

Not Taking Aim: the Tragedy of Stray Bullets in Colombia

The proliferation and misuse of firearms continues to take an onerous toll on Colombia, particularly in urban conglomerations. Yet amongst the victims of gun violence, one in particular is often overlooked: he or she hit by the stray bullet. Though blind, stray bullets disproportionately affect the innocent. Adding a cruel insult to injury, they are the most unjust form of gun violence in the country.

Following media reports and social networks, CERAC has been monitoring the incidence of stray bullets in Colombia for some time. The following pages report its most recent findings, some of whose major points lie below:

- ❖ Stray bullets continue to destroy lives: in 2013 alone there were 95 victims, 32 of whom were fatal
- ❖ 2013 saw a 59% decrease in deaths from stray bullets on the previous year, compared with a 1.6% increase in overall homicides through September 2013 on the first 9 months in 2012
- ❖ An increasingly random pattern: women and children are a larger percentage of victims each year. In 2013, 55 victims were under 18 and 47 were women
- ❖ Urban disputes amongst organized criminal groups and youth gangs continue to be the primary context in which stray bullets take lives
- ❖ Criminal investigations and conviction rates continue to be extremely low.

The toll of stray bullets

Between January 1990 and November 2013, there were **2969 registered victims** of stray bullets throughout the country. Of these, **27.5% (818)** suffered **fatal wounds** while another **72.5% (2148)** suffered **non-lethal** injuries.

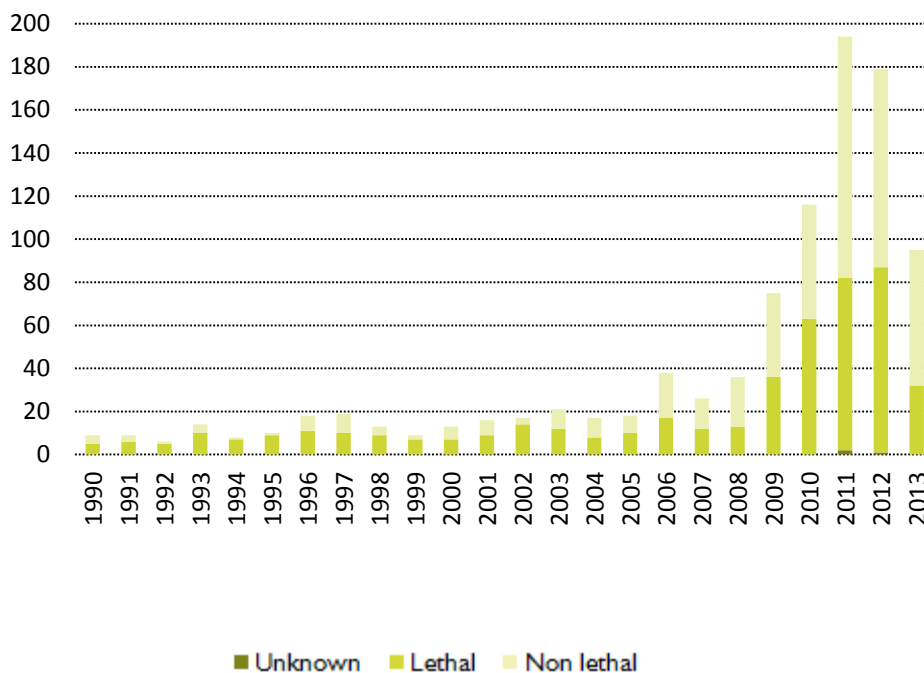
Over the course of **2013**, there have been **95 registered victims** of stray bullets, **34%** (32) of whom were **lethal** and **66%** (63) of whom were **non-lethal** – a **38% decrease** on the previous year. In turn, the percentage of those who died as a result of a stray bullet fell by **59%**.

