alienated, and distrustful and they may come to believe that they have no future and will die before reaching adulthood. Adults are affected as well. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs:

Adults can also experience PTSD following exposure to community violence. In addition to symptoms of PTSD, survivors of community violence often struggle with (1) how to build trust again (which includes looking at issues of power, empowerment, and victimization); (2) how to find meaning in life apart from the desire for revenge; (3) how to find realistic ways to protect themselves, their loved ones, and their homes and community from danger; and (4) how to deal with feelings of guilt, shame, powerlessness, and doubt. A final concern regarding the effects of community violence is whether there are links between witnessing violence and becoming violent, especially in intimate relationships ([www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/specifics/fs\\_comm\\_vioence.html](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/specifics/fs_comm_vioence.html); p. 3)

The chronic nature of violence in ghettos overtime becomes intergenerational and self perpetuating. This is especially evident in the research on the development of gangs and the extent of violence within the home between family members. For many living in impoverished areas there is no safe place because of the violence in the home and on the street. As one prosecuting attorney from San Diego, California stated when giving a presentation about reducing homicide in his city, "I have never met a serious gang member who didn't come out of a home full of domestic violence. If you want to stop gang violence, you have to stop domestic violence—they are inseparable problems" (Western and Pacific Association of Criminal Justice Educators, 2003).

***Domestic Violence.*** Violence within the home perpetrated against women and children

has historically been condoned and oftentimes ignored in the US (see Lutze and Symons, 2003).

Although feminist scholars have long argued that violence against women in the form of domestic violence, rape, and stalking cuts across all social and economic strata, more recent research has begun to acknowledge that poor and minority women experience significantly higher rates of violence than other women (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2002; Rapheal, 2000; Renzetti and Maier, 2002). For instance, a national survey of women in the US reported that approximately 2 percent of women reported being physically assaulted (see notes and cite). Studies that survey women about violence within the home, however, report much higher rates, especially for women living in the poorest areas such as public housing.

There are approximately 1.27 million publicly funded households in the US with 90 percent of these headed by women (Renzetti and Maier, 2002). Public housing is generally located in the poorest areas of urban centers with few economic or social supports available. Studies based on interviews with women who receive welfare and who live in public housing report much higher rates of violence perpetrated within the home. Renzetti and Maier (2002), who interviewed women in Camden, New Jersey, reported that 50 percent reported some form of violent victimization. Other studies have reported similar findings with one-third of women reporting severe violence with their current or most recent partner, one-third reporting that an intimate partner had threatened to kill them, two-thirds reporting that they experienced severe child abuse while growing up, and over 40 percent having been sexually molested as a child (see Rapheal, 2000, p. 27). Studies of poor, incarcerated women report similar life experiences (see Zaitzow and Thomas, 2003) as well as studies of homeless women living on the street or in public shelters (Golden, 1992).

The majority of women living in violent relationships have children. Poor women often have children at a young age who are fathered by older men who use their maturity to coerce or manipulate their younger partners (see Rapheal, 2000). Poor women with young children are often isolated, economically dependent on the abuser, and oftentimes coerced into having children or additional children due to the control asserted over them by their partners who refuse to practice birth control. In addition, caring for young children with few resources contributes to the isolation and fear that many women experience who live in violent relationships and violent communities (see Rapheal, 2000; Renzetti and Maier, 2002).

Attempts to explain why poor women are more likely to experience domestic violence and rape suggest that economic disadvantage and male peer support creates a climate in which poor men's methods of achieving conventional forms of masculinity are threatened or denied to them (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2002). Poor men are less able to fully participate in supporting their families and economically heading the household. They too are surrounded by violence and peers who are similarly situated and who demonstrate or condone similar behaviors. Any attempt by their partners to achieve financial success is often sabotaged by violence that keeps the women dependent upon them (see Rapheal, 2000). Thus, male gender instability and hypermasculine sex role stereotypes combine to devalue women and to support the use of violence within the home and in the community (see Mageo, 2005; Schwartz and DeKeserdy, 1997).

