In recent years, lethal violence has remained firmly in the headlines. In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, for instance, violence erupted in Libya and Syria, with the latter experiencing particularly high levels of lethality ever since. Honduras, Mexico, and Venezuela have been exhibiting a high incidence of violent deaths in the face of ongoing gang and drug wars. In fact, some of the world’s highest homicide rates are found in these countries. Volatility in the levels of violence in the Central African Republic, Egypt, and Ukraine serve as reminders that episodes of great lethality can be short-lived and concentrated. Meanwhile, in many other countries around the world, enduring trends hold the promise that levels of violence may continue to drop.

This chapter analyses changes in the distribution and intensity of lethal violence by comparing newly gathered data for the period 2007–12 with data for the period 2004–09, which formed the basis of research presented in the 2011 edition of the Global Burden of Armed Violence (GBAV) (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011). Overall, global levels of lethal violence appear to be in decline; yet a closer look reveals that while most national homicide rates have been stable or decreasing over the long term, a few states have been experiencing volatile or increasing levels of violence.

Based on a detailed analysis of information in the GBAV 2014 database, this chapter presents lethal violence averages for the period 2007–12 and reviews changes in rates for the entire period for which data is available (2004–12). The chapter continues to use the ‘unified approach’ to lethal violence that was introduced in the previous edition of this report. The approach covers conflict, criminal, and interpersonal forms of violence and includes data from a large variety of sources on homicide, conflict, and other forms of violence.

In highlighting medium- and long-term changes in lethal violence as well as the most recent available figures on violent deaths, the chapter also draws attention to improvements in the collection of data. Indeed, the availability of more refined data allows for more accurate estimates and for the unpacking of patterns in lethal violence (see Box 2.2). To some extent, improvements in the collection and monitoring of national data on lethal violence for the period 2004–12 may be linked to efforts under way in the context of the post-2015 development agenda, its proposed goal on peaceful and inclusive societies, and associated targets and indicators (see Chapter One).

Like the previous edition, this report considers ‘violent deaths’ that can be directly attributed to violence in both conflict and non-conflict settings, including direct conflict deaths, intentional and unintentional homicide, and killings that occur in the context of legal interventions (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011). This chapter records data on victims of lethal injuries sustained in violent events among people, communities, groups, and states.
While this chapter focuses on the years 2007–12, it also considers significant violent death counts that were reported after the period under review, such as those related to the ongoing conflict in Syria and the recent crisis in the Central African Republic. This edition of the GBAV does not cover the issue of indirect deaths, such as those resulting from the consequences of violence, including a lack of access to medical care, clean water, or proper sanitation.²

The chapter finds that:

- At least 508,000 people died annually as a result of lethal violence in the period 2007–12, corresponding to an average rate of 7.4 persons killed per 100,000 population. This figure comprises approximately 70,000 direct conflict deaths, 377,000 intentional homicides, 42,000 unintentional homicides, and 19,000 deaths due to legal interventions.

- More than one in ten violent deaths around the world occurs in conflict settings. Intentional homicides account for nearly three out of four violent deaths in the world.

- The 18 countries with the highest violent death rates are home to a mere 4 per cent of the world’s population but account for nearly one-quarter (24 per cent) of all violent deaths in the world.

- A comparison of GBAV data for the periods 2004–09 and 2007–12 reveals reductions in the numbers of intentional homicides (from 396,000 to 377,000), unintentional homicides (from 54,000 to 42,000), and killings during legal interventions (from 21,000 to 19,000), but a significant increase in direct conflict deaths (from 55,000 to 70,000).

- In 2012, the latest year for which data is available, 37 countries exhibited lethal violence rates higher than 10 per 100,000. Only 13 of
In 2012, the countries with the highest rates of lethal violence per 100,000 were Syria (180.2), Honduras (90.4), and Venezuela (72.2).

The sub-regions most affected by lethal violence are—in decreasing order—Central America (with a rate of violent 33.6 deaths per 100,000 population), Southern Africa (31.2), the Caribbean (20.5), and South America (17.0).

The sub-regions with the greatest increase in the violent death rates per 100,000 population from 2004–09 to 2007–12 are Northern Africa (94.8 per cent increase), Central America (15.7 per cent), and Southern Africa (13.8 per cent).

Globally, firearms are used in 46.3 per cent of all homicides and in an estimated 32.3 per cent of direct conflict deaths. That means that firearms are used in 44.1 per cent of all violent deaths, or an annual average of nearly 197,000 deaths for the period 2007–12.

Central America, the Caribbean, and South America suffer from the highest firearm homicide shares (above 50 per cent) and exhibit the highest firearm homicide rates.

A global snapshot of lethal violence

As noted above, this edition of the Global Burden of Armed Violence continues to take a ‘unified approach’ to armed violence. This framework of analysis allows for the generation of an overall estimate of violent deaths at the global level and for a comprehensive update on lethal violence in both conflict and non-conflict settings.

Yet the use of GBAV data also entails a series of challenges. First, the quality of data varies across countries, especially with respect to lethal violence. These variations undoubtedly have an impact on GBAV estimates. In particular, the absence of national recording and reporting of violent deaths in many countries in Africa continues to preclude the generation of accurate estimates of lethal violence in that part of the world (see Figures 2.3 and 2.4). Second, underreporting skews data on violent deaths, especially in conflict settings, as these tend to be inaccessible. Underreporting can also be an issue in non-conflict settings, especially if public health systems do not record violent deaths as homicides. Third, variations in definitions and methods can prevent comparisons. Sources do not necessarily share one definition of ‘armed conflict’, nor do they always take the same approach to recording conflict-related casualties (see Box 2.1).

In view of the shortcomings in the data, GBAV estimates are conservative. One such estimate, based on selected sources covering the Syrian conflict, indicates that the number of lives lost in Syria between March 2011 and December 2013 was 80,000. That figure is markedly lower than the estimate of 92,000 killed by March 2013, published in a report commissioned by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (Price et al., 2013, p. 3; see Box 2.3).

Approximately 508,000 people died violently each year in the period from 2007 to 2012. This figure includes 377,000 intentional homicides (74 per cent of all the deaths), 70,000 direct conflict deaths (14 per cent), 42,000 unintentional homicides (8 per cent), and 19,000 deaths due to legal interventions (4 per cent) (see Figure 2.1).

These estimates are 3.4 per cent lower than those presented in the 2011 edition of the GBAV, which reported an average of 526,000 violent deaths annually for the period 2004–09 (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011). The overall reduction in
Box 2.1 The politics of words: defining conflict

One difficulty in estimating the full scope of lethal violence stems from the varying definitions of armed conflict. In this context, the political significance of definitions should not be underestimated. Conflict is defined differently within and across disciplines; some definitions are based on legal instruments, while others rely on numerical values, conflict resolution perspectives, or levels of intensity of fighting.

Most definitions of conflict are based on the identities of the belligerents—state or non-state—and on the intensity of the conflict, generally measured by the number of casualties (De Martino and Dönges, 2012). Conflict typologies are reviewed regularly, classifications often differ between different sources, and different types of conflicts may overlap or coincide in time (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall, 2011, pp. 10–11; Casey-Maslen, 2013, p. 6).

International humanitarian law (IHL) is also often used to categorize armed conflicts. IHL distinguishes between international armed conflicts, in which two or more states resort to the use of armed force, and non-international armed conflicts (NIACs), in which two or more conflict parties reach a ‘minimum level of intensity’ and a ‘minimum of organization’ (ICRC, 2008, p. 5). While the existence of an armed conflict is a precondition for the application of IHL, the ‘treaties [of IHL] do not set out in detail the elements necessary to determine that a situation has reached the threshold of a NIAC’ (Karimova, Giacca, and Casey-Maslen, 2013, p. 11).

Legal determinations of what constitutes a conflict govern the applicability of legal standards as well as access to international assistance and resources, but can often be politically sensitive (Alvazzi del Frate and De Martino, 2013, p. 12). Low-intensity conflicts in fragile states do not necessarily meet the requirements for classification as an NIAC to which IHL may apply, and the determination may be rejected by one (or more) conflicting parties. Instead of sustained combat or large-scale military operations, such hostilities may be intermittent, with fluctuating levels of violence (Geiß, 2009, p. 135). Apart from the IHL definitions of armed conflict, the more general notion of ‘conflict’ remains open to interpretation and encompasses a wide spectrum of situations (Karimova, Giacca, and Casey-Maslen, 2013, p. 11).

