

Press Release

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475,000 PEOPLE KILLED BY FIREARMS IN COLOMBIA

Colombia suffers one of the highest levels of armed violence in the world, although there have been significant improvements since 2002. Between 1979 and 2005 more than 475,000 people were killed by the use of firearms through crime, organized and petty, and the ongoing conflict. Most victims have been young men.

These findings are revealed in a report produced by CERAC—the Conflict Analysis Resource Center—and the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey. The authors of the study are Katherine Aguirre (CERAC), Robert Muggah (Small Arms Survey), Michael Spagat (Royal Holloway, University of London), and Jorge Restrepo (Universidad Javeriana).

The report concentrates on measuring the impact of armed violence on human security. It also describes the production, trade, use, and trafficking of arms in Colombia and the regulatory framework in the country.

Human insecurity

The WHO reports that in 2000 the primary cause of death worldwide was ischemic heart disease (12%) while homicide was in the twenty second place (0.9%). Alarming, small arms and light weapons are the first cause of death in Colombia: firearm deaths, 92% of which were homicides, account for 14% of total deaths in 2000.

This large impact of firearms has grown considerably over the last 25 years: from 3% of total deaths in 1979, when detailed records began, to a peak of 15% in 2002. The variation in total deaths follows the variation in firearm deaths very closely.

Civil conflict and criminal violence

While the civil conflict occupies much of the international attention devoted to Colombia by the media and analysts, the main threat to human security is actually posed by criminal violence, both organized and common. The civil conflict has claimed just over 38,800 persons since 1988, whereas the total number of firearm deaths since 1979 reaches 475,000.

There is a sharp contrast in the locations of conflict versus criminal deaths; conflict deaths occur predominantly in rural and isolated areas whereas criminal deaths are concentrated in urban areas.

Illegal right-wing paramilitary groups, currently disarming as part of a negotiation with the government, have been the most vicious

- **One in ten Colombians dies by firearms, 93% of them are men**
- **76% of firearm killings occur in urban areas**
- **80% of homicides are committed with firearms**
- **Colombia has 700,000 registered firearms and 2.4 million illegal guns**
- **Since 1988, 39,000 people have died due to the conflict**
- **1 out of 20 Colombian males born in the year 1985 could expect to die from a firearm.**

faction in the civil conflict. They are responsible for most of the civilian deaths and generate a high ratio of killings to injuries, indicating strong intentionality in their killing. The paramilitaries are also much better armed than the guerrillas.

Conflict firearms use

The country's various non-state armed groups possess a wide range of weaponry. There are probably more than 12 different calibres and more than 42 brands distributed among the arsenals of the non-state actors.

It is significant that the paramilitaries have acquired and deployed better weapons than the guerrillas. This distinction—one that is not yet properly appreciated in discussions of Colombia's armed conflict—implies that paramilitary groups are both wealthier and better connected internationally and domestically than guerrilla groups. In fact, while the paramilitaries have been actively procuring modern military technology on the international market, the guerrillas have settled for cheaper, and even home-made, weapons.

The illegal drug business is to a large extent a mirror image of the gun trafficking business, with guns flowing into the

country and drugs flowing out. The paramilitary gun premium, expensive to maintain, suggests that the paramilitaries participate more deeply in the lucrative narcotics trade than do the guerrillas. Moreover, recent evidence from the demobilization process suggests especially strong paramilitary participation in the international transport and distribution phases of the drug business. This inference reinforces a difficult-to-prove perception among some analysts that the paramilitaries are bigger and more successful narco-traffickers than the guerrillas. It also demonstrates graphically and unequivocally the utility of examining violence through the lens of small arms.

Demographic and economic impact

Firearms were associated with the loss of some 350,000 potential years of life (PYLLs) among Colombian males in the year 1985 alone. 1 out of 20 Colombian males born in the year 1985 could expect to die from a firearm.

More than one-third of all firearm deaths are concentrated among men aged 20–29. On average, Colombian men born in 2002 lose 40 months of life due to firearms violence. Women, in contrast, give up only four months of life expectancy due to firearms.

How many guns?

In comparison with neighbouring countries, Colombia actually exhibits a low level of firearm ownership. The reason for this is twofold: the Colombian state enforces strong regulation on civilian arms possession while non-state conflict groups and organized crime exert tight control over the criminal market for guns. CERAC and the Small Arms Survey estimate that roughly 4 million guns are held in Colombia. About 2.4 million of these are illegal. State security forces have up to a million guns of various types. Colombia also issued 706,210 holding and carrying permits as of mid-2005. With an estimated population of more than 46 million, the 2005 figure indicates an ownership rate of about 5 to 8 guns per 100 inhabitants. This compares to a figure of about 12 to 16 per 100 inhabitants in Argentina.

Unique regulation

Colombia has a unique regulatory system, with the Constitution mandating state ownership of all guns. Colombia's legal arms market is among the most transparent and tightly regulated in the world, despite uneven enforcement.

The Ministry of Defence controls both the agency that regulates and registers guns and the country's monopoly gun producer. This is a potentially unhealthy regulatory environment that is fraught with conflicts of interest. In particular, these current arrangements can create a situation whereby

licensing requirements could be relaxed to enable certain weapons sales that should otherwise be blocked. While no systematic malfeasance has come to light, the separation of production and commercialization on the one hand and regulation on the other could avoid potential conflicts of interest and properly align incentives.

Grounds for hope

Firearms of various calibres are the primary tool of those who murder, kidnap, and forcibly displace in Colombia. This report has found that easy availability of small arms and light weapons has been a major contributor to the onset, lethality, and scale of both criminal and conflict violence in Colombia. On average, more than half of the variation over time in external death rates is significantly explained by the variation in firearm death rates. Yet despite Colombia's severe problems there are real grounds for hope. In recent years there have been substantial reductions in homicides in several of the country's biggest cities. Some of the policy initiatives that have contributed to these improvements can be replicated elsewhere and extended, not just in Colombia.

The Colombian cities of Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali have shown drastic reductions in homicide rates in recent years, with gun control being central to their success. These experiences demonstrate that gun control policy can produce and has yielded a substantial impact even within an overall context of rampant violence. It should be noted, however, that the reductions in violence have been achieved principally in more densely populated areas, where the state has established a strong presence. In isolated areas, the state holds little sway and the conflict continues unbridled. Conflict violence, especially pertaining to civilians, had been greatly reduced in 2003 and 2004, but many of these gains were reversed in the first half of 2005. All in all, the country's major successes have been limited in scope.

Future progress depends largely on Colombia's paramilitaries, who have been the main perpetrators of conflict violence against civilians in recent years. The country could look forward to a future much less violent than its past if the paramilitaries can be successfully demobilized and their criminal activity kept in check. If, instead, the paramilitaries transition from a mixture of counterinsurgency and criminality into pure criminality, Colombian violence could reach new heights. Paramilitary DDR is, therefore, critical and should become a major focus of international attention.

The report can be downloaded from:
<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/copublications.htm>

The Conflict Analysis Resource Center (CERAC) is a private research organization specialized in data-intensive studies of conflict and criminal violence. We investigate the spatial and temporal dynamics of violence from a variety of methodological perspectives, with a strong focus on human impact.

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