The trauma and the psychological impact of this violence has serious outcomes for abused women and their children. Fear, anxiety, PTSD and isolation can be overwhelming and socially paralyzing. Poor women, and especially African American women, are even more



isolated due to a deep mistrust of social service and law enforcement agencies who have often failed to help them in the past (see Barnett and LaViolette, 1993; Lutze and Symons, 2003), and a need to protect their abusers from further disempowerment within a racist society (see Rapheal, 2000). Therefore, both the victims and the perpetrators of the violence are trapped in a cycle of violence that continues over time. This absence of external support or control from the agencies that could be most helpful, creates a climate in which victims become helpless to change their circumstances and other forms of power and control emerge in the community. Gangs are an interesting example of how violence within the home spills onto the street as a cause of violence, isolation, and fear as well as a reaction to the violence, isolation and fear.

**Gangs.** The National Youth Gang Survey of 2004, a compilation of police reports from across the country, estimates that there are around 24,000 youth gangs in the United States today with 760,000 active members. Youth gang members commit the majority of youth violence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). In Los Angeles and Chicago in 2004 over half of the homicides were reported to be gang related and in 171 additional cities with populations over 100,000 one quarter of the homicides were gang related. (National Youth Gang Survey, 2004). Gang members commit numerous crimes that are associated with violence from drug and weapons trafficking, to assault, burglary, extortion, homicide, drive-by shootings, and robbery. There was a large upsurge in gang activity and violence from 1983 to 1993 and this is generally attributed to poverty and the growth of the urban underclass, unemployment and deindustrialization, the popularization of gang culture, and the advent of crack cocaine. The deterioration of inner city neighborhoods contributed to the disintegration of families, a disintegration which was augmented by crack cocaine, which is cheap, highly addictive, and

made a devastating impact on inner city neighborhoods. Gangs, the fractured family, and crack cocaine had a symbiotic relationship. Gangs became substitute families for young people with absent or addicted parents, gangs sold crack cocaine, thereby contributing to the addiction problem and the disintegration of families. This is not to say that only the children of broken homes joined gangs. The glorification of gang life, the exhilaration gang-banging brings, and many other factors (initiation rites, strong enforcement of group norms, deindividuation, etc) contribute to the attractiveness of belonging to a gang.

An additional factor to consider when looking at the prevalence of gang-produced violence is the fact that gang members grow up in environments filled with constant violence. They are the older results of the children described above. They become immunized to the horrors of violence, at the same time that they suffer from its ill effects of post traumatic stress, anxiety, fear, and numbing. While gangs produce the violence, belonging to a gang is seen as a survival technique. Gangs protect their members from the random violence of civilian life. Gangs are not secret organizations, but open and readily evident part of the social fabric of inner city life. As Sanyika Shakur writes in his autobiography of life in the Los Angeles Crips, *My participation came as second nature. To be in a gang in South Central when I grew up B and it is still the case today B is the equivalent of growing up in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and going to college: everyone does it. Those who don't aren't part of the fraternity...it's better to be in than out* (1993: 138).

Moreover, non-gang members (of every age) can not avoid gang-induced violence. They are caught in the cross fire, suffering from stray shots in drive by shootings, robbery, and assault, but they also benefit from gang protection. Gangs control turf and they have drug profits.

In one study gangs were used for protection by people who needed escorts to the store and other locations and who did not have adequate police protection (Venkatesh, 1997). Council members would negotiate with gang leaders to restrict their drug dealing and other violent activities to areas where Acivilians@ are unlikely to be hurt. As one tenant leader stated:

[Residents] stopped cooperating with police a long time ago, >cause [the police] harass us so much and they don=t do a damn thing anyway: At least the gangs is giving us something, so lot of us prefers to help them=cause we can *always* go to them and tell them to stop the shooting. Police don=t do anything for us and they can=t stop no shooting anyway. Call me what you want, but all I know is that [the Saints] is the ones providing security around here, not no police (quoted in Venkatesh, 1997: 95)

Venkatesh also notes that gang members are also family members for many residents in the community. They cannot draw a clear distinction between the gang members and themselves. Parents and other relatives do not simply disown their offspring gang-bangers, but continue to consider them part of the family, so it is not possible to separate society into gang and non-gang groups. Finally, gang members may bring money in for their families and the community.

