

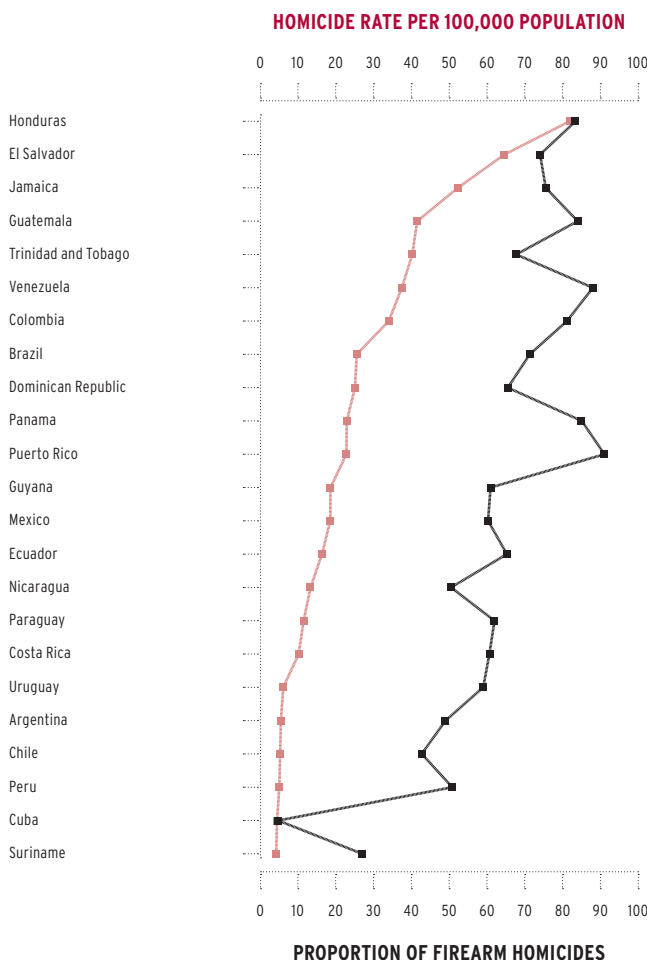
A Fatal Relationship

GUNS AND DEATHS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Armed violence is a defining problem for contemporary Latin America and the Caribbean. Not only do countries in the region show significantly higher homicide rates than countries elsewhere in the world, but many of them also have significantly higher proportions of firearm homicides than the global average of 42 per cent. Firearms were used in an average of 70 per cent of homicides in Central America, in 61 per cent in the Caribbean, and in 60 per cent in South America.

This chapter sheds light on patterns and trends in homicides and firearm homicides in Latin America and the Caribbean. It shows that higher overall homicide rates are frequently linked to higher proportions of firearm homicides. Figure 1.2 presents national homicide rates and the proportion of firearm homicides on the basis of 2010 data (or data from the latest available year) in 23 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. The countries with higher homicide rates (top of the figure) exhibit higher proportions of firearm homicides, while the countries with lower homicide rates show lower proportions. There also appears to be a link between increasing homicide rates over time and an increase in the proportion of firearm homicides. It is unclear whether firearm homicides are driving overall homicide rates or vice versa. Whatever the causality, there is clearly an important relationship between the two.

Figure 1.2 National homicide rates and proportion of firearm homicides in 23 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010 or latest available year



