

# Armed Violence: Spotlight on Lethal Effects

**A**rmed violence—the intentional use of illegitimate force (actual or threatened) with arms or explosives, against a person, group, community, or state’ (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008, p. 2)—has many harmful consequences, death being the most extreme. The reason why the number of violent deaths is frequently used as a proxy for armed violence is that killings are likely to be recorded more systematically than other crimes. Indeed, ‘[k]illing is treated seriously in all societies, which renders it more readily amenable to examination and measurement’ (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 43).

This *Research Note* is largely based on Chapter 2 of the *Global Burden of Armed Violence 2011* (GBAV 2011) report, which presents the GBAV 2011 database (Gilgen, 2011). Established by the Small Arms Survey, the database provides an overview of the number of violent deaths that took place across all settings from 2004 to 2009, revealing that 9 out of 10 violent deaths occur in non-conflict settings. The chapter sheds light on the 58 countries most affected by armed violence between 2004 and 2009 and focuses on trends in countries that exhibit the highest rates of violent deaths per capita.

## Violent deaths: an overview

The boundaries between political, criminal, and intimate or gender-based violence have become increasingly blurred. It is often difficult to determine whether politically motivated violence reflects a conflict situation. Similarly, distinguishing economically motivated from interpersonal violence (intentional homicides) is not always straightforward; violent killings may be the result of both or neither.

The GBAV 2011 database—which contains homicide data from public health and criminal justice sources as well as information on direct conflict deaths assembled by academic institutions—highlights that, on average, an estimated 526,000 people died violently each year in 2004–09. This figure includes an estimated 55,000 direct conflict deaths,<sup>1</sup> 396,000 intentional homicides, 54,000 ‘unintentional’ homicides, and 21,000 killings during legal interventions (Gilgen, 2011, p. 43). Of particular note is that the number of people dying violently in non-conflict settings is far greater than the number killed in conflicts.

## Violent death rates across: a global comparison

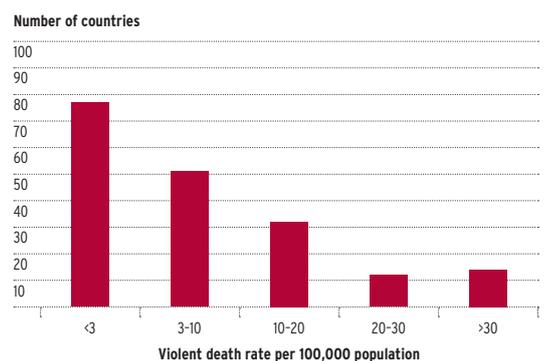
While violence experienced in wars is a regular feature of media headlines, non-conflict violence is much less visible even though it is much more prevalent. On average, about 55,000 lives were lost in conflict settings every year between 2004 and 2009; in the same period, an estimated 48,800 intentional homicides were perpetrated in Brazil alone (Gilgen, 2011, p. 52).

This *Research Note* presents a snapshot of the national distribution of violent deaths rates. In order to allow for comparisons of levels of armed violence across countries, data is presented as rates per 100,000 population.

The average annual global violent death rate between 2004 and 2009—covering only direct conflict deaths and intentional homicides—was 6.8 per 100,000. A large number of countries and territories—77 out of 186—have low rates of lethal violence, with less than 3 violent deaths per 100,000 population; another 51 show moderate rates of between 3 and 10 per 100,000 (see Figure 1). In total, 128 countries, covering approximately 82 per cent of the world population, showed low–moderate rates of violent deaths (below 10 per 100,000) (Gilgen, 2011, p. 58).

At one end of the spectrum, 14 countries exhibit violent death rates above 30 per 100,000. These countries comprise less than five per cent of the global population and account for an estimated 124,000 violent deaths annually. In other words, more than one in four deaths is concentrated in these 14 countries (Gilgen, 2011, p. 60).

**Figure 1 Distribution of violent death rates among 186 countries, per 100,000, 2004–09**



Source: Gilgen (2011, p. 58)

Figure 2 presents the geographical distribution of the 58 countries and territories with violent death rates above 10 per 100,000. These countries comprise some 1.2 billion people or roughly 18 per cent of the global population. At the same time, they account for almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of all direct conflict deaths and intentional homicides, or an estimated 285,000 people who are violently killed each year.

Only five of the 14 countries most affected by armed violence registered more than 1,000 conflict deaths in an average year (namely Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and Sudan). This indicates that the large majority of violent killings occurred in non-conflict settings. Among the top 14 countries,

seven are in Latin America or the Caribbean, namely Belize, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, and Venezuela. With a violent death rate of 61.9 per 100,000 in 2004–09, the people of El Salvador were more at risk of dying violently than any population around the world.<sup>2</sup>

Parts of sub-Saharan Africa also appear highly affected by armed violence, yet undercounting and a lack of data on intentional homicides in the region renders accurate counting and monitoring of death rates very challenging. South Africa, the country that provides the most comprehensive data in Africa, also exhibits the continent's highest violent death rate. Rankings should thus be treated with caution, as countries whose data collection

capacity is well developed may report higher death rates than states that are unable to produce accurate statistics (Gilgen, 2011, p. 57).