Several other aspects of gang violence are important for this discussion. First, gang violence is cyclical. Because of the eruption of periodic wars for turf or drug markets, gang violence flares up suddenly in some urban areas (Klein, 1995). Consequently, both gang members and civilians live with the certainty that violence will occur, but no ability to predict exactly when and take protective measures. This heightens anxiety.

Second, stereotyping and dehumanization play a large role in gang violence. This is nicely illustrated in Shakur=s (1993) autobiography. He compares gangs in the 1980 war in

South Central Los Angeles to the United States and the Soviet Union, as sovereign entities that are sworn enemies, with all the assumptions that go with the stereotypes of the enemy (p.56). He describes the war as no less complicated than world wars, or wars fought to either suppress or liberate a country (p. 57). Shakur also describes territorial conquest or weaker gang areas as an imperial take-over of inferior colonial gangs: He writes;

I would imagine that our aggressive conquering of territory in those days, and still today, resembled Hitler's sweep through Europe...The mechanics involved in taking a street, or territory, is not unlike any attempt, I would assume, on behalf of early Euro-American settlers. Send in a scout, have him meet the natives, test their hostility level, military capabilities, needs, likes and dislikes. Once a military presence is established, in come the citizens, in this case, gang members (1993: 36).

Non-gang members, hooks, are described as spineless nerds who were always victims of someone's ridicule or physical violence (p. 100). When engaged in attacks on members of other gangs, dehumanizing language is used: they are fools, another fuckers, ACrabs (a derogatory reference to Crips). Ethnocentrism also plays a role in gang violence. Many gangs are racially exclusive (Eller, 2006) and one of the most violent gangs in America today, the Mara Salvatrucha or MS 13, was formed by war refugees from El Salvador for protection against Mexican gangs in Southern California (they eventually incorporated into the Mexican mafia).

Sanyika Shakur was not only a perpetrator of gang violence, but also a victim of it, and his autobiography indicates that he suffered from many of the consequences of experiencing chronic violence described above. He describes a lack of control over events, and few prospects for a future: I had no way to stop the wheels of fate, already set in motion long before I had a ticket to

ride...Prison loomed in my future like wisdom teeth: if you lived long enough you got them@ (p. 163). In addition, Shakur recalls paranoia as a consequence of countless battles in the 1980 war (p. 77), and nightmares after being wounded (p. 97).

In general, it is apparent that the violence that occurs within the home and the threat from gangs and other perpetrators of violence outside the home, with little to no response from authorities, creates a climate of constant fear. This same pattern of victimization and exposure to violence is evident in refugee camps around the world.

### **Violence in Refugee Camps:**

The recent annual report from the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees indicates that the number of refugees globally has reached a 26 year low of 8.4 million last year (UNHCR, 2006). However, the overall number of concern for the agency, including internally displaced persons, totals more than 20 million (UNHCR 2006). Refugee populations examined in this paper include the following three groups: 1) those living in refugee camps outside their native country, 2) internally displaced persons (IDPs) within their native country and 3) refugees resettled in western countries. Any attempt to study the impact of chronic and extreme violence on refugees is quickly confronted with a serious lack of information on the first two groups. The data on violence faced by refugees in camps and IDPs is typically in the form of personal accounts gathered from aid agencies and human rights NGOs. The data used in this paper on the third group is largely constituted from clinical and diagnostic interviews of refugees going through the process of resettlement in Western countries.

