

# Creating Smart Cities

SOURMEN BAGCHI

BA NGLADESH is on the path to be a middle-income country by 2021 which is well articulated in the government's development plans for the next few years. Urbanisation has a huge potential to contribute to this vision, as it is projected that more than half of the country's population will live in cities by 2050. While this is a huge opportunity, this could also be a potential challenge in terms of access to basic services, environmental degradation and pitiable living conditions. But it seems like Bangladesh is ready to grab the opportunity, a glimpse of which was visible at the Smart City Week organised by UNDP and the Access to Information (a2i) at the Prime Minister's Office, along with other urban stakeholders, from November 29 to December 5, 2017.

As an urban reform enthusiast from India, who had the opportunity to participate in this event, I felt this was a great initiative that attempted to construct a roadmap to co-create smart cities in Bangladesh. While this is an ambitious task, from my own experience with the government of India's Smart City Mission, it is a much-needed one.

The Smart City Week brought together a diverse group of stakeholders in the urban space—policymakers, city leaders, planners, authorities, communities and students. I was part of this

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diversity and represented IPE Global, which is an international development consultancy with its roots in India. While I shared some of our experiences of working in multiple and challenging Indian cities as part of the government's Smart City Mission, there was a realisation that many of the innovations that are tried and tested in our homeland



An aerial view of a site under construction at the Gujarat International Finance Tec-City at Gandhinagar in Gujarat, India. It is part of a grand scheme to build "smart" cities that the country hopes will provide a model for its urban future.

PHOTO: REUTERS

can be dovetailed into the Bangladesh context.

One of the most attractive aspects of this Smart City Week was for people to participate, to develop a homegrown vision towards a Bangladeshi Smart City. This is important to emphasise as creating solutions that are suited to a particular social, political and

economic context is critical. Moreover, a city can only be smart if it addresses the challenges of its slum-dwellers and I think this could be a common ground for India and Bangladesh to learn and share experiences with each other.

The other point of learning for the two countries could also be the use of technology to build inclusive cities

that look after the poor and vulnerable. To me, this is the top line that defines a "smart city," its ability to look after those who are at the bottom of the pyramid.

An integrated planning approach could support in addressing the needs of the poor in our cities. IPE Global has used this integrated approach for our work; an example will be from

the State of Madhya Pradesh which is in Central India. One of the major components of this approach included creating an integrated cluster based approach to solid waste management. This resulted in significant reduction in transaction costs of solid waste management. Another integrated approach was to build and develop comprehensive water supply and sanitation system. Thirdly, integrated urban service centres were envisioned.

These centres would provide real-time data on multiple services while addressing citizen complaints and grievances in record time and with significantly reduced transaction costs. This ensured better coordination among various urban agencies like municipalities, development authorities and departments like police, transport and planning.

Cities are the centre of economic growth, innovation and empowerment. They are key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agenda 2030. It is, therefore, encouraging to see Bangladesh gearing up to take on this challenge. It is the responsibility of the development community in Bangladesh to support the government in making our cities sustainable and truly smart. Learning from best practices from around the globe would be a logical start.

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## GUN VIOLENCE IN THE US

# Thoughts and prayers are not enough

LAVINA AMBREEN AHMED

IT happened a few days back on New Year's Eve. A 16-year-old boy in New Jersey, US, killed four members of his family on December 31, just a few minutes before the brand new year dawned. He used a semiautomatic rifle to fatally shoot both of his parents, a sibling and his grandfather's partner. Yet despite the time and date of the grisly murders, the news did not shock me that much. Gun violence has become a routine occurrence in America and it's hard not to come across reports of gun-related deaths in the media almost every other day. Although I did not react to the news of the teenage murderer at first, I couldn't help thinking about the incident one day later when new details emerged. Let me explain why.

I am currently teaching a creative writing class in the undergraduate programme at Rutgers University in New Jersey. It's a core course that brings students from all academic and racial backgrounds to my class every semester. Last semester, I made my students critique articles written by the Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof on gun violence in America, in the aftermath of the Las Vegas mass shootings that left 58 people dead and more than 500 injured. Kristof made some practical recommendations on tackling the problem, taking into account that firearms cannot realistically be banned in his country because of the Second Amendment in the US Constitution.

The Second Amendment gives every American citizen the right to "keep and bear arms," a powerful constitutional right that many Americans take very seriously, even though it was adopted in 1791. My students, who are in different years of their undergraduate study, were asked to read the articles carefully and argue on the points Kristof made. Needless



Hundreds of people attend a vigil marking the one-week anniversary of the October 1 mass shooting in Las Vegas, on October 8, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS

to say, they were at first uncomfortable to discuss the issue since it was a contentious topic that often leads to heated discussions. I was prepared to hear both sides of the debate—pro-gun and anti-gun arguments—but was a bit taken aback when two of my white, male students admitted to owning guns.