A stray bullet is defined as any bullet intentionally fired resulting in the death or injury of someone other than the shooter’s intended target

An analysis of the victims of armed violence

Whereas the national homicide rate has steadily decreased in the past decade (from 23,523 in 2003 to 14,594 in 2012), the number of stray bullet incidents increased until 2010 – when it peaked – before significantly coming back down in the past three years.

Graph I. Lethality of stray bullets between 1990 and 2013 (as compiled by CERAC)



Source: The Colombian stray bullet database by CERAC

The Deadly Injustice of Stray Bullets

A closer look at the data shows how deadly unjust stray bullets can be. Affecting men and women, old and young alike in equal measure, stray bullets show no favorites and spare none: neither age nor gender offer cover of any sort.

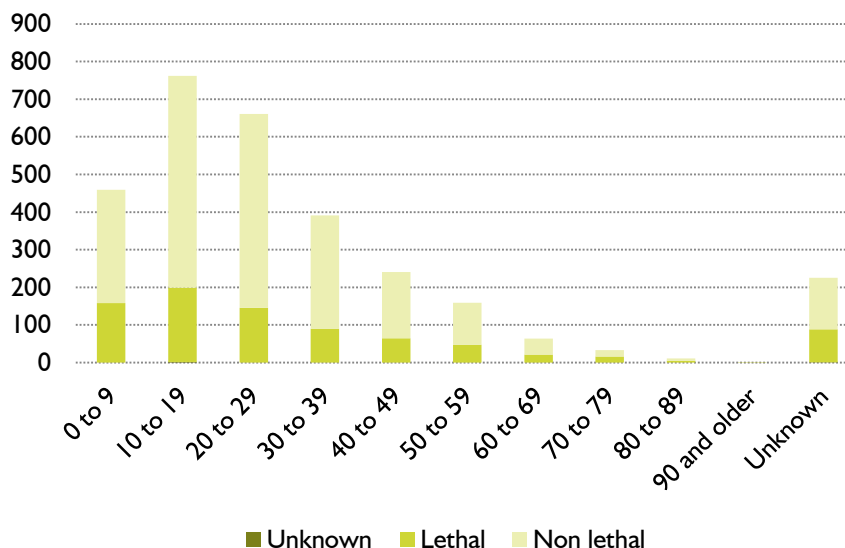
Since 1990, **men** have accounted for 61% (1814) of registered **victims** of stray bullets, and **women** 38% (1124). In the course of 2013, however, women were struck by stray bullets on **55** occasions (**58%**), compared to **39** for men (**41%**). This represents a 9.2% increase on the percentage of women affected in 2012 and a 7% decrease for men. Compare this with the fact that, on average, women only account for 8% of homicides in Colombia per year.

Minors' general inability to protect themselves is thought to be one of the principle factors behind their vulnerability to stray bullets. Since 1990, they have been the victims in 35% (1095) of stray bullet cases on record. In 2013, they accounted for **49%** of victims (47 cases), a **30%** decrease on the percentage of minors who were victimized the previous year (**not sure what we mean by victimized in this case**).

According to records of the past 23 years, the largest concentration of victims, whether lethal or not, has been in the 10-19 and 20-29 age groups.

Graph 2 shows stray bullet victims, whether lethal or not, as divided by age since 1990. As previously mentioned, those between **10 and 29 years of age** have been the **primary victims** of stray bullets during this period.

Graph 2. Victims of stray bullets by age group



Source: The Colombian stray bullet database by CERAC, integrated with National Police database

A geographical analysis of stray bullets and their victims

Victims of stray bullets have been recorded in 31 departments and 295 municipalities throughout the country. Since 1990, Valle del Cauca (708), Antioquia (499) and Atlántico (402) have witnessed the greatest amount of incidents.