Large-n data sets often base their classifications and definitions on the overall number of casualties or ‘battle deaths’. The threshold of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) data set lies at 25 battle deaths per calendar year; the UCDP classification of ‘armed conflict’ requires at least one of the conflicting parties to be the government of a state (UCDP, n.d.c). Under certain circumstances, UCDP does not count violent deaths as battle or combat deaths despite their great number or the involvement of the state. Civilian deaths brought about by massacres, state violence against demonstrators, or combat between non-state actors fall into this category. As a result, the more than 1,000 fatalities that resulted from post-election violence in Kenya in 2007 and hundreds of lives lost during the quelling of initial Arab Spring protests in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia have not been counted as conflict deaths (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, p. 21; see Box 2.5).

Quantitative assessments of armed conflict seek to measure various aspects of actions and communication between the conflict parties. The Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, for instance, assesses the intensity of violent conflicts by analysing the use of weapons, employment of personnel, the number of casualties, the degree of destruction, and the overall numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (HIIK, 2014, pp. 8–10).

A broader ‘conflict diagnosis’ may be undertaken as part of the conflict resolution approach, which aims to identify and map out the conflict parties’ main concerns, attitudes, and strategic considerations, as well as the stages of escalation and the internal dynamics between stakeholders and conflict parties. Instead of classifying conflicts based on cut-off numbers, this approach analyses them on a continuum that reflects the risk of escalation, the difficulty of keeping a conflict under control, and the likelihood of the occurrence of violence (Glasl, 2008, p. 3; Lucade, 2012, pp. 12–13).

A sub-national focus is also reflected in some data sets and academic literature, for example in the study of the micro-dynamics of civil wars or conflicts, or in the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project (see Kalyvas, 2008; ACLED, 2014). This work often captures broader forms of armed violence beyond the legal definition of NIACs. In contrast to ‘minimum of organization’ requirements, terms such as ‘political violence’ or ‘civil conflict’ encompass ‘diverse but recurrent forms of violence between individuals and groups’ in urban settings, including ‘organized violent crime, gang warfare, terrorism, religious and sectarian rebellions, and spontaneous riots or violent protest over state failures such as poor or absent service delivery’ (Beall, Goodfellow, and Rodgers, 2013, p. 5).

Authors: Hannah Dönges and Keith Krause
Figure 2.1 Distribution of the victims of lethal violence per year, 2007–12

Direct conflict deaths:
- Battle-related deaths
- Civilian deaths
- Victims of terrorism

Unintentional homicides:
- Deaths as a result of ‘accidental’ killings (42,000)

Intentional homicides:
- Deaths as a result of interpersonal violence, gang violence, and economically motivated crimes (377,000)

Victims of legal interventions:
- Deaths of civilians by law enforcement and state security forces during legal interventions (19,000)

Note: The figure is not intended to reflect proportions.

Source: Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2014)

Figure 2.2 Changes in lethal violence by region, 2004–09 vs. 2007–12

- Homicide and conflict deaths
- Homicide only

Percentage change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americas</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2014)

violent deaths has also been observed in other relevant studies. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime notes in its Global Study on Homicide 2013 that the homicide rate declined substantially in Europe and Oceania between 2010 and 2012 (UNODC, 2014, p. 21). Similarly, the literature shows that there was a general trend of reductions in direct conflict deaths, until the high number of casualties in Syria in 2012 drove numbers upwards again (Themnér and Wallensteen, 2013, p. 510).

Although homicide rates are decreasing in many parts of the world, as discussed below, a comparison of the number of violent deaths for the periods 2004–09 and 2007–12 reveals significant regional variations (see Figure 2.2). It highlights how changes in the number of homicides can be
Box 2.2 The availability of data on violent deaths

Given that the analysis of violent deaths is highly data-dependent, the Geneva Declaration Secretariat has made ongoing efforts to broaden the scope and enhance the quality of GBAV data.

The 2008 edition of the GBAV presents sub-regional data on homicide and conflict deaths. At the time the volume was published, the database did not contain enough information to allow for disaggregation based on sex, firearms, or circumstances. Nor were national data series complete enough to be integrated into the analysis.

By the second edition of the GBAV, in 2011, the analysis had expanded to cover national data on lethal violence (intentional homicide) for 186 countries and territories as well as data on direct conflict deaths for 29 countries. Furthermore, case studies were used to assess violence not recorded in classical ‘intentional homicide’ data, such as manslaughter and killings during legal interventions. The 2011 edition also presents a first attempt at disaggregation of homicide data by sex, based on data for 111 countries.5

Data availability has improved significantly—in terms of both coverage and comprehensiveness—in the past decade. In addition to building on previous editions of the GBAV, this volume widens and deepens the scope of analysis, notably by featuring data disaggregated by sex, by mode of killing, and by sub-national unit of analysis, such as the urban level (see Chapters Three and Four).

This edition of the GBAV, which benefits from an increase in data and information on lethal violence around the globe, covers 189 countries and territories.6 A key improvement is that data is now systematically gathered at the national level in most regions of the world, with the exception of Africa (see Figures 2.3 and 2.4). A further improvement is the establishment of lethal violence data series at the national level for the period 2004–12; in addition, homicide data is available for the period 2000–12.7

The GBAV database is unique in that it combines violent deaths resulting from a wide range of causes, in both conflict and non-conflict settings. It is the only integrated database that maps changes in contemporary levels of lethal violence; it thus represents a core contribution to measuring and monitoring progress in human security around the world.

Authors: Irene Pavesi and Matthias Nowak
attenuated by, for example, an increase in direct conflict deaths, demonstrating the utility of a comprehensive approach to armed violence. In Africa, for instance, the number of homicides dropped by more than 20 per cent between the two periods; if conflict deaths are included, however, the overall reduction in lethal violence stands at only 13 per cent.

In Asia, the number of homicides increased by less than 1 per cent from one period to the next; yet when conflict deaths are included, the change in lethal violence swells to 6 per cent, largely reflecting the high number of deaths in Syria. The comparison also makes clear that the Americas experienced the greatest upsurge in lethal violence—in homicides as well as direct conflict deaths which combined increased by nearly 10 per cent.

Map 2.1 presents the global distribution of violent death rates per 100,000 population for the period 2007–12. The average global annual violent death rate is estimated at 7.4 per 100,000 population for the period under review. Reflecting a reduction in lethal violence at the global level, this average annual rate is slightly lower than the previous estimate of 7.9 deaths per 100,000 population for the period 2004–09 (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011).
Map 2.1 colour-codes countries and territories according to their average rates of lethal violence. The rates are grouped into five categories: ‘very high’ ($\geq 30.0$ violent deaths per 100,000 population), ‘high’ (20.0–29.9), ‘medium’ (10.0–19.9), ‘low’ (3.0–9.9), and ‘very low’ (3.0). Since this map employs national averages, however, it unavoidably hides significant variations within states, such as between rural and urban areas, or between central and border regions (see Chapter Four).

Nevertheless, Map 2.1 clearly illustrates where rates of violence are elevated. It shows that a few countries in Latin America and Southern Africa exhibit high and very high rates, as do conflict-affected countries in Africa and Western Asia. The countries with the highest average rates—the 18 countries with the darkest shade—account for a total of about 280 million people and an estimated 121,000 violent deaths annually. This means that countries that are home to just 4 per cent of the global population experience 24 per cent of the world’s violent deaths. In contrast, some countries have high absolute numbers of violent deaths, but very large populations. Specifically, violent deaths in Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and the United States total an average of 137,000 per year (which is equivalent to approximately 27 per cent of all violent deaths), yet the population of these six countries exceeds 3 billion people, which is almost 50 per cent of the world’s population.

Homicides continue to account for the vast majority (74 per cent) of violent deaths worldwide. In contrast, the proportion of direct conflict deaths, which stood at just over 10 per cent of all violent deaths in 2004–09, rose to 14 per cent in 2007–12, largely due to the severity of the conflicts in Syria and Libya. Selected data can further illustrate why homicides represent the mammoth share of violent deaths. Brazil and India, for example, account for an annual total of more than 86,000 violent deaths; that figure alone exceeds the global number of direct conflict deaths per year. The highest number of global direct conflict deaths per year, as registered in the GBAV database, is just over 74,000 for the year 2012.

Map 2.1 can also serve to highlight broad patterns of regional violence, such as those linked to the trafficking of drugs in Central America’s Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), where criminal groups shape levels of violence (ICG, 2014a; Sánchez, Díaz, and Nowak, 2014). Similarly, the map reflects the impact of the Arab uprisings, which began in 2011 with mass protests in Tunisia (see Box 2.5). A fact-finding report produced after the Egyptian coup estimates the protest-related death toll at more than 800 (BBC, 2011). In Syria, protests rapidly escalated into a full-blown civil war.

