

# Firearms and Violence in Honduras

More than 42,000 people have been violently killed in Honduras over the past nine years. In 80 per cent of cases the weapon used was a firearm.<sup>1</sup> To explain this, analysts and the media point randomly to the political instability and polarization of the country, the level of corruption in the police and state institutions, and the climate of terror created by gangs and organized crime. Comprehensive solutions based on solid empirical evidence, however, are not yet available.

This Research Note is based on a scoping assessment of armed violence in Honduras.<sup>2</sup> It summarizes and briefly unpacks specific characteristics of armed violence in the country and explores some of the key questions that need to be asked. As such, it provides a basis on which work and research can draw to design responses to Honduras's challenges by answering the following questions:<sup>3</sup>

- What kind of knowledge is needed to tackle the spiralling violence in Honduras?
- How can actors be mobilized more effectively to influence policy responses to violence?

## Firearms homicides

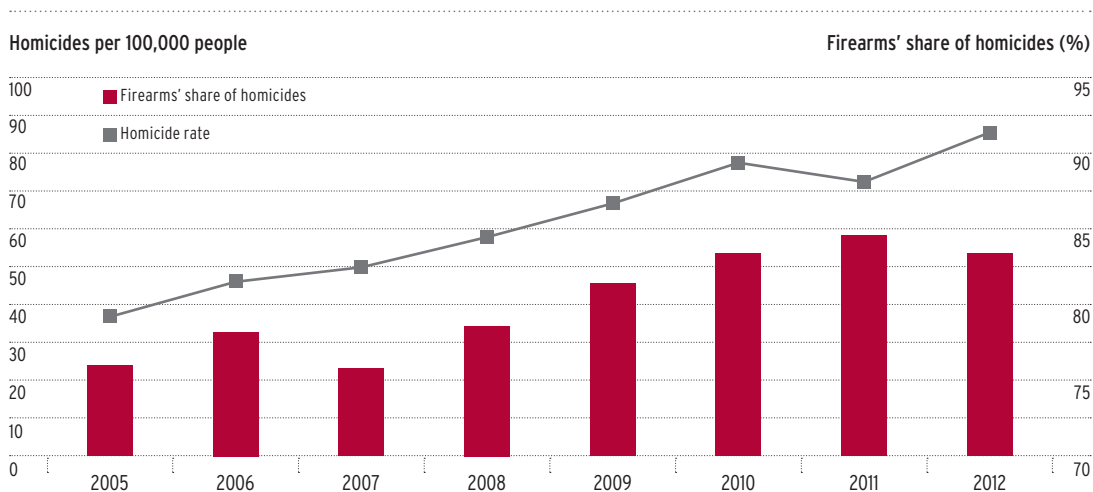
The Honduras Observatory of Violence provides data for violent deaths since 2005. Honduras experienced over 7,000 homicides in 2012, at a rate of 85.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants (Sánchez, 2013). This is 8.5 times the global

homicide rate and represents a cumulative increase of more than 200 per cent since 2005 (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011; Sánchez, 2013) (see Figure 1). Despite a levelling off, if not a slight decrease, in the homicide rate between 2011 and 2012, the rate of killings in Honduras remains extremely high compared to the rest of the world.<sup>4</sup>

Between 2005 and June 2013 there were 42,497 homicides in Honduras (Sánchez, 2013). For a country with a population of roughly 8.3 million inhabitants, this is an appallingly high incidence of violent death. The IHME (2013) estimates that more than one in ten male deaths in 2010 was due to violence in Honduras (10 per cent); when calculating only for the male population aged 15–49, 33 per cent of all deaths were attributable to violence.

Homicides by firearm comprise the vast majority of killings in Honduras: over the period 2005–12 an average of 80 per cent of homicides involved the use of guns, resulting in almost 32,000 people being killed by firearms (Sánchez, 2013). The increase in homicides in Honduras is mirrored by an increase in the share of homicides committed with firearms (see Figure 1). However, in Honduras, as elsewhere in the region, this does not mean that there is a direct causal relationship between homicides and the prevalence of firearms. Even though several other countries in the region show an above-average proportion of homicides committed by firearms, the frequency of firearms

Figure 1 Homicide rate and firearms' share of homicides, Honduras, 2005–12



Source: Sánchez (2013)

homicides in Honduras is still among the highest in the world (Gilgen, 2012).