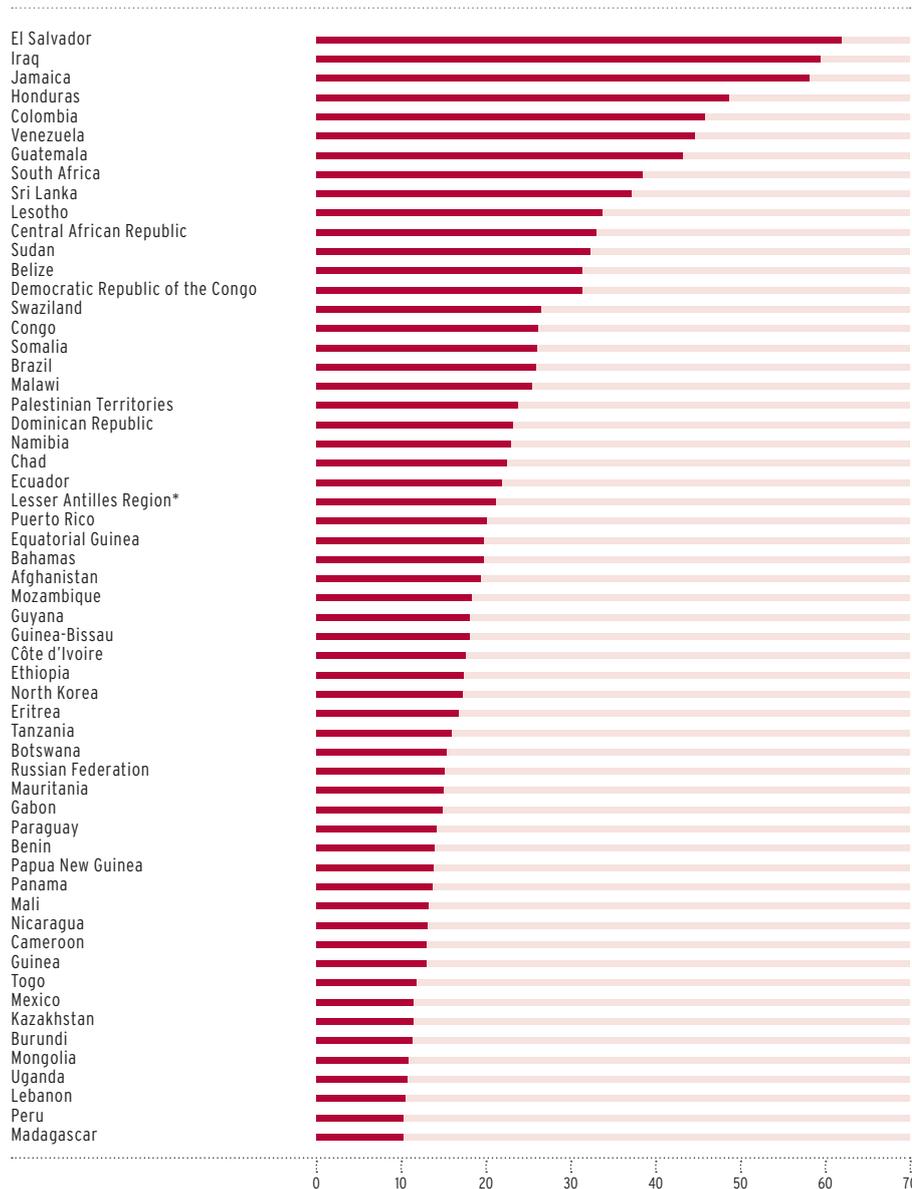
In countries that are experiencing armed conflict, undercounting of homicides is especially common since 'administrative sources typically lack the capacity to record all intentional violent deaths' (Gilgen, 2011, p. 64).

A case in point is Nepal. Among all countries in Asia, only Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, North Korea, and Sri Lanka exhibit average violent death rates above 10 per 100,000.

Despite its armed conflict, Nepal reports a violent death rate of 'only' 6.2 per 100,000 in an average year between 2004 and 2009. However, there are reasons to suspect that the homicide rate is higher than reported by Nepal's Central Bureau of Statistics, suggesting that the overall violent death rate would also be higher (Gilgen, 2011, p. 64).