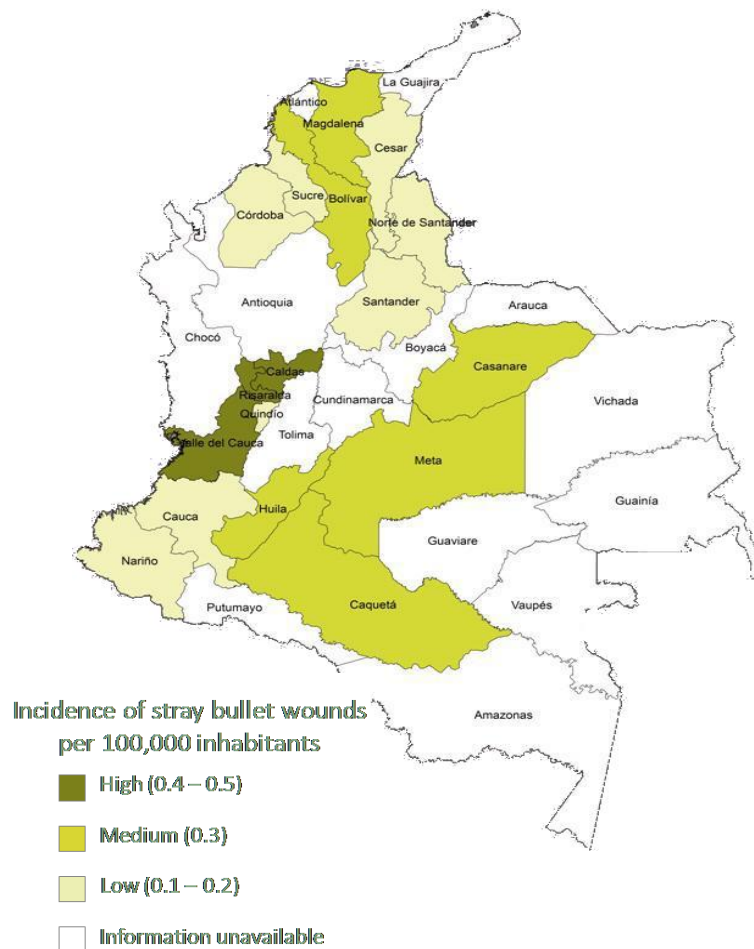
Over the course of 2013, the departments that recorded the highest rate of stray bullet incidents were Caldas and Bogotá DC. Each of the latter had a rate of 0.5 stray bullet victims per 100,000 inhabitants, whereas departments like Nariño, Cauca, Cesar, Sucre and Córdoba only had rates of 0.1 per 100,000 inhabitants.

The municipalities that recorded the highest rates of stray bullets per capita in 2013 were San Luis (Antioquia), with a rate of 9 victims per 100,000 inhabitants; Toro (Valle del Cauca) with 6 victims per 100,000 inhabitants; and San Martín (Meta) with 5 victims per 100,000 inhabitants. It should also be noted that none of these

municipalities had registered any victims of stray bullets during the previous three years.

The municipalities with the lowest incidence of stray bullet casualties were Bogotá, with a rate of 0.1 victims per 100,000 inhabitants, Valledupar (Cesar) and Pasto (Nariño) – each of which had 0.2 victims per 100,000 inhabitants. Compared with figures from 2012, Bogotá and Valledupar alike showed significant decreases in 2013.

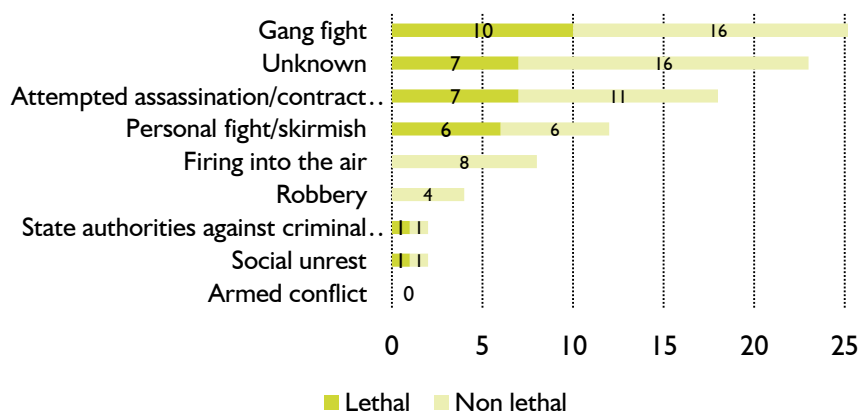
Image 1. Incidence of stray bullet wound per 100,000 inhabitants



Stray bullets in context: who pulls the trigger?