Let me call them, student A and student B. Student A, who is a senior, dominated the discussion. He explained that he owns guns because he grew up with guns in his house as his father was an army veteran. He firmly believes that firearms are necessary for protection and one needs them to be prepared to fight against any potentially tyrannical government. He pointed out that things are a bit crazy right now with the US government—"anything can happen at any time!" Student A mentioned the example of Nazi Germany, and how Hitler and his

army were able to coerce the German population into obeying orders because the ordinary citizens had no weapons to fight back the despot.

On the other hand, Student B, a reserved sophomore, shared a personal story about his grandmother bravely shooting down a mugger with her own gun for self-defence when he was little. A story that he was obviously proud of and that influenced his decision to own a gun. "You never know when you might need it!" he cautioned.

The New Year's Eve quadruple murders made me reflect on my recent class discussion, mainly because my students are only a few years older than the 16-year-old perpetrator, and the gun enthusiasts in my class were introduced to guns in high school. Many interesting perspectives and arguments came up during the discussion and their writing assignment titled, "thoughts and

prayers aren't enough." But I was a bit sad to note that my students like, many Americans, have accepted gun deaths as a grim but unavoidable reality. They don't believe there is any feasible solution to this unique American problem. The majority of my students grew up with the belief that "guns don't kill, people kill," so they think that banning guns or imposing stricter regulations wouldn't work. Instead they feel, the focus should be on mental illness and keeping firearms away from those who can use them to harm others. They argued that the Islamist terrorists have resorted to using vehicles to mow down people in crowded areas, but that doesn't mean we should ban vehicles.

A catchy headline caught my attention while I was doing research on this topic. A *Newsweek* report states, "There have been more mass shootings in the US than days in

2017." Published on August 29, 2017, the report used the Gun Violence Archive as a source to point out that there have been 244 mass shootings in the first 240 days of 2017. And this report was published before the two major mass shootings in Las Vegas and Texas. Gun Violence Archive (GVA) is a non-profit dedicated to compiling the accurate number and information about firearms-related deaths in the US and is often cited as a source by American news media and politicians. The GVA defines mass shootings as an incident in which four or more people are shot and killed, not including the shooter. The report further states that until last August, the death toll from firearms was 10,223 and the number of injuries from guns was 20,530. This number rose significantly after the report came out taking into account the mass shootings that occurred in Las Vegas, Texas and other places.

There is some discrepancy about the accurate number of gun deaths

website that rates the accuracy of claims by elected officials and others who speak up in American politics, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported the day after the Las Vegas mass shooting that many news media and social media users were calling the tragedy the 273rd mass shootings in 2017.

PolitiFact pointed out that the number of deaths varies depending on the sources cited, as there is no universal definition of mass shootings. Some organisations include all shootings from bar fights to school shootings, while others are more selective when counting numbers. PolitiFact gives a clear example to explain the confusion—the non-profit, Every town for Gun Safety, counted 156 mass shootings in the US from 2009 to 2016, which is an average of 19.5 mass shootings per year.

*Washington Post* counted 131 mass shootings dating back to 1966, which is an average of less than three per year. *Washington Post* didn't count gang killings, shootings that result from robberies or murders that only involve the shooter's own family.

So, which number is accurate? PolitiFact feels that the truth is somewhere in between. No matter how broadly or narrowly mass shootings are defined and what the accurate number of gun deaths is, there is no denying that many people in the US have easy access to firearms. Whether they are psychopaths or just normal people who want to protect themselves is another matter. But one thing is for sure, the standard response after mass shootings by US politicians—"thoughts and prayers for the victims of mass shootings"—is not enough. There needs to be concrete action for change, not meaningless words.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**



**VIET THANH NGUYEN**  
Vietnamese American Novelist

*All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Fight a knight
- 6 Obscure
- 11 First letter
- 12 Happened
- 13 Rock genre
- 14 Instructional
- 15 Ready for business
- 17 Winter blanket
- 18 Deck worker
- 20 Fishing need
- 22 Bat wood
- 23 Fish groups
- 26 Note taker
- 28 Leading
- 29 Eventually
- 31 Tend the garden
- 32 Tennis star Lendl
- 33 Dispatch

**DOWN**

- 1 Traffic snarl
- 2 Corrida cheer
- 3 Very current
- 4 Form
- 5 Bit of fiction
- 6 Scrooge cry
- 7 Beach problem
- 8 Very close
- 9 Analogy words
- 10 Cat call
- 16 "Today" carrier
- 18 Physics amount
- 19 Regarding
- 21 Sailor's call
- 23 Fizzy drink
- 24 Bird on a Canadian dollar
- 25 Raced
- 27 Reno resident
- 30 Aardvark snack
- 33 Cut, in a way
- 34 Remini of TV
- 35 Friend
- 37 Hula swayers
- 39 History stretch
- 41 Reef setting
- 42 That woman

**BEETLE BAILEY**



**BY MORT WALKER**

**BABY BLUES**



**BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

**BEETLE BAILEY**



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