Living on the street exposes children to violence, yet crimes against them are rarely investigated, and few people are prepared to act in their defence. On the contrary, in the many countries and cities where vagrancy and running away from home are outlawed, children living or working on the street are often the primary victims of such criminalization. Researchers, national bodies and international human rights groups have reported that police and security forces have abused children on the streets of cities all over the world.

Children’s gender, age, ethnicity and disability status influence the extent and type of violence they experience and the coping mechanisms they develop. A 2000 study of children on the streets of Brazil’s cities showed that boys were more likely than girls to go hungry and to experience physical violence at the hands of the police. Girls were less likely to beg for money and more likely to sleep in institutions rather than on the street. Another study conducted that year indicated that girls more frequently internalize violence and are at greater risk of continuous abuse.

The problems outlined in this chapter constitute an unconscionable assault on the rights of children. The following chapters examine more closely some of the challenges and opportunities that children face in cities, and discuss initiatives that seek to improve life for children in an increasingly urban world.

### The Millennium Development Goals

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) cover a spectrum of issues, from poverty and hunger to education, child survival and maternal health, gender equality, combating HIV/AIDS and building a global partnership for development. Progress towards achieving the goals is measured against 21 specific targets.

**MDG 7** contains the commitment to ensure environmental stability. One of its urban facets, Target 11, aims to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. This is also known as the ‘Cities without Slums’ initiative. In addition to environmental concerns and a specific focus on urban slums, MDG 7 also contains a commitment to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

Although one of the targets of MDG 7 is dedicated specifically to slum dwellers, the goals should be seen as a continuum of development priorities. The lives of people in the world’s slums cannot improve substantially without concerted action to eradicate poverty and hunger (MDG 1); achieve universal primary education (MDG 2); promote gender equality and empower women (MDG 3); reduce child mortality (MDG 4); improve maternal health (MDG 5); combat HIV/AIDS (MDG 6); or create a global partnership for development (MDG 8).

Evidence suggests that national approaches to slums are improving as countries move away from negative policies such as neglect, forced eviction or involuntary resettlement towards more positive tactics such as community engagement, slum upgrading and rights-based policies. Nevertheless, the number of slum dwellers worldwide has increased by 60 million since Target 11 was established in 2000.

Slums are the physical manifestation of the urbanization of poverty. Growing numbers of urban dwellers are poor, and inequality in the urban sphere shows no signs of abating. Future international targets will have to take into account the expanding scale of the problem.