In this section we will be utilizing the analysis of refugee camps in Kenya, Burundi and

Tanzania along with human rights reports from NGOs to illustrate the levels, forms and cycles of violence experienced by refugees in those countries. Two primary cases of study are two refugee camps in Kenya, Kakuma and Dadaab camps. Kakuma is in the Northwest of the country, and in October of 2000 (the year of the study cited) this camp contained approximately 110,000 refugees (Crisp, 2000). Most of these refugees in that time were from Sudan but some from Somalia, Ethiopia and elsewhere (Crisp, 2000). Dadaab camp, in the Northeast of the country, also contained approximately 110,000 refugees: 105,000 of them were seeking asylum from Somalia, and the remainder from Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, and Eritrea (Crisp, 2000). However, we also examine testimonials and analysis of the experiences of refugees living in urban centers in developing countries as asylum seekers, from individuals among the 60,000 living in Nairobi and the more than 50,000 living in Kampala, Uganda (HRW, 2002, 2000). Additional accounts of refuge experiences in Tanzania and clinical, diagnostic data accumulated from asylum seekers in western countries are also included in our analysis.

One of the defining features of violence in the refugee camps is the predictability and anticipation of violence as a part of daily life. At the Dadaab refugee camp, attacks by bandits were viewed as daily occurrences (Crisp, 2000). Several refugee accounts conducted by human rights and aid organizations indicate a constant “day and night” fear of attacks in an environment of impunity (HRW 2002, UNHCR 2000). Refugees demonstrate hypervigilance by altering sleep patterns to stay during dangerous nights and sleeping during the day in and around UNHCR administrative buildings (HRW 2002, UNHCR 2000).

Refugees in Kakuma and Dadaab list their immediate personal security needs as their primary concern, ranking it much higher than longer-term goals such as desires to return home, or

concerns over the quality of education their children are receiving (if any) in the refugee system (Crisp, 2000). The constant personal security threats limit long term planning and preparations for a life outside the refugee camp and limits their vision of a future without violence.

Because of its permanence and prevalence, violence among refugee populations strongly influences the ways in which refugees perceive the likelihood of violence and begin to prepare for it. In the model of the cycle of violence there is a stage in which violence becomes so cyclical and patterned that it becomes predictable and anticipated (Walker, 1979; Grossman, 1995). Similarly, accounts from various refugee women demonstrate this experience in ways in which they expect and anticipate sexual and gender based violence. Carrying out tasks and chores that lead them to isolated areas, such as gathering firewood, regularly expose them to heightened attacks. Refugee women, anticipate sexual assault when performing these tasks and seek to mitigate risks by traveling in groups, and wearing multiple layers of clothing to thwart anticipated sexual assaults (HRW 2002).

Violence in some refugee camps is so extreme that UNHCR and other agency staff face restrictions of movement, unable to leave their compounds after dark (Crisp, 2000). These restrictions delegitimize the authority and undermine the effectiveness of intervention efforts, a perception shared by victims of violence in American ghettos. Refugees exhibit a reluctance to cooperate and support formal, institutionalized law enforcement structures. They tend to not recognize the legitimacy of law enforcement and demonstrate a strong loyalty to clan first, with strong intimidation practices against those willing or considering testifying against perpetrators of camp violence. There is even reluctance to enter a police station for fear of retribution (Crisp, 2000).

In fact, the administration of justice in refugee camps is often a pathway to violence. Refugees living outside their country of origin are subject to the host country's legal system,

however the actual implementation of that authority is problematic at best and can often serve to delegitimize peaceful conflict resolution, adjudication and mediation. A refugee in Kenya expressed his fear of the police, expressing that his appearance as a refugee and 'street boy' leads to targeting and abuse on a daily basis from the Kenyan police who revile and target refugee children they deem as threats (HRW, 2002). In the Kakuma camp, abuse against refugees by formal host government criminal justice institutions appear to have lead to vigilantism and assumption of powers of arrest, detention and corporal punishment by "traditional judges" which are oftentimes arbitrary and involve inhumane punishment (Crisp, 2000). These justice systems also tend to reinforce gender inequalities, with judgments of torture and flogging for adultery and coerced marriage in cases of rape (Crisp, 2000). Frequently, the men of a rape victim's clan or family receive compensation to which she is not permitted to access (O'Connor, 1996). Because extended networks of family, neighbors and community leaders are greatly reduced in refugee camps, systems that refugees relied upon for dispute resolution back in their country of origin are often still in place, but are much weaker, ineffective and less reliable (O'Connor, 1996).