Figure 2.5 presents the 37 countries and territories that are most affected by lethal violence, ranked according to their violent death rates in 2012 or the latest year for which data is available. The figure shows that Syria was the most violent country in the world in 2012, with a rate of 180.2 deaths per 100,000 population. That year, violence also spread beyond Syria’s national borders; after Syrian government forces shelled a border town in Turkey, killing two women and three children, Turkey retaliated by opening fire on Syrian troops, leaving several dead (BBC, 2012). In Lebanon, tensions remain high among supporters and opponents of the Assad regime; in March 2014, related clashes in the town of Tripoli killed 11 people (Reuters, 2014). These ‘contagion effects’ in Syria’s neighbours support the finding that ‘a country is nearly twice as likely to experience an outbreak of conflict if at least one of its neighbors is involved in conflict’ (Buhaug and Gleditsch, 2008, p. 225).
Figure 2.5 Countries ranked by violent death rate per 100,000 population, 2012 or latest year available

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Rate per 100,000 Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syria*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
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<td>Venezuela</td>
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<td>Swaziland</td>
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<td>Afghanistan*</td>
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<td>El Salvador</td>
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<td>Belize</td>
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<td>Jamaica</td>
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<td>Lesotho</td>
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<td>Colombia*</td>
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<td>Guatemala</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Sudan*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Somalia*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Puerto Rico</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Iraq*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bahamas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lesser Antilles**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
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<td>Guyana</td>
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<td>Seychelles</td>
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<td>Namibia</td>
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<td>Democratic Republic of the Congo*</td>
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<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yemen*</td>
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<td>Central African Republic*</td>
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<td>Libya*</td>
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<td>Nicaragua</td>
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<td>Iran*</td>
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<td>Gabon</td>
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<td>Cape Verde</td>
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<td>Pakistan*</td>
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<td>Ethiopia*</td>
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</table>

Notes:
* Emerging from or experiencing armed conflict.
** Given the small population of the Lesser Antilles, the eight sovereign states of the region were grouped together and their rates averaged to produce a regional estimate. The countries in question are Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Source: Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2014)
At the time of writing, 13 of the 37 countries and territories in Figure 2.5 were experiencing or had recently emerged from armed conflict. Twelve of the 37 exhibited rates of 30 or more deaths per 100,000 population. Only three of these most violent countries were experiencing conflict: Afghanistan, Colombia, and Syria. The other nine countries with rates exceeding 30 per 100,000 population were in the Americas and Southern Africa, the regions with the highest increases of lethal violence since 2004 (see Figure 2.7).

**Changes in lethal violence, 2004–12**

Data for the period 2004–12 shows that lethal violence is decreasing or remaining low in most parts of the world, with the exception of Central America and Southern Africa. The data also reveals that the countries that exhibit severe levels and rates of lethal violence are the ones where violent deaths have been on the rise or have remained very high for extended periods of time. In addition, a small number of states slipped into severe crises with a high number of associated deaths.

Figure 2.6 compares the distribution of countries according to average violent death rates in the periods 2004–09 and 2007–12. Well over two-thirds of the countries witnessed rates in the ‘very low’ and ‘low’ categories (<10 violent deaths per 100,000 population). The comparison reveals that the number of countries in these categories increased from 128 to 137, and that their average violent death rates decreased slightly. At the same time, the number of countries in the ‘medium’ and ‘high’ categories (10–29.9 violent deaths per 100,000) dropped from 44 to 34 and their average violent death rate remained relatively steady. The group of countries in the ‘very high’ category (≥30 violent deaths per 100,000) increased from 14 to 18; the group’s average rate of violent deaths increased slightly.

Figure 2.6 also reveals that the majority of the countries and territories reviewed for this chapter experienced either low and relatively stable or steadily declining levels of lethal violence. Observers of long-term trends and data agree that, in general, the incidence of lethal violence is decreasing. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program, for instance, stresses the long-term decline in battle-related deaths over the past decades (Themnér and Wallensteen, 2013). Research on homicide in Europe also points to a long-term decline (Goertz et al., 2013; Gurr, 1981). Even some countries that were formerly affected by high levels of lethal violence—such as Colombia and the Russian Federation—have recently witnessed significant declines in the number of violent deaths (Aguirre and Restrepo, 2010; Lysova, Shchitov, and Pridemore, 2012).
In contrast, some countries have suffered from sustained high violent death rates. In Brazil, for example, annual homicide levels increased steadily from 14,000 deaths in 1980 to close to 50,000 deaths in 2002; since then, these levels have not varied significantly (Waiselfisz, 2013, p. 14). The relative consistency, however, hides important shifts within the country, as violence levels decreased in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, but increased dramatically in the Northeast region (see Chapter Four).

An examination of the distribution of lethal violence across sub-regions shows that the Americas and Africa suffered from the highest rates of lethal violence in both periods under review (see Figure 2.7). Central America continues to exhibit the highest rate of violent deaths, which rose from 29.0 to 33.6 per 100,000 population; the next highest rate is that of Southern Africa, which rose from 27.4 to 31.2. Rates dropped slightly in the Caribbean (from 22.4 to 20.5) and in South America (from 18.0 to 17.0); while these averages are not as elevated as those of Central America or South Africa, they are still more than twice the global average of 7.4 per 100,000.

A few major findings emerge from these comparisons. First, the Central American and Southern African violent death rates have increased, reflecting protracted instability in both regions. Honduras, in particular, endured an ongoing spiral of violence in 2004–12, although the rate of increase in homicides began to slow in 2011 (Sánchez, Díaz, and Nowak, 2014). In contrast, El Salvador witnessed a discernible drop in the homicide rate in 2012, in the wake of the highly publicized—and polarizing—gang truce (see Box 2.4). In Southern Africa, rates of lethal violence in small countries remained high and increased in 2007–12, despite a marked reduction in South Africa. The comparisons also reveal a significant increase in the levels of lethal violence in Northern Africa—from 6.7 to 13.0 per 100,000 population—particularly following upheavals and conflicts in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia (see Box 2.5).

Figure 2.8 focuses solely on countries whose average violent death rates were ‘high’ or ‘very high’ (≥20 per 100,000 people) for the period 2007–12. The figure presents the violent death rates for the years 2004 and 2012—the earliest and latest years for which the data is available in the GBAV database—as well as the average rate.
Syria is a conspicuous outlier in Figure 2.8. While the exact death toll in the Syrian conflict is highly contested (see Box 2.3), GBAV data shows that at least 39,000 people were killed in 2012 alone, which translates into a rate of

**Figure 2.8** Changes in violent death rates per 100,000 population, 2004, 2007–12, and 2012

- **Syria**
- **Honduras**
- **Venezuela**
- **Swaziland**
- **Afghanistan**
- **El Salvador**
- **Belize**
- **Jamaica**
- **Lesotho**
- **Colombia**
- **Guatemala**
- **South Africa**
- **Somalia**
- **Puerto Rico**
- **Brazil**
- **Iraq**
- **Bahamas**
- **Dominican Republic**
- **Botswana**
- **Democratic Republic of the Congo**
- **Central African Republic**
- **Libya**
- **Sudan**
- **Côte d’Ivoire**
- **Sri Lanka**

**Note:** This figure features only countries whose average violent death rate was at least 20 per 100,000 population for the period 2007–12.

**Source:** Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2014)
Box 2.3 Measuring violent deaths in Syria: a complex case

The counting of fatalities in the Syrian conflict, which began in March 2011, is both a complex and a highly politicized issue. Recording casualties is complicated not only by the country’s forbidding security situation, but also due to the increasingly fragmented nature of the conflict. Casualty figures in Syria have featured prominently in the international news media and have been the subject of contention among all the parties that take an interest in the conflict, including the international community.

In an effort to call attention to the severity of the conflict and the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis in Syria, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights commissioned the independent Human Rights Data Analysis Group to arrive at an aggregate casualty figure by compiling all known sources. While this research produced estimates that became widely used, the group’s methodology has since drawn a significant amount of scrutiny and criticism (Narwani, 2013). In response, the UN stopped releasing the casualty figures, citing issues of access and an inability to independently verify the information as the principal reasons, while also expressing concerns over the impartiality and credibility of the sources used (Heilprin, 2014).

Although there are many sources of casualty data in Syria, the international community and the media have largely relied on civil society organizations that compile casualty information from a variety of primary and secondary sources. Among these, the most prominent are the Violation Documentation Center (VDC), the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), and the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). Operating mainly as human rights organizations, they gather data on casualties to support survivors in seeking justice and as part of a future transitional justice mechanism.