At the other end of the spectrum—and with only few notable exceptions—are the countries in Europe, the Middle East, Northern Africa, Northern America, and Oceania. Among all countries and territories in these regions, only Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, the Russian Federation, and Sudan feature among the 58 countries with the highest violent death rates. It is important to note that since the GBAV 2011 database covers only the years 2004–09, it does not capture recent violent events of the Arab Spring that swept across Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia in 2011. The picture of lethal victimization in the Arab region will be dramatically different for the years 2010–12.

Figure 2 Countries and territories ranked by violent death rate per 100,000 population, 2004–09



\* Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago are grouped together to allow more robust statistical analysis

Source: Gilgen (2011, p. 53)

## Armed violence trends in the countries most affected by armed violence

Six years of data allow for some trend analysis concerning the 40 countries that exhibited violent death rates above 10 per 100,000 in any given year between 2004 and 2009.<sup>3</sup>

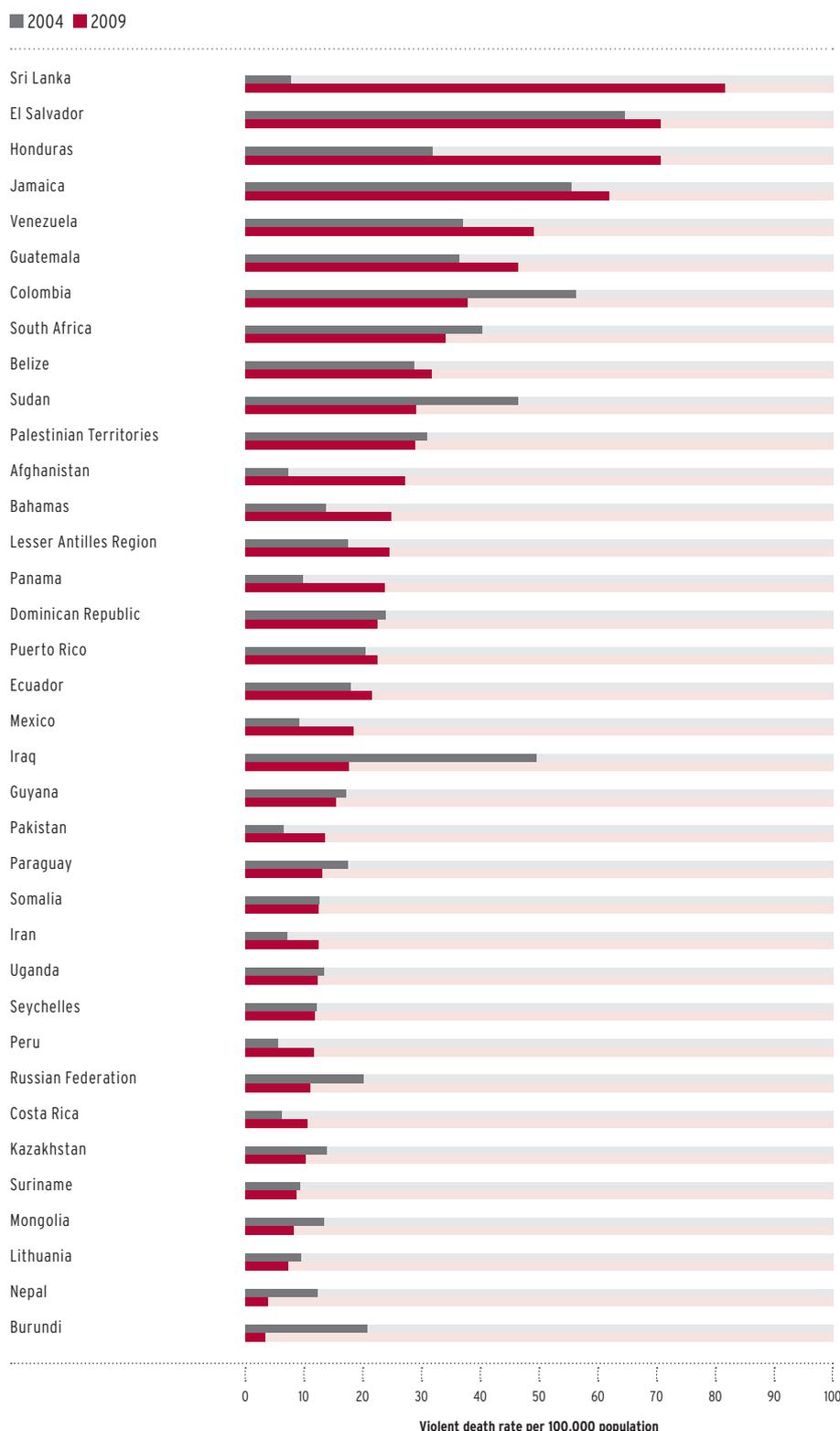
As shown in Figure 3, a number of countries had significant changes in violent death rates between 2004 and 2009, such that the ranking of countries changed over time. Sri Lanka, which experienced the highest violent death rate in 2009, also recorded the greatest

increase during the period under review, with lethal violence rates more than ten times higher in 2009 than in 2004. The increase in violent deaths was largely a function of extensive military operations in the final phase of the 26-year civil war.