While all segments of conflict-affected populations are exposed to dangers to physical security and social protection displaced women and girls have a much higher probability of being victims of sexual and gender based violence. Not only are women refugees often survivors of rape used as a weapon in conflict zones, once displaced they are frequently exposed to sexual and gender based violence in camps where social structures meant to protect them have collapsed (WCRW, 2006). Displaced women and girls are particularly vulnerable to rape and sexual violence, most alarmingly from individuals in positions of authority. Officials may extort sex in exchange for positive determination of refugee status (UNHCR, 1995) for displaced women and girls, further



adding to distrust of institutional services meant to protect them. Women and girls are frequently approached for sexual favors in exchange for additional food rations, and women and young girls placed in foster homes are frequently victims of sexual assault by foster family members (UNHCR, 1995). These attacks and threats from institutions of authority and formal institutions come in addition to the myriad of threats faced by women in refugee settings. Besides being targeted and vulnerable for sexual attack and rape in conflict zones prior to flight, and during flight, refugee women and children suffer heightened exposure to sexual violence and rape in their country of asylum and in refugee camps (UNHCR, 1995).

The exact level of domestic violence against women in the refugee camps of Dadaab and Kakuma is unknown. However, incidents of women beaten by their husbands have become so commonplace within the camps to as be accepted as normal and are rarely reported to authorities in the UNHCR or police authorities (Crisp, 2000). Following a visit to Dadaab in April and May 1993, for example, the Lawyers Committee for Human rights reported that beatings of refugees as well as sexual assault and rape of refugee women were ‘daily and nightly occurrences’ (LCHR, 1996). Just as in American ghettos, it is presumed that the a high number of domestic violence incidents go unreported as part of a general distrust in the effectiveness of police institutions ad a culture of acceptance for intimate violence (HRW, 2002).

Much like we see in American ghettos, males in refugee camps often cite a sense of loss of importance and significance for their family unit. Refugee men express a loss of traditional roles as provider and protector in their family, and that their standing in the family has significantly changed since entering a refugee camp (HRW, 2000). When UNCR and other organizations provide shelter, rations and clothing for the family, the traditional roles of provider and protector celebrated in many

refugee cultures are significantly threatened and challenged. This challenge and threat can be greatly increased when informal camp social structures are dominated by other men from other families, and even more so if from another social or ethnic group. These threats and challenges frequently lead to anger, frustration, uncertainty and a sense of helplessness among male refugees that can manifest as violence against women in their own family or others in the camp (HRW 2000).

As has been mentioned previously, groups have both positive and negative effects. The threat of violence creates stronger adhesion to and identification with one's own group, which in turn makes the survival of the group synonymous with personal survival. Under these conditions, stereotyping members of the out-group becomes more likely. The precarious living conditions of most refugee camps and the competition for scarce resources in the absence of effective structures for law enforcement and control of violence create the conditions under which violence can become the prevalent means for resolving disputes, acquiring precious resources and perpetuating and magnifying previous group divisions. While the propensities toward social categorization, in-group favoritism, out-group stereotyping and comparison between the groups are natural, as under certain conditions these tendencies can lead to extreme violence. Former group divisions are reproduced in the camps, as Crisp shows in his study of two camps in Kenya. Characteristics of refugee groups and of the context of refugee camps create some of the conditions that allow for violence. The social organization and culture of the national and ethnic groups that refugees belong to are usually characterized by violence. Cultural characteristics, such as the emphasis on revenge in the Somali culture lead to escalation of minor disputes (Crisp, 2001). However, the experience in refugee camps contributes to particular responses to chronic exposure to violence. Past victimization contributes to heightened perceptions of threat and to a perception of individuals, as well as whole

groups, as dangerous. Research in child psychology indicates that a feeling of increased vulnerability due to their status as victims creates a readiness to resort to violence preemptively, in an attempt to construct an empowered identity in an environment of normalized violence (Punamaki, 1996, Stichick and Bruderlein, 2001).

