



Contemporary armed violence is highly complex and dynamic. Violent actors have multiple, simultaneous, and shifting motivations, and different forms of violence are linked with each other. This chapter presents an overview of the main themes of the *Global Burden of Armed Violence 2011*, focusing on the reasons for—and challenges to—adopting an integrated approach to contemporary armed violence. Its key conclusions are that:

- The intensity and location of conflict and non-conflict armed violence has changed over recent decades.
- Conventional typologies of armed violence based on the context, intention, and type of actor have limitations for both research (data collection) and policy-making (violence prevention and reduction programmes).
- The boundaries between political, criminal, and intimate or gender-based violence have become increasingly blurred, as revealed in the cases of Iraq, Mexico, and Somalia.
- Effective violence prevention and reduction programmes and policies need to start with an integrated assessment of the scope, scale, and sources of violence and insecurity before focusing on specific drivers or manifestations of violence.

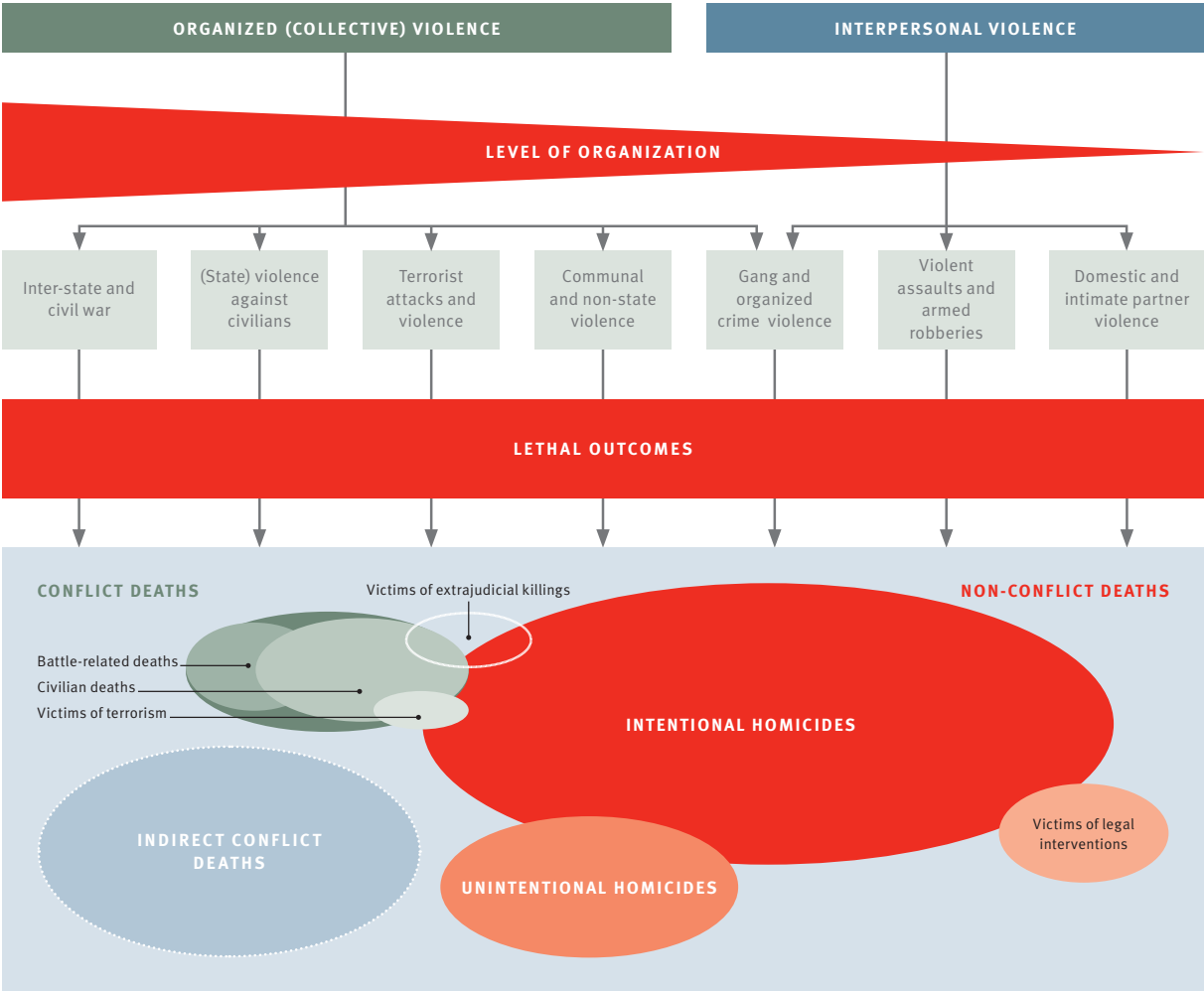
Several issues confound simple classifications and policy responses to the challenges of armed violence. The boundaries between conflict-related violence and criminal violence are increasingly difficult to discern, as demonstrated by high levels of gang violence in El Salvador and Guatemala, vigilante justice in post-war and fragile states such as Liberia and Timor-Leste, post-election violence in Kenya or Côte d'Ivoire, and high levels of urban crime in cities such as Kingston and Rio de Janeiro.

Within conflict settings, different forms of armed violence tend to appear simultaneously. In Iraq since 2003, for example, the targeting of non-combatants by insurgents, militias, and sectarian groups may seem chaotic or random, yet a closer look at underlying patterns of violence suggests that seemingly arbitrary or criminal violence may also serve the political purposes and goals of armed groups. In Somalia, pirates are entangled in local conflict dynamics, making a distinction between politically and economically motivated violence increasingly difficult. By definition, piracy is a violent act serving private economic interests, but these groups have bolstered their armaments, and local officials as well as opposing militias rely increasingly on the pirates' firepower and strength to carry out protective and predatory tasks.

PHOTO Armed Somali pirates prepare a skiff in Hobyo for future attacks, Somalia, January 2010. © Mohamed Dahir/AFP Photo



FIGURE 1.1 A framework of armed violence categories



In non-conflict settings, the activities of organized crime groups—especially the trafficking of illicit narcotics—are frequently accompanied by high levels of violence, often targeting state or local government officials. Drug cartels are locked in battle for control over the flow of narcotics while governments in countries across these regions have mobilized their armies to boost the war on drugs. In several regions of Mexico, violence and insecurity have reached extremely high levels, not unlike those typical of conflict zones.

Figure 1.1 highlights the varying levels of organization behind different types of violence and the categories often assigned to lethal consequences. For a number of reasons, exclusive reliance on such classifications and sharp distinctions can hinder our ability to develop effective practical and programmatic responses to armed violence. First, they give the misleading impression that any particular violent incident fits into one—and only one—neat box. Second, they do not explicitly recognize that armed actors may perpetrate several different forms of violence simultaneously. Third, they are not designed to show that armed violence can change from one form to another over time, depending on the fluidity of motives and capabilities of violent actors. Finally, rigid and exclusive categorizations treat different forms of armed violence as though they were self-contained within a particular system of perpetrators, victims, survivors, and conditions.

Effective policy responses should thus avoid simple classifications, instead taking into account the multiple, simultaneous, and shifting motivations of violent actors, and the links between different forms of violence. Such a unified approach should be a first step in designing armed violence prevention and reduction initiatives. 🔄