

# Colombia's Hydra

## THE MANY FACES OF GUN VIOLENCE

Colombia has long been characterized as one of the most violent countries in the world. Violence arising from a protracted armed conflict and both organized and common crime has claimed the lives of almost half a million civilians and combatants since 1979—almost 17,600 per year—a human security crisis of extraordinary dimensions.

This chapter finds that while there is considerable heterogeneity in the nature of homicides over time and space, there is a strong contributing factor: firearms. In fact, more than 80 per cent of all homicides in Colombia since the late 1970s have been perpetrated with guns. What is more, this percentage has steadily increased—from about 60 per cent in the 1980s to more than 85 per cent in 2002.

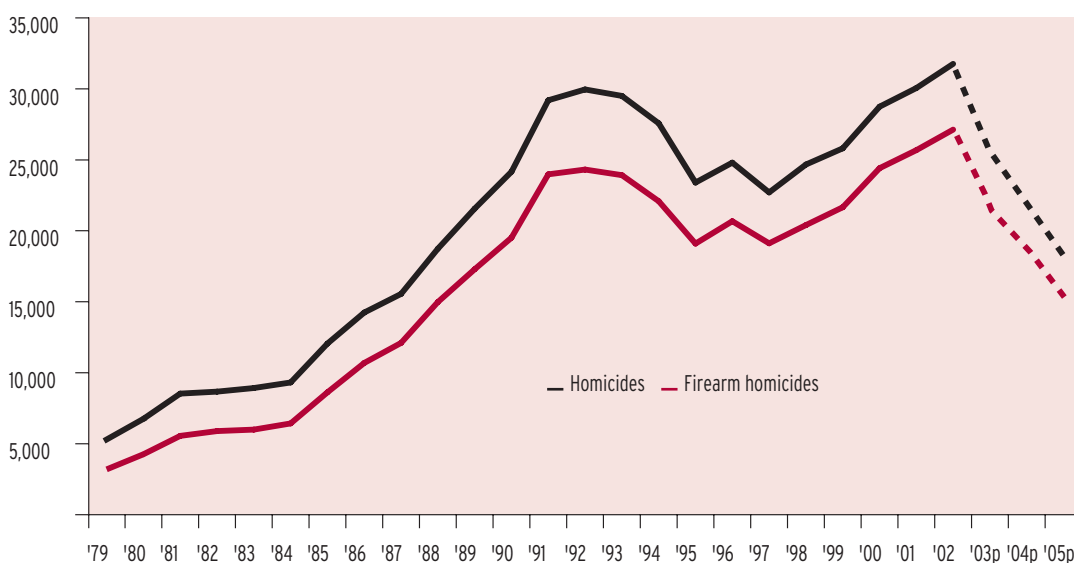
**Firearms currently account for more than 80 per cent of all homicides in Colombia, 36 per cent of all suicides, and more than 2 per cent of all accidents.**

This chapter offers the first comprehensive and evidence-based overview of the relationships between armed violence and firearms in the country. Since the early 1960s, a major contributor to human insecurity remains the armed conflict, which has pitted the government against left-wing guerrilla groups, primarily the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), as well as the right-wing paramilitary groups such as the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). There are probably more than 12 different calibres and more than 42 brands distributed in the arsenals of these non-state actors. Another factor contributing to insecurity is the deeply embedded organized and common criminal violence, much of it carried out by narco-traffickers, mafia gangs, and petty bandits.

Among the findings of this chapter are:

- There have been nearly 39,000 violent deaths due to armed conflict since 1988. The yearly average is 2,221 violent deaths, many of them concentrated in rural areas.
- Colombia experienced a significant reduction in conflict-related civilian deaths in 2003 and 2004, followed by a pronounced reversal in the first half of 2005.