Their methodologies are similar: they all rely primarily on a network of information gatherers who collect data on conflict-related deaths in the country’s various governorates and districts (see Box 1.4). These recorders gather basic information, such as the names of victims, their sex, where they died, how they died (which weapons were used), and, on occasion, additional demographic details. The information gathered by these networks is usually sent to a central database, hosted outside of Syria, where it is processed and compiled. The recorders submit reports on an almost daily basis, with the aim of being as comprehensive as possible.

Despite their similar methodologies, these organizations have differing total casualty figures (see Figures 2.9–2.11). As discussed below, the disparities are partly due to operational challenges, yet they also reflect problems related to accessing sources as well as variations in the classification of the data.

**Operational challenges.** The networks of information gatherers are rarely able to maintain complete coverage of all events taking place in the country, largely

**Figure 2.9** Total number of fatalities in Syria, May 2011–June 2014

- VDC
- SNHR
- SOHR

**Figure 2.10** Total number of ‘civilian’ fatalities in Syria, May 2011–June 2014

- VDC
- SNHR
- SOHR

**Figure 2.11** Total number of ‘combatant’ fatalities in Syria, May 2011–June 2014

- VDC
- SNHR
- SOHR

**Note:** VDC categorizes its fatalities into two sub-categories: 1) deaths of martyrs, meaning individuals who opposed the regime or supported the revolution, and 2) deaths of regime supporters, including civilians and combatants. SOHR includes Syrian Army defectors in its civilian count.

**Note:** The SOHR ‘combatant’ count includes the following categories: rebel fighters, regular soldiers and officers, non-Syrian fighters in various Islamic groups, Hezbollah fighters, popular defence committees, national defence forces, shabiha (pro-regime militias), and pro-regime informers.

**Sources for figures 2.9–2.11:** Karimi and Abdelaziz (2014); Winstanley (2012); Zenko (2013); VDC and SNHR casualty data shared with Every Casualty
because of the security risks of working in a conflict zone. In some areas, information gatherers may be cut off from electricity or Internet access for long periods of time, and thus be unable to record or share their information about violent incidents in that area.

**Uneven access to sources.** Individual information gatherers may only be accessing a limited pool of sources, such as witnesses or official documentation (death or medical certificates), especially if they are opposition activists. The use of activists as primary data gatherers may also explain why some of the opposition-aligned organizations—such as SNHR and VDC—report similar figures. Access to a wider range of sources may be the reason why SOHR’s figures are significantly different from the others. Indeed, SOHR reportedly has access to sources in the Assad government and receives information about the deaths of Syrian Army members, while the other organizations admit that this type of information is difficult to access.

**Conflicting classifications.** The varying categorizations of victims, especially in relation to their combat status, complicate assessments of casualty figures from the various organizations (see Figures 2.10 and 2.11). Their notions of who constitutes a civilian or a combatant and why are not always based on legal definitions and can thus differ greatly. Another problem is related to the frequent use of the term *shuhada* (martyr) to refer to those who have died in the name of the Syrian revolution. VDC, which is the only organization that defines ‘martyr’, uses the term to refer to anyone who was killed by Assad’s government forces. SNHR, SOHR, and VDC classify the majority of fatalities recorded in their databases as ‘martyrs’. The use of this kind of locally relevant yet highly subjective term causes additional ambiguity and can lead observers to question the impartiality of the information and even of the organizations themselves.

**Author:** Hana Salama, Every Casualty

*Photo A shell explodes in the Syrian city of Kobane, near the Turkish border, November 2014.* © Aris Messinis/AFP Photo
180.2 deaths per 100,000 population. In stark contrast, Syria’s average for the period 2007–12 is 36.3, a figure mitigated by low rates from before the outbreak of civil war in 2011. The rate for 2004 is lower still, at 2.4 deaths per 100,000.

After Syria, the three countries with the next highest violent death rates for 2012—Honduras, Venezuela, and Swaziland—all experienced increasing levels of lethal violence. In Honduras, the rate nearly tripled from 31.9 in 2004 to 90.4 in 2012; meanwhile, the number of homicides doubled from 3,200 deaths in 2007 to more than 7,000 in 2012—a rate only surpassed by the Syrian conflict deaths. Over the same period, Venezuela’s violent death rate experienced a two-fold increase, from 37.0 to 72.2 (see Figure 2.13). In Swaziland, the lethal violence rate more than doubled, from 21.4 to 49.2 deaths per 100,000 population (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2014).

Following the military coup in Honduras that deposed President Manuel Zelaya in 2009, the United States suspended counter-narcotics assistance. A ‘cocaine rush’ subsequently took shape, giving rise to struggles for the control of Honduran drug routes. The country’s ‘flow events’ shot up from 20 in 2000 to 233 in 2011, reflecting the southward shift of the battle over cocaine routes, which was partly brought about by Mexico’s drug war (UNODC, 2012, pp. 19–20). Drug trafficking is strongly associated with violence in Honduras, particularly regarding territorial disputes over routes, especially in border areas with Guatemala and ports, which are some of the most lethal areas in the world (UNODC, 2012, p. 70; ICG, 2014a). The recent upsurge in lethal violence in Honduras—where the violent death rate rose from around 70 per 100,000 in 2009 to more than 90 per 100,000 in 2012—may reflect an increase in such competition.

Dramatic improvements in security levels may also take hold in a short period of time, as was the case in El Salvador. In 2009, the country’s homicide rate had reached 71 per 100,000 population; by 2012, this figure had dropped to 41 per 100,000, following a truce between El Salvador’s two major gangs, the Mara Salvatrucha and M-18 (see Box 2.4). From 2011 to 2012 alone, the number of homicides sank by more than 40 per cent, from 4,366 to 2,567 (IMLS, 2012; 2013; Sampó and Bartolomé, 2014; see Box 2.4).

A few other countries also exhibited improvements in the period under review. In Sri Lanka, for example, lethal violence rates improved substantially following the end of the conflict in 2009, after which no further direct conflict deaths were recorded. While the average annual violent death rate for 2007–12 comprises the conflict period and thus stands at 30.4 per 100,000 population, the rate plummeted to 3.3 per 100,000 in 2012, demonstrating that peace pays significant dividends.

During the period 2004–12, Iraq also witnessed a significant reduction in lethal violence. The year 2006 was the most lethal during that period, with close to 30,000 violent deaths, followed by 2007 (Crawford, 2013, p. 3). However, in 2013 and 2014 the situation deteriorated dramatically.

Among the countries whose average lethal violence rate remained below 20 per 100,000 population for 2007–12, a few have experienced significant gains in security. In Uganda violence linked to operations of the Lord’s Resistance Army as well as to the ‘cattle wars’ in the Karamoja region decreased significantly over the period under review. In 2004, Uganda’s violent death rate stood at 12.9 per 100,000 population. Lethal violence levels reached a low in 2012 (5.5) and the average rate for the years 2004–12 was 8.5—after a peak at 12.2 deaths per 100,000 population in 2009.
Box 2.4 The gang truce in El Salvador

On 14 March 2012, Salvadorans woke up to the news that the government was negotiating a truce with El Salvador’s most prominent gangs, the Mara Salvatrucha and M-18—in exchange for a cutback in violence. Initially, government sources denied the talks were taking place, but soon it became clear that official representatives—including the security and justice minister, David Munguía—were involved (El Faro, 2012a; 2012b; Ayala Figueroa, 2013).

In view of a homicide rate that had reached 69.0 per 100,000 people in 2011, El Salvador had embarked on a bold and controversial initiative—a ‘deal with the devil’—to identify viable ways to reduce the human toll of gang wars and to address widespread security concerns (Economist, 2012; Farah, 2012; IMLS, 2013). Within a few days of the truce, daily homicide figures had dropped from 14 to 10, then to 7, and on the Monday after the transfer of gang leaders to new facilities, they plummeted to 2 (El Faro, 2012c). Within the first 100 days, Salvadoran authorities claimed that the truce had reduced deaths by 60 per cent. Soon the country had witnessed its first homicide-free day—with the security and justice minister arguing that the remaining homicides committed by gangs were according to their own ‘internal disciplinary measures’ (El Faro, 2012c; Farah, 2012; Whitfield, 2013, p. 18; see Figure 2.12).

These positive results have not been sustained, however. In December 2013, the discovery of 44 dismembered bodies in a mass grave on the outskirts of San Salvador raised a worrisome possibility: the number of recorded homicides may have decreased only because gang war tactics had shifted away from the open display of victims towards the more discreet use of disappearances (Robbins, 2014). The discovery strengthened Salvadoran groups that had opposed the truce, arguing that gangs would simply kill more clandestinely while engaging in other crimes, such as extortion and robberies (Farah, 2012; Whitfield, 2013, p. 18).