Source: Small Arms Survey Database

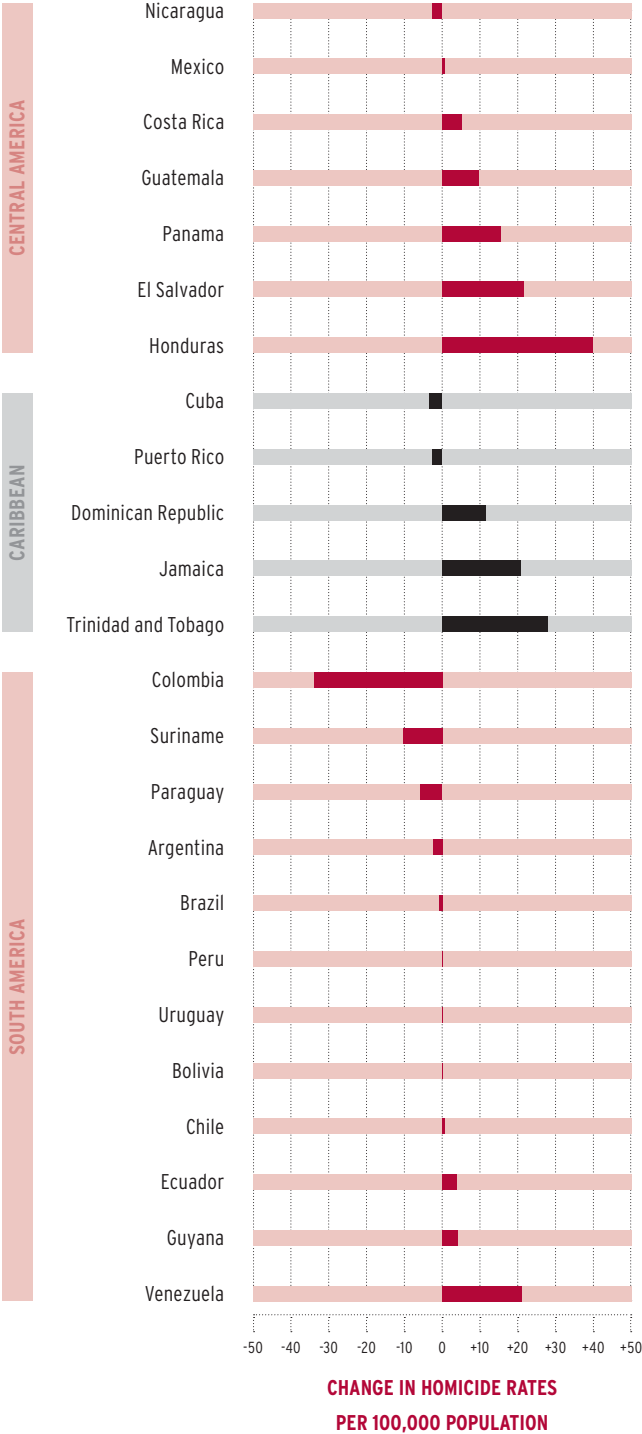
Higher overall homicide rates are frequently linked to higher proportions of firearm homicides.

In addition to higher homicide rates and higher proportions of firearm homicide in a number of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in contrast to global trends, a number of countries in the region exhibit deteriorating security situations. Available data reveals that between 2005 and 2009, homicide rates decreased in 101 countries with low and in 17 with medium homicide rates. Meanwhile, homicide rates increased mainly in countries that already suffered from high levels, including countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Figure 1.4 presents the changes in national homicide rates between 1995 and 2010 (or the earliest and latest reported year within this time period), by sub-region. It shows that, on average, more countries in the region experienced an increase than a decrease in homicides. The country with the greatest change in homicide rates between 1995 and 2010 was Honduras; between 1999 (the earliest for which data is available) and 2010, the national homicide rate rose from 42.0 to 81.9 per 100,000.

Honduras experienced the highest increase in homicides: from 42.0 per 100,000 in 1999 to 81.9 per 100,000 in 2010.

El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, and Venezuela all exhibit homicide rates of more than 30 per

Figure 1.4 Changes in national homicide rates in 24 countries in Central America, the Caribbean, and South America, 1995-2010



Source: Small Arms Survey Database

America finds that in Brazil poor stockpile security and corruption leads to widespread firearms diversion from law enforcement agencies into criminal hands.

Despite some evidence, little is known about the legal status of firearms used in armed violence in the region. Further research is needed on the underlying risk factors of armed violence, on perpetrators' access to guns, and on the legal nature of firearms in Latin America and the Caribbean. ▣

100,000, rates that have been rising since 1995, and proportions of firearm homicides above 70 per cent. In contrast, Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Peru, Suriname, and Uruguay all have homicide rates below 10 per 100,000, decreasing or stable rates since 1995, and proportions of firearm homicides below 60 per cent.

This chapter sheds light on some of the factors that may explain why the relationship between high homicides rates and the high proportion of firearm homicides is especially pronounced in certain countries—such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, and Venezuela. Research suggests that the extent to which perpetrators possess and use firearms varies according to the general availability of and obstacles to buying an illicit gun, as influenced by the presence of black markets or the ease of firearm smuggling. Possible factors of armed violence discussed in the chapter include the availability of firearms, the prevalence of youth gangs, the drug trade, and weak security systems.

The chapter further reveals that in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, pistols and revolvers are the weapons most frequently used in crimes. For example, a study on Jamaica in 2009 shows that 50.6 per cent of the 569 firearms seized after a criminal event were pistols and 21.8 per cent revolvers. Yet data on gun seizures must be interpreted with caution. It is possible that criminal groups are especially watchful of expensive weapons, which may partly explain why the police seize relatively few machine guns or assault rifles. Indeed, the literature suggests that drug-trafficking organizations are increasing their use assault rifles and machine guns. For example, a recent report reveals that, while drug-trafficking organizations in Mexico primarily used .38 mm handguns for some time, they have since developed a preference for more powerful firearms, such as the Colt AR-15 (.223-calibre assault rifle) or AK-47-pattern weapons (7.62-calibre assault rifle).

In addition, the diversion of firearms from security institutions is reportedly not uncommon. A study on state military surplus weapons and ammunition in South