Apart from variables such as age, gender and geography, it is important to note the context in which stray bullets are most likely to pose a threat. In 2013, **gang fights** were the most common circumstances in which victims were injured or killed by stray bullets, at 27% of all recorded cases (26 in total and 10 of which were fatal). After gang fights, **botched assassinations and contract killings** were the most common cause of stray bullet casualties, with 18 cases (20%), followed by **civilian fights and scuffles**, with 12 cases (13%). It should be noted that sources do not always report the context in which stray bullets injure or kill; in 2013 alone, 24% of all registered cases (23) had no such information.

Graph 3. Stray bullets in context (as compiled by CERAC and the National Police)



Source: The Colombian stray bullet database by CERAC, integrated with National Police database

By now it should be clear that stray bullet incidents are all too often the result of organized crime: territorial struggles, revenge killings, extortion and contract killings are but several examples. Though multiple studies in other countries attribute the majority of stray bullet casualties to “celebration shots” (New Years, for example) and other instances of glibly firing a shot off into the air, the Colombian case is quite different. In 2013, celebration shots only accounted for 8% (8) of incidents involving stray bullets.

As for those pulling the trigger, records show them belonging to the following groups: 29% were criminals (28 cases), 23% were paramilitaries (22 cases), 18% were civilians and 2% were National Police (2 cases). However, in 27% of the cases the guilty party was never identified. Compared with figures from 2012, the percentage of shooters that were common criminals declined by 65%, whereas those belonging to the civilian population increased by 30%.

From 1990 through November 2013, the percentage of cases in which the shooter remains unknown has hovered around 80% (2393). Nonetheless, records kept since the beginning of 2013 regarding the background and characteristics of the shooter showed similar trends. For example, individuals belonging to criminal rings came out on top at 11.8% of cases (351), followed by civilians at 4% (116) and the FARC (26), neo-paramilitaries (25) and National Police (22) at 1% a piece. That being said, one must always keep in mind that a high percentage of stray bullet incidents remain shrouded in mystery, and that identifying the shooter or group he or she belongs to is often very difficult.

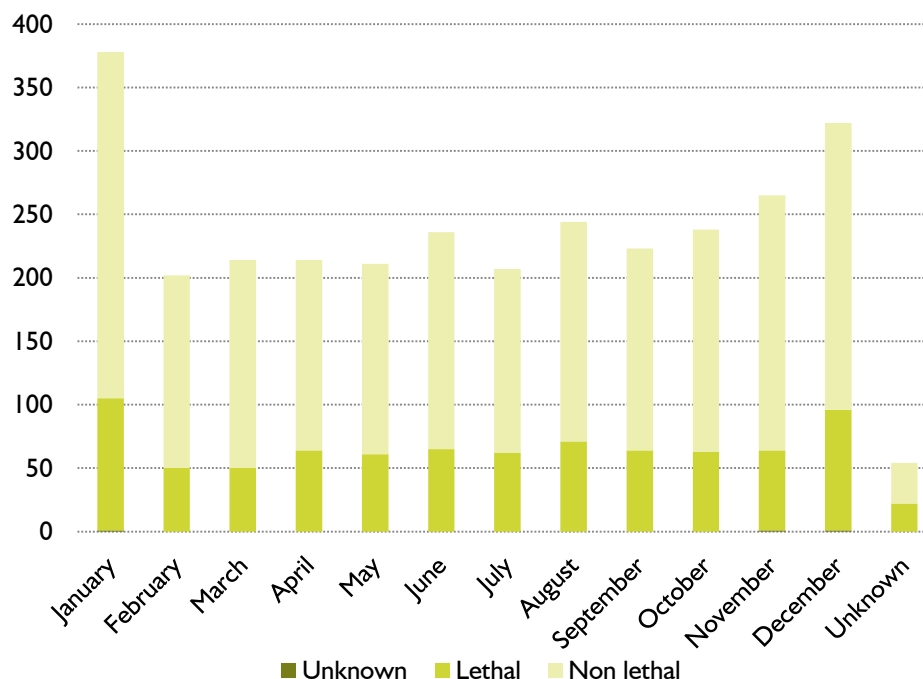
Finally, a depressing note on which to conclude. Over the course of 2013, only 14% of stray bullet cases have been investigated and only 9% (8) of shooters have been detained. In 6% (6) of cases the shooter has remained unknown. Moreover, according to the sources of this report, information regarding criminal investigations or judicial proceedings is lacking in 67% (64) of cases.