As the controversy grew, left-wing presidential candidate Salvador Sánchez Cerén refused to take a clear position on the truce, fearing political fallout; by mid-2014, he had rejected the truce as president of the country (COHA, 2014). However, gangs seemed to be increasing pressure on the government, particularly with a series of very well coordinated attacks on police patrols (Bargent, 2014). On 23 May 2014, gangs in the country announced a ‘Black Friday’ and perpetrated at least 32 killings. The most recent reports indicate that the truce may be over, but that gangs are pressuring government officials and ministries to continue negotiating (Lindo, 2014; Martínez and Sanz, 2014).

Despite the current setbacks, ‘at least 5,539 Salvadorans are alive today who would have died had the gang violence not been curtailed through dialogue and negotiation’ (Wennmann, 2014, p. 269). The complexity of the negotiation and its reception by the Salvadoran public aside, the truce in El Salvador suggests pathways for solving security issues related to organized forms of crime. For such processes to be sustainable, however, ‘they must be embedded in broader social and political transformation processes’ (Wennmann, 2014, p. 269).

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Figure 2.12 Monthly homicides in El Salvador, 2012 vs. 2013

Source: Southern Pulse (2013)
Libya had a lethal violence rate just above 3.0 per 100,000 population in 2004, and by 2012 that rate stood at 14.1. However, the country’s average rate for 2004–12 was 34.6 violent deaths per 100,000 population—due to the war, the subsequent destabilization, and high levels of violence in 2011 and 2012. At the height of the conflict in 2011, the lethal violence rate in Libya peaked at 276.5 deaths per 100,000 population. This is the highest rate of violent deaths recorded in the entire database for the period 2004–12.

Figures 2.13 and 2.14 reflect data for selected countries that experienced significant increases and decreases—more than 50 per cent in either direction—in lethal violence for the period 2004–12. These changes are not necessarily linked to conflict dynamics, as evidenced by rates of countries with no recent or ongoing armed conflict, such as Honduras and Venezuela.

In Figure 2.13, the explosive nature of the conflicts in Syria and Libya is clearly reflected in the sharp increases to 180.2 and 276.5 violent deaths per 100,000 population, respectively. Both Honduras and Venezuela display steadily growing death rates, symptoms of their security crises. In contrast, the trend lines of Afghanistan and Somalia reveal volatility, with Afghanistan suffering marked increases in the death rate while Somalia exhibits strong fluctuations.

Sudden eruptions of lethal violence are typically linked to armed conflict or episodes of political violence; they tend to lead to a rapid deterioration of the security situation and can cause a high number of violent deaths. Recent upheavals and extremist violence in Nigeria and Ukraine are telling examples of how, within a few weeks, tensions can escalate and generate large numbers of violent deaths. In Nigeria in early 2014, at least 1,500 people were killed in Boko Haram-related violence (AI, 2014). Around the same time in Ukraine, clashes in Kiev claimed 100 lives, while subsequent fighting elsewhere in the country caused as many as 5,000 deaths (Cumming-Bruce, 2014; ICG, 2014b, p. 1). In mid-2014, Israel’s Operation Protective Edge in Gaza claimed the lives of more than 2,000 Palestinians, of which an estimated 69 per cent were civilians, as well as 64 soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces (OCHA, 2014; Jerusalem Post, 2014).

In some cases, security threats remain high following initial upheavals, as has been the case in Syria. In other cases, security can improve after a peak of violence linked to conflict and political violence. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, political violence is exhibiting a ‘shift away from
large-scale armed conflict to smaller, more peripheral wars, as well as a ‘continuation of other forms of less lethal but important political violence, such as electoral violence and local violence related to access to vital resources’ (Straus, 2012, p. 201).

Unlike the countries in Figure 2.13, the ones in Figure 2.14 benefited from significant gains in human security at some point during the period under review. In some cases, these gains followed intense peaks in violence, as in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 and in Sri Lanka in 2009. In 2010–12, the rate in Iraq seems to hover just over 25 violent deaths per 100,000 population, whereas the Sri Lankan rate rapidly sinks to 3.3. Sudan’s drop in the rate of lethal violence is linked to the 2010 declaration of independence of South Sudan, which recorded annual rates of lethal violence averaging 30 deaths per 100,000 in 2010–12. Meanwhile, Sudan’s rate plummeted to less than 10 deaths per 100,000.

Although the data series covers too short a period to allow for the identification of long-term trends, lethal violence in conflict settings appears to have increased, especially in the later stages of the period under review. The rise in deaths can largely be attributed to the Arab Spring and ensuing wars in Libya and Syria (see Figure 2.16 and Box 2.5). Ongoing armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Somalia also continue to account for direct conflict deaths. The average of 70,000 direct conflict deaths annually for the period 2007–12 is thus significantly higher than the previous estimate, which stood at 55,000 (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011).

As indicated above, the rise in direct conflict deaths is attributable to the civil wars and crises in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere. In 2010, the global number of direct conflict deaths was just over 40,000, yet by 2012 this figure had almost doubled to more than 74,000 deaths (see Figure 2.15). Between 2010 and 2012, direct conflict deaths increased by approximately 85 per cent—the greatest hike in such deaths during the period under review.
Box 2.5 Violent deaths and the Arab uprisings

During the first half of 2011, uprisings and popular protest spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Protest movements and civil resistance, followed by varying reactions of governments, ‘brought about unexpected transformations on the ground’ (Burgess and Constantinou, 2013, pp. 365–67). Violent clashes between state forces and protestors have taken on different forms across the region and led to a variety of security concerns among men and women during and since the uprisings.

Initially, violent clashes between government forces and demonstrators often led to civilian deaths. These fatalities do not fit neatly into the standard data set categories of homicide or conflict deaths, partly because the killings may not meet the minimum requirements for armed conflicts (see Box 2.1).

In times of regime change, state security structures are often weakened, while political factions and security agencies may be absorbed in power struggles. Sustained collective violence is unusual during such transition periods, yet the physical security of citizens has often been threatened by transition-related conflicts (Gledhill, 2013, p. 709). Indeed, the proportion of fatalities associated with violence against civilians has been high across the Middle East and North Africa (ACLED, 2014, p. 5).

According to data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the dominant conflict events in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia have been riots and protests, while battles are most prevalent in Algeria and Libya (ACLED, 2014, p. 5).

The cases of Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia are instructive in two ways: first, in that different approaches were applied to record casualties and events and, second, in that different states of instability arose in the aftermath of the uprisings (ACLED, 2014, p. 5; see Figure 2.16).

In Tunisia, violence was initially limited and sporadic. Security forces appeared to do no more than contain the demonstrations—until it became clear that the challenge to the regime was serious (Johansson-Nogués, 2013, pp. 399–400).

In the week prior to President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali’s ousting on 14 January 2011, security forces killed at least 300 people and injured hundreds during mass demonstrations. As Amnesty International reports, many ‘protesters were shot dead by security forces using live ammunition’ (AI, 2012).

Figure 2.16 Quarterly conflict events and reported fatalities, January 2011–December 2013

Source: ACLED (2014, p. 1)
The Uppsala Conflict Data Program does not include violence perpetrated during demonstrations in its data sets, but it registers 86 fatalities that do not fit into the categories of armed conflict, state-based violence, or one-sided violence (UCDP, n.d.a). ACLED finds that “[w]hile conflict events spiked in January 2011, levels of unrest have remained much higher than their pre-uprising averages since the uprising”, noting that riots and protests made up 80 per cent of Tunisian conflict events from 2010 to 2014 (ACLED, 2014, p. 6). Despite striking instances of Salafi violence, however, such incidents have not been widespread in Tunisia (ICG, 2013, p. i).

In Egypt, the beginning of the ‘25 January Revolution’ was mostly peaceful. The army refrained from using violence against the protesters in the initial stages of the demonstrations at Tahrir Square (Johansson-Naguès, 2013, p. 400). Yet, by the end of the uprising, at least 840 people had been killed and 6,467 others injured (AI, 2011, p. 28).

As was the case in Tunisia, protest fatalities in Egypt were not included in the UCDP data sets; nevertheless, UCDP counts 316 fatalities prior to and 62 fatalities after President Hosni Mubarak’s departure (UCDP, n.d.b).

The levels of violence in Egypt were relatively low in late 2011 and throughout 2012, but marked by a sharp resurgence in 2013. Countrywide demonstrations and a growing insurgency in eastern Egypt were met with heavy military force, as reflected by a significant rise in the number of conflict events, which far exceeded those of the previous peaks in January 2011 (ACLED, 2014, p. 5). Estimates of the number of deaths in the Libyan uprising and subsequent civil war vary widely. The Libyan Transitional National Council estimated in September 2011 that at least 30,000 people had been killed in the six-month armed conflict (Haaretz, 2011). Recorded fatalities for 2011 range ‘from 12,700 to 17,800, including 5,000 to 7,000 civilians, 5,500 to 7,500 rebels and 2,200 to 3,300 Gadhafi loyalists’ (Ploughshares, 2014).