In this environment, even minor quarrels and disputes have the potential for escalation. A report from UNHCR in August 1998 cites a minor dispute that escalated into an interclan “block fight” in which four women were injured. A few days later two refugees armed with a knife attacked a 40 year-old man in a revenge linked to the quarrel, he sustained serious injuries and was admitted to the hospital (Crisp, citing UNHCR report). In another example of group conflict and conflict escalation, two Somali boys tipped over the water buckets of 5 Sudanese boys at a well. A Sudanese boy quickly acquired a knife from a sympathetic adult and stabbed one of the Somali boys. Eventually locked in continuing escalation of violence, this conflict eventually led to the burning down of 54 shelters, and two deaths (Crisp, 2000).

As prominent and pervasive as intergroup conflict can be in these refugee camps, research indicates that intra-communal violence is at least as prominent as intergroup violence. Much of the violence experienced by refugees in the Dadaab and Kakuma camp is inflicted by members of their own family and community (Crisp, 2000). One intra-clan violent conflict lasted four hours and police fired 100 rounds of ammunition over the heads of the belligerents “around 140 casualties were recorded (Crisp, 2000).

Finally, the relationship between refugees and the population in the host countries is one characterized by distrust and fear. Locals are sometimes exploiting refugees and use them as a source of income. The massive influx in countries like Tanzania has generated “anti-refugee

sentiment among Tanzanians: increasingly, refugees are viewed by many Tanzanians as a threat to security and a drain on the country's limited resources" (HRW, 2002). Research also indicates attacks from local populations against refugee women are more likely to occur when refugees are considered materially or legally privileged over local populations (UNHCR, 1995). With the majority of refugees living in developing countries, where resources are scarce, it is reasonable to assume that this might be the case in other places as well. This dynamic only serves to compound the already high level of isolation experienced by refugees.

Research on the impact of exposure to violence in a comparison between Vietnam veterans and Southeast Asian (SEA) refugees indicates that the two groups display similar trauma-induced psychiatric disorders (August, 1987). The psychological and behavioral symptoms of the two groups are associated with PTSD. The impact of systematic and brutal violence is revealed in a set of psychological and behavioral symptoms that make normal and daily functioning very difficult or impossible. The oppressive traits of these symptoms include the include re-experiencing of the trauma through dreams and nightmares, and compulsive memories that are triggered by various stimuli present in their everyday environment; irritability, memory impairment, survival guilt, startle response and sleep disturbance; and development of a sense of detachment and loss of interest in current life situations (August, 1987). Beside these symptoms that form the standard definition of PTSD, SEA refugees also suffer from severe depression, states of anxiety and frequent panic attacks, explosive and violent behaviors, somatic symptoms and intrusive thoughts, all of which are common to Vietnam veterans as well. These symptoms keep people exposed to systematic violence trapped in a dialectic of trauma, a permanent oscillation between numbing, depression and apathy on the one hand, and the reliving of the events associated with the trauma in the form of intrusive thoughts and

nightmares on the other (Herman, 1997). Thus, people suffering from PTSD are not able to move on and rebuild their lives, suffering the lingering oppression of their exposure to violence. Numbing and dissociation constitute psychological defenses against the devastating effects of systematic violence. But the dissociation of the feelings associated with traumatic events leads to aggressive and impulsive behavior that cannot be controlled, oftentimes against family members, spouses and children. This creates a self-reproducing dynamic of violence, which is even more damaging in contexts such as refugee camps or violence ghettos.

A meta-analysis of psychiatric surveys provides information about the prevalence of PTSD, major depression and psychotic illnesses in refugee populations resettled in Western Countries (Wheeler et. al., 2005). The authors conclude that 1 in 10 suffer from PTSD, 1 in 20 suffer from major depression and 1 in 25 suffer from generalized anxiety disorder (Wheeler et. al., 2005). Also, this data shows that when age-matched with the general US population, refugees based in Western Countries are 10 times more likely to suffer from PTSD. Analysis indicates that the refugee children living in Western countries suffer from PTSD at a rate of 11%. These sufferers of PTSD experience a chronic oppression by the way their symptoms serve to marginalize them in society. Because the sufferers are trapped in a past moment of trauma and oscillate between intrusive, traumatic memories and periods of emotional numbing victims they find it difficult to integrate into daily life or plan and prepare for their future (Herman, 1997). The consequence of this marginalization and perpetual trauma experienced by the sufferer of PTSD also serve the perpetrators of the violence and the oppressor by effectively silencing the victim, and preventing the sufferer from speaking to the wider population (Herman, 1997).