What time of year are people hit by stray bullets?

Compiling the data on stray bullet incidents per month from 1990 through November 2012, January comes out as the bloodiest month with 13% of total cases (377). Close behind is December with 11% of cases (325) and November with 9% (264).

Graph 4 represents the above discrepancy of total victims per month between 1990 and November 2013. As mentioned, January is considerably more violent than the bulk of the other months, whose stray bullet incidence remains more or less constant.

Graph 4: Stray bullet victims on a month-to-month basis from 1990 to November 2013



The increase in violence during these months is thought to be related to two factors. On the one hand, the various holidays and celebrations (Christmas, New Years and extended vacation time for much of the country’s population); on the other hand, the marked uptake in alcohol consumption and relative purchasing power that accompany the holidays. Both of these factors exacerbate the incidence of violence when firearms enter the picture.

This does not, however, mean that stray bullets are strictly related to “celebration shots” or fighting brought about by an increase in alcohol consumption. The consistently high levels of victims of stray bullets during the rest of the year are proof enough of that.

Stray bullets the result of deeper societal problems

One of the single easiest ways to limit the incidence of innocent casualties from stray bullets would be to better regulate the civilian possession of firearms. In addition to promoting a culture of

peaceful conflict resolution, the need to regulate the right (or simply ability) to possess, carry and purchase firearms has to become a primary objective of anyone seeking to reduce or prevent injury and death from stray bullets.

Stray bullet victims' registry in Colombia

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Stray bullet victims' registry in Colombia

The Armed Violence and Development line of research at the Conflict Analysis Resource Center (CERAC) has an ongoing project to keep an extensive record to measure and study the phenomenon of stray bullets within Colombia. To do so, its researchers have built an extensive database of material from the press and the National Police – the very first of its kind in Colombia.

CERAC have been able to conduct this project thanks to the support of our longterm partner the Small Arms Survey, (seek description on web). We gratefully acknowledge this support.

While the database has figures dating to 1929, it is far more comprehensive from 1990 onward. Having said that, data from the National Police is only available until 2011; any information from the past two years has been exclusively found by CERAC's own research team.

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CERAC
CONFLICT ANALYSIS RESOURCE CENTER

The Conflict Analysis Resource Centre (CERAC) is a private and independent non-governmental research center, specialized in the study of conflict and armed conflict.

CERAC seeks to contribute to the promotion of development, the reduction of violence and its negative impact, and the cessation of violent conflict. We do so through the production of knowledge and information based on verifiable empirical evidence and high theoretical and methodological standards; the development of methods, technologies and innovation; incidence in public and private politics; and the formation of qualified human resources.



The Small Arms Survey is an independent research Project located at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. The Survey sponsors field research and information-gathering efforts, especially in affected states and regions.