The number of conflict events and deaths between 2011 and 2013 remained below fatality levels witnessed during the NATO-led military operations. Yet they gradually increased, reflecting instability and potentially explosive dynamics not only among political and military actors, but also among local extremist groups that sought to take advantage of weak security institutions (ACLED, 2014, p. 4; McQuinn, 2013, p. 719).

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Furthermore, the updated version of the GBAV direct conflict deaths data set covers countries that had not previously recorded conflict-related fatalities. These include Libya and Egypt, where troops and pro-government armed groups opened fire and killed many people; Mali, which experienced an intervention and rebellion; Côte d’Ivoire, where post-electoral violence escalated into armed conflict; and South Sudan and Syria, where civil war erupted and intensified.

The country that suffered the highest number of direct conflict deaths in 2004–12 is Iraq, with an estimated 110,000 total fatalities. During the same period, Pakistan witnessed the second highest number of deaths: 46,000. In Syria, 44,000 people were killed between March 2011 and the end of 2012 alone; in 2013, a year not under review in this edition of the GBAV, another 36,000 people met violent deaths in Syria (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2014).

The number of conflict-related deaths in Iraq fell significantly after the upsurge in violence in 2006–07. Yet the number remained high and increased again in 2012 and 2013, such that the latter year was the deadliest in Iraq since 2008, with an estimated 8,868 deaths (7,818 civilians and 1,050 security personnel killed) (Salaheddin, 2014). In September 2013 alone, close to 1,000 people were killed in a surge of sectarian violence and due to a spillover of the Syrian conflict (BBC, 2013).

In Afghanistan, the rate of violent deaths actually began to increase in 2009, underscoring that the conflict was far from over. In particular, an increase in attacks and casualties in the Afghan military and police drove direct conflict deaths upwards (Themnér and Wallensteen, 2013, p. 512).

Other conflicts and crises erupted in 2013 and 2014, but the recording and tallying of related...
fatalities remains distinctly flawed, as evidenced by the cases of Mali and the Central African Republic. In Mali, a military coup destabilized the political landscape in early 2012 and Tuareg rebels joined forces with Islamist militants to take over the north of the country, triggering military intervention by French (and Malian) soldiers in early 2013 (Heisbourg, 2013; Théroux-Bénoni, 2013). As noted by the media, the height of the conflict was characterized by a general information black-out, during which the collection and retrieval of data on conflict-related deaths was extremely difficult (Marthoz, 2013). That lack of information is reflected in the underreporting of casualty figures for 2012, such as in the War Report 2012, which records only 212 deaths for the year—a figure that remains difficult to verify (Casey-Maslen, 2013, p. 117). The sources consulted and compiled for the GBAV database record a total of 213 deaths for Mali in 2012, which is very close to the War Report estimate (see Box 1.4).

In the Central African Republic, a coalition of rebel forces (Séléka) ousted President François Bozizé in 2013, triggering an escalation in violence. Many of the rebel fighters reportedly engaged in serious human rights violations, such as massacres and systematic rape (HRW, 2013b). After the rebel leader took over as the republic’s president and dissolved the coalition, violence levels increased again as reprisal attacks with an increasingly sectarian taint swept across the country. In a very short period of time towards the end of 2013, an estimated 400–500 people were killed (HRW, 2013a, p. 6).

Recording deaths in ongoing situations of conflict and civil unrest represents a challenging task. The data collection effort for the GBAV database intends to overcome some of the issues of updated information by integrating records from a wide range of sources.

**Firearms and lethal violence**

This edition of the *Global Burden of Armed Violence* benefits from a marked improvement in the availability of nationally recorded and reported absolute values of firearm homicides across the globe. The firearm homicide data set comprises a total of 175 countries and territories. Much of the information gathered in the GBAV database is drawn from two types of sources: 1) national-level sources, including international repositories based on national data, and 2) Global Burden of Disease and other public health estimates.

The estimates presented in this section are subject to substantial limitations as the focus of the data collection and analysis is on firearm-related homicide. Although some of the conflict-related data provides details about the use of firearms, conflict settings generally prove more difficult for the gathering of such information. Consequently, this section is based mostly on homicide data provided by national records or reports, from either public health or criminal justice sources.

It should also be borne in mind that this edition of the GBAV covers fatal events only. Due to this focus, the analysis excludes a wide range of violent events whose outcomes are not fatal, such as robberies at gunpoint and non-lethal gun-related injuries (see Box 2.6).

An analysis of the data on the mechanisms of killings reveals that firearms remain the instruments that are most widely used to commit homicides worldwide. Based on the data for the countries and territories under review, this report finds that close to half of all homicides are committed with a firearm (46.3 per cent), meaning that guns are the mechanism of violence in about 174,600 homicide cases every year. Recent research shows that sharp objects such as knives and machetes are used in about 24 per cent of all homicides,
while all other means—including blunt objects and physical force—account for an estimated third of all killings (UNODC, 2014, p. 65).

In view of a host of weaknesses in the data collection process, the above-mentioned number of annual firearm-related homicides should be treated as a conservative estimate. Many countries in the world do not produce any data on mortality or morbidity, nor do they release crime reports. As a result, these countries are not covered in the GBAV database. Meanwhile, certain countries that do publish data on homicides do not disaggregate it by mechanisms used to perpetrate killings. Still other countries publish disaggregated data, with some limitations. One example is Brazil, whose public health data for 2012 includes 1,801 homicides (roughly 3.5 per cent of all homicides) for which the mechanism has not been identified (MoH Brazil, n.d.). Similarly, records for the same year do not identify the means of killing in 126 homicide cases (roughly 5 per cent of the total) in El Salvador (IMLS, 2013, p. 7). While these figures may seem small, they can potentially add an error of 3–5 per cent in national totals.

Mis- and underreporting further weaken the reliability of data. In the public health sector, undercounting may be severe if medical staff members habitually ‘misreport the context of a death’ (Jackson and Marsh, 2011, p. 114). In Argentina, health statistics on firearm-related deaths for 2009 include 1,787 homicides and a further 1,050 firearm deaths of ‘unidentified intentionality’, meaning that the latter events—which comprise more than one-third of the total number of firearm deaths—could not be classified as suicides, accidents, or homicides (Fleitas, Lodola, and Flom, 2014, p. 15). Undercounting in public health and criminal justice statistics can thus introduce significant errors in the calculations of the global prevalence of firearm-related deaths.

As noted above, conflict settings pose their own sets of challenges to data collection. Yet although comprehensive data on firearm deaths remains elusive, some data on the mechanisms used in killing people in conflict situations is available.

Box 2.6 Beyond homicide: non-lethal firearm violence

Estimates of levels of armed violence are typically based on homicide numbers and recorded conflict deaths. Yet this approach excludes non-lethal consequences of firearm injuries, which can require treatment and recovery that ‘place a heavy burden on survivors, their families, communities, and society’ (Alvazzi del Frate and De Martino, 2013, p. 1).

Analysts use ‘case fatality rates’ to shed light on the relationship between fatal and non-fatal firearm-related incidents. The rate can be employed to provide a rough indicator of the proportion of people who do not survive a specific type of injury over a certain amount of time (Alvazzi del Frate and De Martino, 2013, p. 2). A review of data available for 26 countries and territories indicates that ‘the higher a country’s firearm homicide rate, the higher its case fatality rate for all firearm violence’ (p. 3). In other words, the higher a country’s firearm homicide rate, the higher the proportion of gunshot victims who die from their wounds.

The average global case fatality rate for intentional, non-conflict firearm injuries can be estimated using extrapolation. Based on the average case fatality rate of the 26 countries for which data on both non-lethal and fatal firearms incidents is available, the case fatality rate for all countries is approximately 48 per cent, or roughly one non-fatal injury for every homicide (Alvazzi del Frate and De Martino, 2013, p. 3). Applying this average case fatality rate to the GBAV estimate for intentional homicides (377,000) suggests that at least 754,000 non-fatal firearms injuries occur each year.

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from case studies. Analysis of this data shows that the share and role of firearms are highly dependent on the context and nature of a conflict, including the types of armed actors, their access to materiel, the capacity of weaponry used, and the fighting strategy employed.