Map 1 shows the localization of firearm homicides across municipalities in Honduras. Firearms homicides are highly concentrated in urban centres and strategic points (the Atlantic coast and border regions). This may reflect violent dynamics related to the presence of gangs and trafficking routes. Furthermore, there is a correlation between the number of firearms homicides and police seizures of firearms. Between 2010 and 2012 the Cortés and Francisco Morazán areas accounted for the highest numbers of firearms captured by the police (1,136 and 1,126 weapons, respectively); both areas also show the highest numbers of firearms homicides for 2008–12 (CNCN OHD, 2012, pp. 41–43) (see Map 1).

## Firearms, drugs, and gangs

There is a crucial relationship among violence, firearms, and the drug trade. Drugs finance the purchase of weapons, which in turn promote wars between gangs and groups for control of territory and smuggling (World Bank, 2011). The introduction of firearms into a specific area can facilitate violence, whether or not it is related to the drug

trade. The escalation of violence in Central America is indeed frequently linked to the presence of drug-trading organizations and gangs, and to the increased availability of firearms in the region (FESCOL, 2011).

This Research Note provides the following estimate of the number of firearms circulating in Honduras. The Honduran National Arms Registry recorded 280,305 registered firearms in the country by the end of 2012 (Díaz, 2013). However, police reports of firearms seizures indicate that an average of 60 per cent of weapons seized are illegal. By applying this figure to the number of registered firearms in Honduras, approximately 420,000 illegal weapons are estimated to be circulating in the country (Díaz, 2013). However, according to a 2012 UN Development Programme estimate, approximately one-third (between 800,000 and one million) of the three million firearms circulating in Central America are in Honduras (Agencia EFE, 2012).<sup>5</sup>

The most popular firearms in Honduras are 9 mm handguns, which can be legally purchased and owned. These weapons are banned for civilian use in nearby Mexico, thus creating a regulatory imbalance that encourages

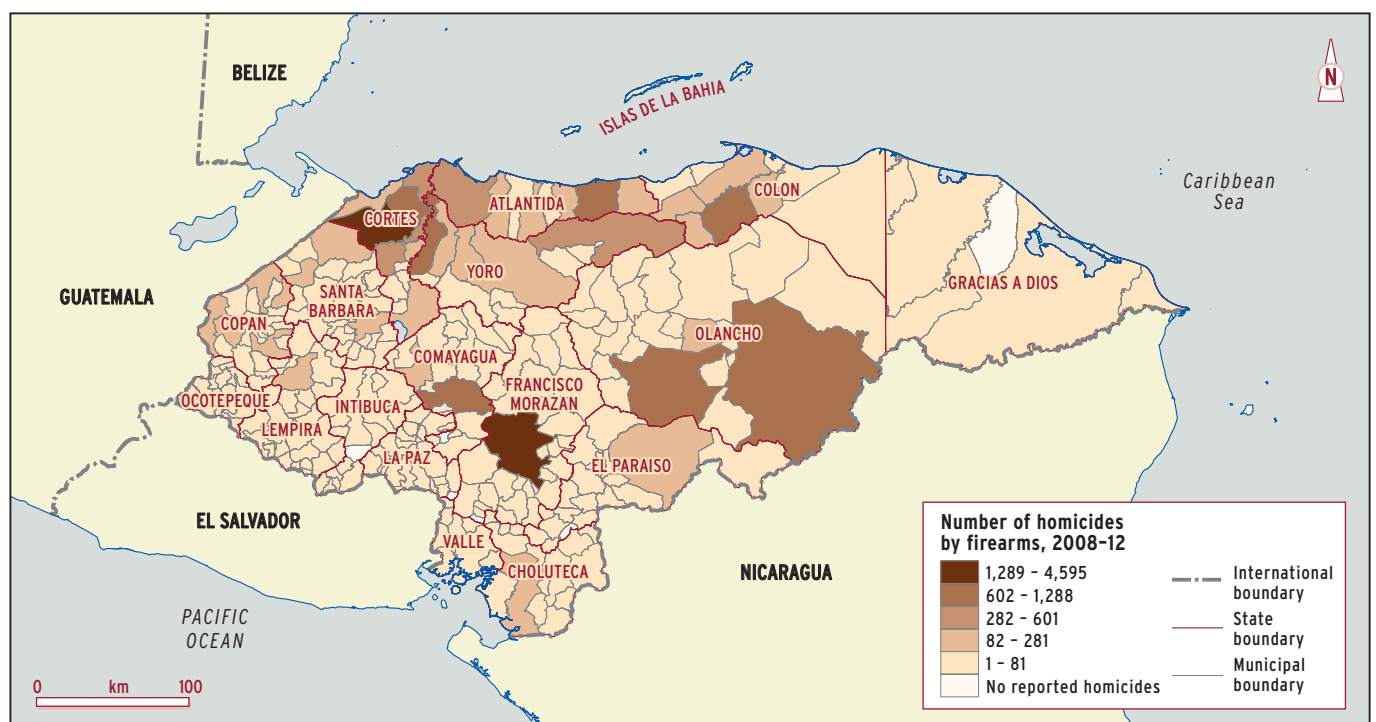
illicit weapons flows between the two countries (UNODC, 2012, p. 61).

