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Urban Wilderness

Eighty percent of the U.S. population lives in the nation's metro areas, and the bulk of the population — 65% — is concentrated in 100 of the largest metroplexes, sprawling areas that encompass central cities, older suburbs, and former small towns gobbled up by the metro sprawl.

In the United States, rapid growth of small and medium cities — as much as 75% in two years, many of them west of the Mississippi — accounts for much of this expansion (Muro et al. 2008). This population shift from rural to urban has already introduced tremendous pressures on municipalities to provide physical infrastructure, health, education, and social services to their expanding populations. Continued growth will stretch municipalities well beyond their capacity.

What happens to cities that succumb to the pressures as infrastructures fail and social fabrics tear? Writer Alex Steffen imagines the most dire effects of urban growth in his fictional account on worldchanging.com, a non-profit media organization that comprises a global network of independent journalists who write visionary articles to change the world. Imagine a city that is globally connected, with some of the population having access to the most modern communication and computing technologies, and with a minimal amount of commercial linkages, “social services are all but nonexistent, and the vast majority of the city's occupants have no access to even the most basic health or security assistance. There is no social safety net. Human security is for the most part a matter of individual initiative. . . . Some elements, be they criminals, armed resistance groups, clans, tribes, or neighborhood associations, exert various degrees of control over portions of the city. Intercity, city-state, and even international commercial transactions occur, but corruption, avarice, and violence are their

hallmarks. . . . Yet even under these conditions, these cities continue to grow, and most occupants do not voluntarily leave” (Norton 2003).

Is this account so different from some of our current communities? Homicide is the second-leading cause of death among youth aged 10-24 years in the United States. For 25 years, murder has been the leading cause of death for black men between ages 15 and 34 (Centers for Disease Control 2009). Even as homicide rates have declined across the country, shootings continue to plague economically struggling minority communities (CDC 2009). Many cities have experienced an increase in homicides in recent years. Since 2004, for instance, homicides are up 19% in Philadelphia and Milwaukee, 29% in Houston, and 54% in Oakland (Kotlowitz 2008). According to the Justice Department, most violence can be attributed to gangs. Criminal gangs now count roughly one million members — and are responsible for some 80% of the crimes in American communities. From coast to coast, gang crime destroys inner cities, devastates families, and causes whole neighborhoods to live in fear.

A Medical Response in the United States

Gary Slutkin is fighting gang shootings in the United States by applying lessons he learned while fighting diseases in developing nations. Slutkin is a physician and epidemiologist who has worked to control infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis among Vietnamese refugees in San Francisco, cholera in Somalia, and HIV/AIDS in Uganda. Slutkin treats violence as he would the outbreak of any disease, working with communities rather than treating single patients. His organization, Ceasefire (ceasefire.org), works from a basic premise: Gang violence proliferates in communities that have become accustomed to it. To reverse its proliferation, communities must reset the behaviors that are considered normal. Cease-

Loss of infrastructure, threats of violence, declining budgets — all of these present opportunities for schools to be flexible, innovative, and collaborative.

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fire enlists everyone who helps establish a community's norms — teachers, faith leaders, business leaders, police, coaches — to redefine social expectations.

Ceasefire is one of the few proven techniques for making neighborhoods safer (Skogan et al. 2008). It has started to proliferate across urban communities, has been highlighted in the *New Yorker*, and has received the attention of President Barack Obama and former First Lady Laura Bush. What Ceasefire shows is that there may be new opportunities for us to define how we want to work together to create the world we want to inhabit. Ceasefire has expanded to multiple cities, including Baltimore. But clearly, more programs such as this are necessary.

Time for Innovation

One of my very favorite schools to visit is the Student Empowerment Academy, a small school in South Central Los Angeles that uses the New Tech High School model. The academy is on the campus of the former Jefferson High School, which experienced multiple riots in 2003-04 and led then-Superintendent Roy Romer to close the school and re-open the campus as four small learning communities. Enrollment is growing at the academy, even though the school is surrounded by gang violence. The students and their families pass through multiple gang territories on their way to and from school. Teachers know this and try to ensure that students leave campus before dusk. Imagine the stress level these students live with on a daily basis under circumstances fully outside of their control. On top of that, they've grown accustomed to this and accept this as a fact of life. Unfortunately, this is not unique to the Student Empowerment Academy but common for many of our youths who attend urban schools.

The same students who witness or experience violence in their communities also see that their community has no infrastructure. For instance, three years ago, Martin Luther King Jr.-Harbor Hospital, built in the aftermath of the Watts riots and one of the few hospitals serving poor residents in South Los Angeles, closed. "They are going to be left without a safety net for health care," said Janice Hahn, a Los Angeles city councilwoman whose district includes Watts. "There will be no trauma care, no emergency care, and a lack of the basic services this community needs and

deserves" (Steinhauer and Morris 2007). Cities such as Vallejo, Calif., filed for bankruptcy protection because they couldn't pay their bills after costs for police and firefighters soared and the housing market's slide cut into tax revenues.

A number of urban districts that lack the necessary infrastructure to make needed reforms are reaching to outside agents to do what they cannot do for themselves. Philadelphia has been using outside organizations to improve its schools for eight years. New Orleans is run by the Recovery School District (RSD), a special school district administered by the Louisiana Department of Education. Created by legislation passed in 2003, the RSD is designed to take underperforming schools and transform them into successful places for children to learn. Unfortunately for both Philadelphia and New Orleans, the results are inconsistent to poor.

Seeking such outside support is not always popular, even when the situation is extreme. In Detroit, the state intervened to try to head off a potential bankruptcy by installing a district emergency financial manager, Robert Bobb. But the Detroit school board sued the state for overstepping its authority when Bobb brought in Edison Learning and several nonprofit high school reform models to reform 22 of the district's 44 high schools. Ironically, Detroit has famously been shrinking as its population has declined, but the school district still lacks the internal capacity to tackle its own problems. What would the school board suggest when there is no infrastructure to provide optimal learning opportunities for youths remaining in the system?

Extreme urbanization makes this an ideal time to be innovative by investigating new strategies to provide basic infrastructure, health, education, and effective governance. Are we moving to a time, whether we want to or not, where systems disappear and governments see a markedly different role for themselves, perhaps merely setting rules by which markets operate? What can we learn from Ceasefire that would teach us to leverage participatory forms of governance and connectedness? Today, 40% of urban students in the United States attend schools in high-poverty districts, compared to 25% for rural students and 10% for suburban students. Our students' futures are jeopardized if we can't develop institutions and systems that are flexible, innovative, and collaborative. ■



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