Depending on the evolution of military operations, the number of direct conflict deaths can fluctuate dramatically

on an annual basis. Iraq is another example of a conflict country with very volatile trends. In 2006, Iraq experienced the most violent year, with an estimated overall violent death rate of 105.6 per 100,000. This translates into approximately 30,500 violent deaths. By 2009 the annual toll had dropped to around 5,400 people—or a rate of roughly 17.6 per 100,000 (Gilgen, 2011, p. 68).

Figure 3 Change in violent death rates per 100,000 population, 2004 and 2009



Source: Gilgen (2011, p. 67)

Significant changes in intentional homicides can also be observed in a number of non-conflict countries, especially in Central America. For example, between 2004 and 2009, violent death rates in Honduras more than doubled, from 31.9 to 70.6 per 100,000 population, and rates also increased sharply in Venezuela and Guatemala.<sup>4</sup> Worryingly, these countries already suffered from high violent death rates in 2004. Research suggests that a number of factors are behind these upward trends (see Box 1).

Some countries are witnessing declining homicide rates; while the majority have relatively low rates, there are some notable exceptions, such as Colombia and South Africa. In Colombia, the violent death rate dropped from 56.2 in 2004 to 37.9 in 2009. This drop is believed to be partly related to a set of violence reduction interventions in Colombian cities, such as the one implemented in 2005 in Medellín.<sup>5</sup> Another factor that seems to have contributed to the drop in

### Box 1 Drivers of armed violence in Central America

A United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime study points out that many countries in Central America are 'caught in the crossfire' of armed violence for a number of reasons (UNODC, 2007). A legacy of armed conflicts and violence, the easy availability of guns, unplanned urbanization, high income inequality, a lack of (legal) economic opportunities, a high proportion of (marginalized) youth, local gang structures, as well as transnational organized crime and drug trafficking all feed into a complex picture of causes and drivers of armed violence in Central America (UNODC, 2007; 2011, p. 49)

According to a recent World Bank report on crime and violence in Central America, drug trafficking is the major driver of armed violence in the region, outranking many of the other causes:

Drug trafficking stokes violence in several ways, including fighting between and within trafficking organizations, and fighting between traffickers and law enforcement officials, adding to the availability of firearms and weakening the criminal justice system by diverting judicial resources or corrupting the criminal justice system itself (World Bank, 2011, p. 11).

This finding is partly corroborated by analysis of homicide trends in Central America against the backdrop of cocaine seizures in the region. There appears to be a link between changes in cocaine trafficking flows and increased competition among drug-trafficking organizations over drug markets (UNODC, 2011, p. 51).

homicides is the 2003–04 demobilization and disarmament of the paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia), which complemented the municipal violence prevention policies.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

While casualties incurred during armed conflict often make media headlines, the number of intentional homicides far outnumbers direct conflict deaths. Moreover, many countries that exhibit high rates of armed violence are not suffering from an armed conflict, as revealed by the GBAV 2011 database.

Yet violent deaths are not only distributed unevenly across countries, but also within them. Raw statistics on violent deaths at the national level alone cannot fully explain the causes and consequences of armed violence, nor can they effectively inform appropriate violence prevention and reduction programming. Data must also be collected at the local level, since '[e]ach situation of armed violence is characterized by its own unique combination of drivers, dynamics, and effects' (Gilgen and Tracey, 2011, p. 22).

In order to provide durable solutions to the challenges of armed violence, there is a need for continued commitment to building global and national institutions that measure and monitor armed violence and collect data on violent deaths at the national and local levels. A more fine-grained analysis of context-specific risk factors and drivers of violence at the local level would also be beneficial. ■

## Notes

- 1 See Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2008, pp. 10–13) for a discussion on how conflict deaths are defined.
- 2 See, for example, Manwaring (2007); Seligson and Booth (2010); Rodgers (2009); Zinecker (2008). For an overview of the research on violence in Latin America and the Caribbean, see Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión (2011).
- 3 For these 40 countries, comprehensive longitudinal data series are available for the period 2004–09.
- 4 Despite concerns about underreporting with respect to the dramatic declines in lethal violence, countries showing marked upward trends in intentional homicides usually collect fairly robust data.
- 5 For a review of the impact of multi-institutional efforts to prevent and reduce crime and violence in urban centres in Colombia, see Aguirre and Restrepo (2010).
- 6 See Spagat (2008) and Rozema (2008).

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For more information on the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, please visit: [www.genevadeclaration.org](http://www.genevadeclaration.org).

## About the Small Arms Survey

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