For refugees, marginalization as a result of PTSD and other psychological illnesses as a

result of exposure to war and extreme violence also manifest in unintended ways. The disjointed, fragmented and contradictory retelling of experiences can not only served to undermine their credibility (Herman, 1997), but can also be misunderstood as cultural or language difficulties. Social workers or resettlement specialists working with refugees often fail to attribute difficulties of integration with cultural, language and economic barriers rather than psychological trauma. These difficulties often lead to the refugee being labeled as ‘unemployable’ by resettlement specialists, leading to further social isolation and economic marginalization (August, 1987).

### **Conclusions**

How does violence, its patterns, frequency, and consequences in urban America and refugee camps compare? Clearly there are many differences: life in an American ghetto is not as bad as life in a refugee camp. But those differences are differences of degree, not kind. Many IDPs and refugee camp dwellers have experienced war-related stressful events including witnessing injury or death of family members, injury or death of friends and fellow countrymen, being at constant risk of own injury or death, being responsible for the injury or death of enemies, being responsible for the injury or death of an enemy civilian (including women and children), being a victim of beatings, kidnappings, torture and so on. The war-like environment of inner cities in America exposes people to the same trauma-inducing events as those experienced by many refugees. This environment characterized by constant threat and the witnessing and experiencing of violence on a daily basis creates the necessary conditions for the development of PTSD and other psychological illnesses. Research shows that the degree of exposure to and intensity of violence impacts the severity of the psychological consequences (Lund, et al 1984, Pearce, 1985, Silver &Iacono, 1984). Those consequences are strikingly similar in refugee camps and high violence urban areas in the US.

There are additional similarities. Violence in both contexts is chronic and experienced differently by males and females. Males may be in the forefront of the statistics as perpetrators and victims of violence. Nevertheless, chronic domestic abuse experienced by women and children abounds and is given less attention than violence perpetrated by and against men. Violence against women is breathtakingly common and is often sanctioned by the society (the camp or urban areas) in which it occurs.

Stereotyping and dehumanization are also common attributes of life and violence in both refugee camps and urban ghettos. Clan and ethnic group identities in refugee camps are matched in urban areas by ethnic/racial/gang identities. These in turn lead to stereotyping and fuels violence by making it easier to target and kill or maim an opponent. Violence also tends to be cyclical in both contexts which only heightens the negative consequences. Potential victims know it is going to occur, and trying to predict when and how it will occur adds to the constant sense of threat and fear. Moreover, in both contexts the authorities whose job it is to protect people from violence are either or both ineffective and distrusted. Living with violence, whether in America or in a refugee camp, makes one more likely to use violence in the future as an approach to conflict. Both refugee camps and urban ghettos are very isolated and it is difficult for residents to experience different environments where nonviolent responses to conflict and frustration can be learned.

The extreme violence that results in citizens fleeing to refugee camps and the ensuing violence that occurs within camps provide important insight to understanding the perpetuation of violence overtime. The parallels between American ghettos and refugee camps should be seen as alarming. The types of violence, the cyclical nature of violence, the role of inter-group stereotyping and dehumanization, the extensive domestic violence and rape, and the psychological consequences

of experiencing these conditions may not be surprising when found in refugee camps, but to find similarities in the United States has numerous implications for public policy and academic research. Violence is understudied and it should be studied in comparative contexts. Second, in addition to the obvious negative outcomes of violence in the US, the endemic nature of violence in the US, particularly in urban areas, has the potential to threaten the legitimacy of the political system and its institutions as well as the ability and willingness of residents of these violent areas to identify with the nation. When the primary group (in this case, the nation and its government) provides no protection from threat, people find other groups that will provide protection. When in urban America that group is a gang rather than the government, the stability of national identity, and therefore civil society, is threatened.



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