

Urbanization, Ethnic Diversity, and the Risk of Violence: A Case Study of China's Western Frontier

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Abstract

China launched the Marketization Reform in 1978 and the Great Western Development Campaign (*Xibu da kaifa*) in 2000, both of which boosted the urbanization process of Xinjiang, a remote inland region on China's inner Asian frontier. Urbanization is expected to enhance economic and social development, thereby consolidating national security. However, past studies on the relationship between urbanization and violence have yielded mixed results. We argue that ethnic composition of a society has a significantly conditional effect on the nexus between urbanization and stability. Using a county-level dataset of ethnic violence in Xinjiang from 1997 to 2008, our analysis confirms our theoretical expectation: in ethnically homogenous areas, urbanization reduced the likelihood of violence by improving economic welfare and public goods provisions; in ethnically heterogenous areas, the distribution of welfare and public goods along ethnic lines increased inter-ethnic grievances and the risk of violence. We present micro-level

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evidence for our causal mechanism through an analysis of the 2005 China mini-census data, which confirms that although urbanization increased overall economic welfare, its distribution was uneven, leaving marginalized members of certain ethnic groups at a disadvantage in terms of both income and health outcomes.

The foremost goals of urbanization in western China, particularly in border and ethnic autonomous regions, include upgrading industrial structures and public administration, bridging cross-regional and inter-group gaps, and strengthening state capacity and long-term stability. Xinjiang, China's remote inner Asian frontier region, has been undergoing a rapid urbanization process. Most of its urbanization has occurred in the last four decades, with the urbanization rate rising from 22 percent in 1977 to 57 percent by the end of 2021.

While the number of cities and towns in Xinjiang is limited due to its terrain and ecological conditions, oasis towns have historically been the main driving force behind economic and social development in the region. This rapid wave of geographic and demographic rural-urban transformation has improved housing, infrastructure, education, health, and income levels to an unprecedented degree. However, questions remain as to whether urbanization has achieved common prosperity and long-term stability. Multiple historical reviews, case studies, and field observations have touched upon some of the controversial impacts of urbanization in the region, including resource depletion, damage to fragile ecosystems, disruption of traditional norms, and the aggravation of social problems (e.g., alcoholism and the spread of HIV). In addition, it has exacerbated rural-urban and local-migrant disparities, as well as deepened inter-group or inter-class grievances.¹ Our study focuses on explaining the conditions under which urbanization promotes or inhibits ethnic violence.²

Past studies on urbanization and violence often present mixed evidence. For instance, urbanization is found to be conducive to conflict only in the form of political protest/demonstration, riots and strikes, but not in rebellion and other forms, based on an analysis of 70 less developed countries during 1981–1989.³ Some research has differentiated between forms of urbanization, finding that only metropolization—i.e., the high concentration of urban population and political, economic, and social institutions in the largest city—can increase the risk of conflict.⁴ Additionally,