Unemployment in the region is particularly high among better-educated, mostly urban, young people. The supply of skilled jobs has simply not matched demand for them. The opposite is true of the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), where unemployment is highest among the least educated.30

The poor are also especially vulnerable to rising food and fuel prices because they already spend 50–80 per cent of their money on food, leaving little for medicines, education, transport or cooking fuel. These families can ill afford to pay more, yet their purchasing power is further eroded by declining incomes, reduced public spending and shrinking remittances from family members working overseas.31 Governments have an obligation to protect the poorest and most vulnerable children from the adverse effects of economic crises.

**Violence and crime**

Crime and violence affect hundreds of millions of children in urban areas. Some are targets and others participate in or witness such acts as assault, mugging, communal conflict and murder.

In addition to the obvious direct harm they cause, crime and violence can undermine children’s faith in adults and the social order. Chronic exposure can impede children’s development and has been related to poor academic performance and higher school dropout rates, anxiety, depression, aggression and problems with self-control.32

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**Armed conflict and children in urban areas**

Since Graça Machel's landmark *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* report was published in 1996, the international community has focused increasingly on this subject of grave concern. Millions of children have been killed, injured, orphaned or separated from their families. Millions more have been deprived of schooling in Iraq, Pakistan and other countries embroiled in armed conflict. Often, the deprivation has been worst in cities. In Tajikistan, for example, researchers have found that primary school enrolment rates remained lower in urban areas than in the countryside for years after the 1992–1998 conflict.

Although armed conflict is distinct from the quotidian violence of gangs and organized criminal activity, the two increasingly overlap. To secure resources, armed groups may become involved with criminal trafficking networks, as is the case with the drug trade in Colombia and Afghanistan and trafficking in rare minerals in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Urban gangs, most often composed of young men, can morph into militias, as was the case with the West Side Boys, who were tactically employed by combatants in Sierra Leone’s civil war of 1991–2002.

While armed conflict is not exclusive to urban areas, it is clear that an attack on a densely populated city neighbourhood – whether by government forces, rebel militias or terrorists – maximizes casualties, including among children. In some cases, civilians are deliberately targeted in order to create a greater political impact – as with explosive devices detonated in busy urban areas such as markets. In other cases, combatants claim that broader war aims justify the costs of civilian death or injury. All assaults on civilians, however, and especially those on children, are violations of international human rights law.