Between 2002 and 2009 the Forensic Institute of Honduras examined 8,581 firearms from crime scenes and police raids. Other evidence it examined included approximately 50,000 cartridges of various calibres, tens of thousands of spent casings, bullets from crime scenes and the forensic pathology department, and samples of physical evidence, including chargers and other firearms accessories (Sánchez, 2013).

The data collected reveals that semi-automatic pistols are most commonly used in homicides in Honduras, closely followed by revolvers, together totalling 64 per cent of all weapons examined. The use of semi-automatic or automatic rifles is also relatively high, at 20 per cent of all weapons analysed by the laboratory. Closely linked to gang violence, the use and prevalence of home-made firearms is reflected by the large number of such weapons examined by the laboratory (8 per cent) (Sánchez, 2013) (see Figure 2).

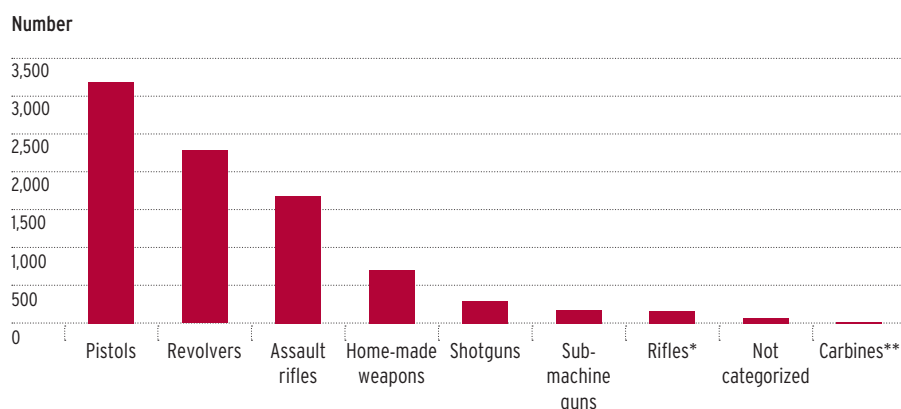
Weapons confiscated in Honduras between 2006 and 2012 reflect this pattern. The most prevalent are pistols (40 per cent) and revolvers (38 per cent), totalling more than three-quarters of

Map 1 Distribution of homicides by firearms in Honduras, 2008–12



Source: Sánchez (2013)

Figure 2 Number of weapons examined by the ballistics laboratory of the Forensic Institute of Honduras, 2002-09



\* Small-calibre hunting-style weapons (.22 and .223 long rifles).

\*\* Weapons formerly used by the Honduran prison authorities (.30 or 7.62) that have been replaced by M-16s. Some have subsequently entered the civilian and illicit markets.