The Lebanon war, for example, was conducted largely via airstrikes and shelling, which is reflected in the low proportion of firearm deaths recorded in 2006; only 5 of 1,109 deaths—less than one-half of 1 per cent—were due to firearms (HRW, 2007, pp. 172–78). In Gulu province, Uganda, however, 168 of 397 deaths—more than 40 per cent—resulted from gunshots in the period 1994–99 (Kreutz and Marsh, 2011, p. 51). These Ugandan figures and data from other selected case studies listed in Table 2.1 suggest that close to one-third of all direct conflict deaths around the world are firearm-related.

For the period 2007–12, this edition of the GBAV estimates that almost 197,000 violent deaths—or 44.1 per cent of all violent deaths—were caused by firearms every year. This figure comprises 174,600 firearm-related homicides (46.3 per cent of all homicides) and 22,380 firearm-related direct conflict deaths (32.3 per cent of all direct conflict deaths). The global firearm death rate for the period was thus 3.0 per 100,000 population (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2014).

Yet these global figures hide significant sub-regional and national variations. Figure 2.17 shows regional variations for 2007–12. In Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Eastern Asia, and Oceania, for instance, only about 10 per cent or less of all homicides were firearm-related—a very low proportion compared to those of other sub-regions. Even in Western Europe, which is among the sub-regions with the lowest homicide rates in the world, 26 per cent of homicides were firearm-related. In Southern Europe that rate stood at 40 per cent, the highest in all European sub-regions, despite its low firearm homicide rate of 0.6 per 100,000 population (see Figure 2.17).

**Table 2.1** Estimated firearm deaths in conflict settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Total deaths</th>
<th>Firearm deaths</th>
<th>Firearm deaths as a share of total deaths (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syria (child victims only; 30 months of the war, 2011–14)</td>
<td>10,586</td>
<td>2,806</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq (2012)</td>
<td>4,594</td>
<td>1,624</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia (1991–92)</td>
<td>4,339</td>
<td>1,463</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various conflicts (June–October 2004)*</td>
<td>1,364</td>
<td>1,165</td>
<td>85.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulu province, Uganda (1994–99)</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon (2006)</td>
<td>1,109</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>22,389</td>
<td>7,231</td>
<td><strong>32.3</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** * The ‘various conflicts’ took place in Aceh, Algeria, Burundi, Chechnya, Colombia, Côte d’Ivoire, Nepal, and Uganda.

**Sources:** ICRC (1999, p. 10); Iraq Body Count (n.d.); Kreutz and Marsh (2011, p. 51); Kuzman et al. (1993); ORG (2013); Wille and Krause (2005)
At the other end of the spectrum, all the sub-regions of the Americas exhibit high firearm homicide rates as well as high proportions of homicides committed with firearms. In South America, which has a firearm homicide rate of 10.3 per 100,000 population, 52.7 per cent of homicides are firearm-related. In the Caribbean and in Central America, where the firearm homicide rates are 22.5 and 28.8 per 100,000 population, 65.0 and 69.0 per cent of homicides are committed with firearms, respectively. It should be kept in mind that the Americas is the region that experienced the greatest increase in lethal violence over the period under review (see Figure 2.2). In some countries where firearm homicide rates are low, notably in Southern Europe, Northern Africa, and South-eastern Asia, high proportions of homicides are firearm-related. Yet in no sub-region that exhibits a high firearm homicide rate is only a small proportion of homicides firearm-related.

Figure 2.17 highlights that the proportion of homicides committed with firearms and the severity of firearm homicide rates are not necessarily linked, although they seem correlated in the Latin American and Caribbean regions. Indeed, data for those two regions suggests that the greater the homicide rate, the greater the share of homicides committed with firearms (Gilgen, 2012).

Additional regional variations emerge with regard to homicide contexts and the use of firearms. For example, gang and organized crime-related homicides are more frequent in the Americas, where the share of homicides perpetrated with firearms is also high. In contrast, in Europe the most common context for homicides is intimate partner- or family-related violence, with a somewhat lower share of firearms use (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011, pp. 90–93). This comparison may indicate that firearms are an important instrument in violence associated with gangs and organized crime groups. It also underscores that an understanding of country-specific contexts of lethal violence is key to assessing the relative risk that stems from the presence of firearms.

The country ranking presented in Figure 2.18 is based exclusively on national reports of firearm homicides. The figure shows the 20 countries and territories that report an average firearm homicide rate of at least 3.0 per 100,000 people for the period 2007–12 (equal to or above the average global firearm-related violent death rate); the other countries and territories with available national data sources exhibit firearm homicide rates below that threshold. Since only a limited number of countries disaggregate data based on the means used to commit homicide, Figure 2.18 excludes...
many parts of the world, especially countries in Africa and Asia. The fact that Latin American and Caribbean states provide quality data that is readily available may in part explain why they feature more prominently than other countries whose violence levels also appear to be high but whose data on the mechanisms used in homicide is scarce.

In total, 18 of the 20 countries in Figure 2.18 are located in Latin America and the Caribbean. The remaining two countries are South Africa (with a firearm homicide rate of 16.5 per 100,000 population) and the United States (with a rate of 3.1 per 100,000 population).
Box 2.7 Knives and lethal violence

The mortality associated with the use of knives and other bladed weapons, such as scissors or a broken bottle, is measured on the basis of crime and health statistics.

Firearms represent the offensive weapon most commonly used to perpetrate violent acts in large parts of the Americas. In 2012 in Honduras, firearms represented the leading mechanism used in causing violent deaths, while blades were responsible for only 9 per cent of cases (IUDPAS, 2013, p. 3). In the same period in the United States, 12 per cent of murders were committed with knives or sharp instruments, while 69 per cent were carried out with a firearm (FBI, 2012).

In regions outside of the Americas, such as Europe, Asia, and Oceania, bladed weapons are used to commit a large proportion of killings. In the United Kingdom in 2012–13, for instance, more than one-third of all homicide cases involved sharp instruments, which represented the main method used to kill both men and women (Home Office, 2014, fig 2.3). Specifically, sharp instruments accounted for 35.2 per cent of male victims and 39.3 per cent of female victims in the period 2010–11 (Berman, 2012).

Recent crime statistics from Scotland suggest that sharp objects are used to kill about half of all victims of lethal violence in the country; in contrast, firearms are used in less than 2 per cent of cases. In total, sharp instruments were used to kill 23 men and 3 women in 2012–13, while a firearm was used to kill only 1 man (Scotland, 2013). In Australia in 2011, murderers used knives to kill almost half (47 per cent) of all their victims; the use of firearms in the commission of a murder was about half that rate, or 24 per cent (AIC, 2013, p. 17).

While the Western media may have devoted much attention to mass killings involving firearms, mass stabbings continue to take place, particularly in China (BBC, 2014; Hilal et al., 2014). Further research into the role of knives in lethal violence is necessary to understand their contribution to the global burden of violent deaths.

Author: Irene Pavesi
Based on the data available for this review, Honduras had both the highest average rate of lethal violence for the period 2007–12 (73.4 deaths per 100,000 population) and the highest firearm homicide rate for the same period (60.1 per 100,000 population).

The category of non-firearm homicides comprises incidents involving the use of other instruments, such as those referred to as ‘bladed weapons’, which include knives and other sharp objects, such as broken glass. The United Kingdom is one country in which these instruments are of particular relevance (see Box 2.7).

Figure 2.19 correlates homicide rates with the proportion of firearm homicides for 175 countries and territories for which data is available. The location of each point in the graph is determined by a country’s average annual homicide rate per 100,000 population and by the percentage of homicides committed with firearms during the period 2007–12.

As discussed below, correlations are a contested area of research. Nevertheless, Figure 2.19 shows a clustering of data points. First, numerous data points are grouped together tightly in the bottom left corner of the graph—where both the homicide rates and the proportion of homicides committed with firearms are low. Many of these data points represent countries in Western and Northern Europe, regions characterized by

**Figure 2.19** Average annual homicide rate per 100,000 population and percentage of homicides committed with firearms for 175 countries and territories, 2007–12

*Source:* Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2014)
such low rates. Another group of data points seems to run parallel to the trend line, above it, in the direction of increasing homicide rates and shares of homicides committed with firearms. Many of these data points represent Latin American and Caribbean countries, where such elevated rates are not unusual (Gilgen, 2012).

Yet some groups of data points do not fit neatly into either of these two categories. The data points in the top left corner, for example, represent countries where large percentages of homicides are perpetrated with firearms while homicide rates are low or very low. In these countries, the use of a firearm in one or several homicide cases can dramatically drive up the proportion of homicides committed with firearms. In 2007 and 2008, for example, the Maldives and Montenegro each registered five cases of homicide, respectively, all of which were committed with a firearm.

