



Characteristics of Armed Violence

This chapter looks at the trends and patterns of different forms of intentional homicide, which account for three-quarters of all violent deaths. Disaggregating data by situational and geographic context is important for policy and programmatic reasons, not least because this provides details concerning characteristics of armed violence. The main findings of the chapter are:

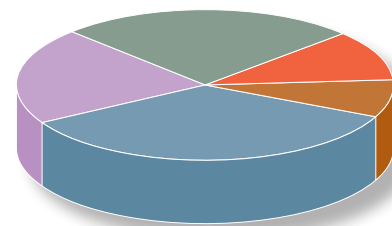
- The situational context of homicide events tends to vary according to geographical context. The proportion of homicides related to gangs or organized crime is significantly higher in countries in Central and South America than in those of Asia or Europe.
- Homicide rates related to robbery or theft tend to be higher in countries with greater income inequality, including in the Americas.
- The proportion of homicides related to intimate partners or family members represents a significant proportion of homicides in some countries in Europe and Asia.
- The relative weakness of a country’s rule of law is broadly linked with higher overall homicide rates. Yet particular challenges—such as gang activity, a history of conflict, or high income inequality—may lead to high homicide rates even in societies with comparatively strong institutions and rule of law.
- A nexus appears to exist between high homicide rates, a high proportion of homicides committed with firearms, and a low proportion of cases solved by law enforcement. Countries showing this combination of factors risk entering a spiral of increasing violence and impunity.
- Measuring the effectiveness of the criminal justice system response to homicide and crime involving armed violence requires more than a simple calculation of conviction or ‘case attrition’ rates. The deterrent effect of police and justice institutions is also linked to public perception and the quality of justice.

Analysis of the homicide context in countries with available data suggests that—in addition to overall homicide rates—the use of weapons and the situational context of lethal violence vary by geographic region. Figure 3.1 breaks down homicide by context for 26 countries in the Americas, Asia, and Europe. It highlights that countries in Asia and Europe show a comparatively high proportion of intimate or family-related homicides (around 30 per cent of total homicides). While the overall homicide rates in these regions are significantly lower than elsewhere, such as in the Americas, the high proportion of intimate or family-related homicides in many countries in Asia and Europe underlines the importance of aiming research and local violence reduction and prevention initiatives at these very forms of lethal violence. On the other hand, the proportion of intentional homicides associated with gangs and organized crime is significantly higher in Latin America countries.

Firearms play an important role in lethal violence, and a close inspection of how and how frequently they are used in homicide highlights ways to refine and focus armed violence prevention and reduction efforts. This chapter presents a review of 104 countries for which accurate data is available to demonstrate the relationship between the overall homicide rate per 100,000 population and the proportion of those homicides committed by firearm. Countries with homicide rates that exceed 20 per 100,000 population do not necessarily have a high proportion of firearm homicides. Yet of the countries where more than

FIGURE 3.1 Homicide context by geographic region

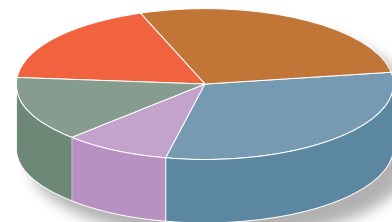
11 countries in the Americas



LEGEND:

- Gangs or organized crime (26)
- Robbery or theft (11)
- Intimate partner or family (8)
- Other (35)
- Unknown (21)

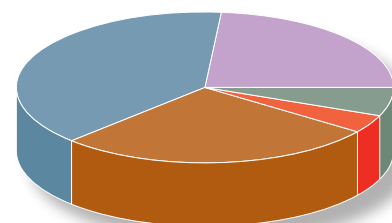
6 countries in Asia



LEGEND:

- Gangs or organized crime (14)
- Robbery or theft (18)
- Intimate partner or family (28)
- Other (31)
- Unknown (9)

9 countries in Europe



LEGEND:

- Gangs or organized crime (6)
- Robbery or theft (4)
- Intimate partner or family (27)
- Other (38)
- Unknown (23)

SOURCE: UNODC elaboration based on UNODC (n.d.a)



PHOTO Members of a citizen vigilante group patrol the streets of Barcenas, Guatemala City, September 2007.
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70 per cent of homicides are carried out by firearm, some four-fifths have homicide rates of 20 per 100,000 or higher. The percentage of firearms used in homicides is significantly higher in the Americas than in other parts of the world, and guns are increasingly the weapon of choice of gangs and groups engaged in organized crime.

The use of small arms in homicide appears to be associated with overall levels of homicide and the role of gangs and organized criminal groups. In addition, higher homicides rates are also broadly linked with poorer rule of law and weaker law enforcement performance. Law enforcement institutions, if not adequately promoted, may lack the requisite resources to fully investigate a large number of homicides; this lack of capacity can lead to a culture of impunity, limited deterrence, and further increases in levels of armed violence. Whether impunity from law enforcement drives high levels of armed violence or vice versa remains an open question; however the problem is viewed, strengthening the effectiveness of the criminal justice system represents a key entry point for armed violence reduction and an essential component of violence prevention. ↻