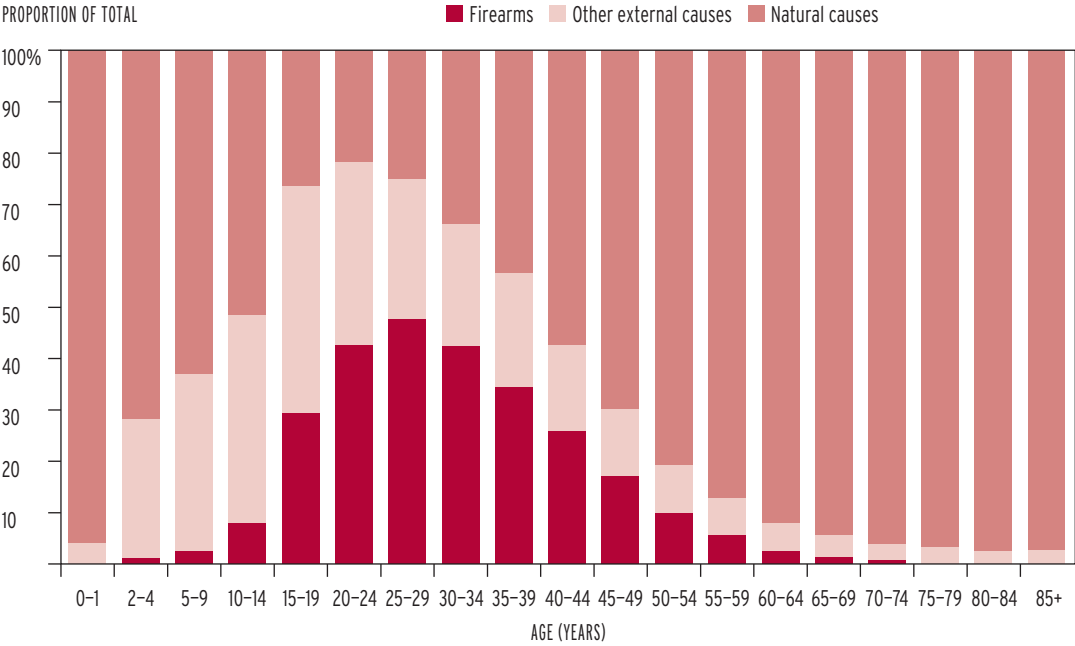
Graph 9.1 **Homicides and firearm-related homicides, 1979–2002**



**Note:** 2003, 2004, and 2005 DANE figures drawn from National Police and INML.

**Source:** DANE; processed by CERAC

Graph 9.6 Demographic distribution of firearm death, 1979–2002



Source: DANE; processed by CERAC

- There have been more than 475,000 firearm-related deaths as a result of crime and conflict violence since 1979, averaging 17,600 per year, with most deaths concentrated in urban centres.
- More than 80 per cent of all homicides are committed with firearms—with more than half of the variation in external death rates over time attributable to firearms.
- Most weapons in circulation are illegal and unregistered. The number of legally and illegally held weapons (excluding those of the state security forces) is between 2.3 million and 3.9 million, which represents an ownership rate of 5.05 to 8.42 per 100 inhabitants. Official statistics report only 1.53 firearms per 100 inhabitants, a low rate in comparison to other Latin American countries.
- Illegal right-wing paramilitaries appear to have more modern and abundant weapons stocks than left-wing guerrillas. Paramilitaries are also party to more lucrative and sustained sources of funding.
- Men suffer more than 90 per cent of all gun deaths. More than one-third of all firearm deaths are concentrated among men aged 20–29, with more than 342,000 years of productive life lost from firearm deaths since 1979.

Colombia’s legal arms market is among the most transparent and tightly regulated in the world, despite uneven enforcement. Though the chapter detects an unhealthy regulatory environment due to the state’s role in producing, selling, and regulating all firearms, it also finds that existing stocks are under fairly tight regulation.

This chapter has found that easy availability of small arms and light weapons has been a major contributor to the onset, lethality, and scale of both criminal and conflict violence in Colombia. On average, more than half of the variation over time in external death rates is significantly explained by the variation in firearm death rates. Yet despite Colombia’s severe problems there are real grounds for hope. In recent years there have been substantial reductions in homicides in several of the country’s biggest cities. Some policy initiatives that have contributed to these improvements can be replicated elsewhere and extended, not just in Colombia.

The Colombian cities of Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali have shown drastic reductions in homicide rates in recent years, with gun control being central to their success. These experiences demonstrate that gun control policy can and have yielded a substantial impact even within an overall context of rampant violence. It should be noted, however, that the reductions in violence have been achieved principally in more densely populated areas, where the state has established a strong presence. In isolated areas, the state holds little sway and the conflict continues unbridled. Conflict violence, especially pertaining to civilians, had been greatly reduced in 2003 and 2004 but many of these gains were reversed in the first half of 2005. All in all, the country’s major successes have been limited in scope. ■