Near the centre of the graph area, a bit below the trend line, a few data points represent countries where the homicide rate is very high (≥30 deaths per 100,000) but fewer than 60 per cent of homicides are committed with firearms. These data points correspond to countries in the Southern African region—Lesotho, South Africa, and Swaziland—and show a relatively high incidence of violence with a relatively low involvement of firearms as the mechanism of violence used. Indeed, South African Police Service data consistently shows that at most 50 per cent of homicides are committed with firearms. The National Injury Mortality Surveillance System offers a hint as to why; its data indicates that 42 per cent of violent deaths are caused by sharp objects, although it should be noted that the data provides coverage below the national level (Jaynes, 2012, pp. 136–37).

Any links between homicide rates and the proportion of homicides perpetrated with firearms seem to be weak as the homicide rates drop below 20 per 100,000 population. Conversely, the links appear stronger as the rate increases above 30 per 100,000; in highly affected countries, a greater proportion of homicides are committed with firearms.

As mentioned above, efforts to link violent deaths to the accessibility of firearms remain contested. The debate around this relationship can be organized into three broad research approaches. The first revolves around the accessibility question, testing the hypothesis that easy access to firearms increases or deters violence. The second focuses on the substitution question, asking whether actors would seek other means or tools of violence in the absence of firearms (Florquin and Wille, 2004, p. 182). A third approach involves assessing the effects of firearms legislation, such as the introduction of more restrictive laws and controls, on access to firearms and armed violence (Aguirre and Restrepo, 2010).

While an exploration of the debate is beyond the scope of this chapter, a review of the literature suggests that while there does appear to be a link between access to firearms and homicide rates, the causality of the correlation is difficult to establish. Studies are hampered by limited access to disaggregated data, especially on firearms holdings and accessibility, and by insufficient information about access to illicit firearms. Yet recent assessments of the impact of firearms legislation indicate with relative confidence that environments that suffer from high rates of lethal violence are responsive to legislative changes. Specifically, the Disarmament Statute in Brazil and a gun-carrying ban in Colombia have ushered in decreases in the rate of firearm homicides and overall levels of homicides (Cerqueira and Pinho de Mello, 2014; Restrepo and Villa, 2011).
In contrast, attempts to identify relationships between firearm violence and firearm possession through cross-national comparisons have yielded inconclusive results. Possession rates are comparatively low in Latin America, even with estimates on illicit firearms holdings taken into consideration: in 2007, these rates stood at 4.7 per 100 persons in the Caribbean, 6.8 in Central America, and 12.1 in South America. The possession rate in Western Europe is much higher at 24.9 per 100, yet the homicide rate is considerably lower than in Latin America (Gilgen, 2012, p. 32). In this context the United States appears as an anomaly: although it has the highest possession rate in the world (88.8 firearms per 100 persons), its homicide levels are relatively low—although they are very high when compared to those of European countries with similar income levels (Karp, 2007).

**Conclusion**

The availability of quality data on lethal violence is increasing, as revealed by the data available for the period 2004–12. Not only does that tendency facilitate more refined analyses and more accurate estimates, but it should also serve to enhance efforts to measure and monitor progress towards a goal for achieving peaceful and inclusive societies within the post-2015 development framework.

The data shows that in most parts of the world lethal violence is either decreasing, or low and stable, as reflected in a slight decrease in the average global number of violent deaths per year, which dropped from 526,000 for the period 2004–09 to 508,000 for 2007–12. The majority of countries and territories—137 of the 189 under review—exhibit very low or low rates of lethal violence (below 10 deaths per 100,000 population). Among these countries, the average rate of lethal violence is decreasing, confirming that already low levels of violence are continuing to fall.

Improvements in security levels are also apparent in countries that were previously affected by high or very high levels of violence (20 or more deaths per 100,000 population). Specifically, the past decade has seen marked reductions in the rates and levels of lethal violence in Colombia, the Russian Federation, and South Africa. Yet other countries, such as Brazil, have maintained high levels of lethal violence over extended periods of time.

Still other parts of the world have experienced severe volatility in terms of lethal violence. In Syria and Libya, relatively sudden eruptions of lethal violence resulted in high numbers of direct conflict deaths—the only category of violent deaths that registered an increase in the period under review. Meanwhile, lethal violence rates in some countries that are not experiencing armed conflict—such as Honduras and Venezuela—have been rising, reaching levels characteristic of countries at war. Although the 18 countries with the highest violent death rates in 2007–12 account for only 4 per cent of the global population, they witnessed almost one-quarter of the lethal violence in the world.

For a country that has experienced repeated cycles of violence, the escape to a ‘virtuous cycle’ may require complex, time-consuming steps to build resilience. As the *World Development Report 2011* highlights, such steps include restoring confidence in collective action, transforming the institutions that provide security, and reducing the risk that external stresses can pose to the process (World Bank, 2011, p. 103). A thorough understanding of the factors that drive lethal violence is essential in these types of structural
processes, especially if the risk of renewed conflict or violence is high. Gains in security can sometimes be obtained swiftly, as was the case in several Eastern Europe states, whose crime and violence levels dropped significantly following tumultuous transitions to democracy (Stamatel, 2012).

Most violent deaths in the world continue to occur outside settings of armed conflicts. The findings presented in this chapter build a strong case for stepping up the media coverage, monitoring, and analysis of lethal violence in so-called ‘peaceful’ settings, not least to better inform policy-making and programming at the national, regional, and international levels. At the same time, policy approaches should be adjusted if results prove less than promising, as has been the case in Mexico, where policies to prevent and reduce the impact of organized crime and gangs still rely heavily on the militarization of security (Moloeznik, 2013).

A better understanding of the role firearms play in lethal violence around the world—especially in areas affected by very high violent death rates—requires further disaggregation of data, and thus enhanced data gathering and recording practices. That better understanding is key to informing policies designed to ensure that the global violent death rate will continue to decline. ☝️

### List of abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACLED</td>
<td>Armed Conflict Location &amp; Event Data Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>GBAV</td>
<td>Global Burden of Armed Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IHL</td>
<td>International humanitaran law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIAC</td>
<td>Non-international armed conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>SNHR</td>
<td>Syrian Network for Human Rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOHR</td>
<td>Syrian Observatory for Human Rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCDP</td>
<td>Uppsala Conflict Data Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>VDC</td>
<td>Violation Documentation Center</td>
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### Endnotes

1. For a full presentation of the ‘unified approach’, see Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2011, pp. 44–51).
2. The GBAV 2008 finds that for each direct conflict death, there are at least four indirect conflict deaths in contemporary armed conflicts (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008, p. 32).
3. For details on the sources used in the GBAV database, see the online methodological annexe at www.genevadeclaration.org.
4. A ‘minimum level of intensity’ can be reached when the hostilities in a conflict are collective in nature, or when the government uses military force, instead of the police, against insurgents. To meet the ‘minimum of organization’, non-governmental groups involved in the conflict must possess armed forces under a command structure that can sustain military operations (ICRC, 2008, p. 3).
5. For details, see Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2012).
6. The GBAV database covers 201 countries and territories. Since countries in the Lesser Antilles and Micronesia have populations below 100,000, however, this study counts each of these regions as one ‘country’; this chapter thus discusses a total of 189 countries and territories. For details, see the online methodological annexe at www.genevadeclaration.org.
7. For additional information on the GBAV database, sources, and the availability of data, see the online methodological annexe at www.genevadeclaration.org.
8. The 18 countries are, in decreasing order of violent death rates, Honduras, El Salvador, Venezuela, Jamaica, Libya, Swaziland, Guatemala, Colombia, Somalia, Lesotho, Iraq, Belize, Syria, Côte d’Ivoire, Afghanistan, South Africa, South Sudan, and Sri Lanka.
9. For the period under review, the conflict deaths database registers 35 ‘focus countries’ as experiencing armed conflict or a severe crisis that results in a high number of deaths. For details, see the online methodological annexe at www.genevadeclaration.org.
10. The GBAV database contains information on firearm homicides for 183 countries and territories, including the Lesser Antilles region, which is counted as one ‘country’. For more details, see the online methodological annexe at www.genevadeclaration.org.
11. For the Global Burden of Disease firearms-related violent deaths database, see IHME (n.d.).
12. The proportion of such crime is not negligible. Research demonstrates that 4.9 per cent of the entire population of Latin America and the Caribbean have been victims of robberies involving firearms (Fleitas, Lodola, and Flom, 2014, p. 9).
See, for example, Aguirre and Restrepo (2010); Cerqueira and Pinho de Mello (2014); Florquin and Wille (2004); Jackson and Marsh (2011); Killias and Markwalder (2012); and Restrepo and Villa (2011).

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