Source: Sánchez (2013)

all firearms. The majority (63 per cent) of the pistols confiscated in Honduras between 2008 and 2011 were 9 mm (Díaz, 2013).

The presence of organized crime and gangs in Honduras is also frequently linked to spiralling levels of violence. *Maras* (gangs) and *pandillas* (youth gangs) feature prominently in Honduras, where well-established local youth gangs developed into replicas of US gang models in the 1980s and 1990s. Later this was exacerbated by further massive migration patterns. Since 2000 the country has also been the target of the mass expulsion of illegal migrants from the United States, many of them members of Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha. Today there are estimated to be 12,000 active members of Honduran *maras*, compared to 22,000 in Guatemala and 20,000 in El Salvador; this represents 151 *maras* members per 100,000 people in Honduras (compared to 146 in Guatemala and 318 in El Salvador) (Ribando Seelke, 2013, p. 3).<sup>6</sup>

In their nascent stages during the 1980s and 1990s, gangs in Central America mostly relied on home-made or craft weapons. As the influence of organized crime became stronger, these groups started participating in illicit drugs and firearms markets, strengthened their organizational structure, and acquired more sophisticated weaponry. For example, it was found that, in Nicaragua, gang

members move away from craft guns towards more sophisticated weaponry as drug trafficking and 'weapons specialists' begin to affect local gang dynamics (Rodgers and Rocha, 2013).

Despite the presence of gangs in Honduras there is also a 'clear link between contested trafficking areas and murder rates' and the fact that 'some of the most violent areas in the world lie along the Honduran coast and on both sides of the Guatemalan/Honduran Border' (UNODC, 2012, p. 11) (see Map 1). So-called *transportistas* (trafficking organizations) and territorial groups (gangs or organized criminal groups) clash over control of trafficking routes and other 'markets' in the region (UNODC, 2012, p. 21).

Other violent groups and contexts in Honduras should be noted here. The land conflict in the Bajo Aguán region has claimed at least 100 lives over the past four years (Lakhani, 2014). During and after the political crisis journalists and activists have been targeted and killed, but these cases have not been investigated (HRW, 2010, p. 61; CPJ, 2010). Hate crimes against transgender persons have been prevalent for some time: at least 31 were killed in Honduras between June 2009 and January 2011 (*La Prensa*, 2011).

## The project

The relationship among gangs, drug-trafficking organizations, and fire-

arm violence is extremely complex in Honduras. Further research and detailed analysis are required to highlight how the various factors that interact in Honduras lead to such a particularly violent context. The Small Arms Survey's project *Security and Violence in Honduras* aims to provide much-needed insight—and support local research capacities—into crucial elements in Honduras, including:

- *Firearms proliferation and control in Honduras.* The project will seek to improve knowledge of firearms proliferation and provide support for better firearms policies in Honduras. For example, how do firearms end up in the illicit market in Honduras or in the hands of criminal organizations? What are the scale and scope of illicit trafficking in the country and the sub-region, and how does such trafficking interact with regional crime and violence dynamics?
- *Armed violence assessment in Honduras.* What types of violence occur in Honduras and how do they interact? Who are the actors inflicting various types of violence? Who are the victims of armed violence in Honduras and what types of violence do they suffer? What are the underlying risk factors and drivers (vectors) of violence in Honduras? What are the main entry points for preventing and reducing armed violence in Honduras (escalating and de-escalating factors for violence)?
- *Support for armed violence reduction and prevention (AVRP) efforts in Honduras.* Enhanced data and analysis on the drivers, risk factors, and dynamics of violence should provide a basis on which local AVRP efforts may be strengthened and more effective responses designed. ■

## Notes

- 1 Based on the compilation of total homicide and firearms homicide figures produced by the Observatory of Violence based at the National Autonomous University of Honduras's Institute for Democracy, Peace and Security. See reports at <<http://iudpas.org/boletines/boletines-nacionales>>.

- 2 For more publications on armed violence and security in Honduras, please visit our website <[www.smallarmssurvey.org](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org)>. Within the 18-month project, several publications will cover aspects of firearms, armed violence patterns, drivers, and actors in the country.
- 3 The research presented here is based on Sánchez (2013) and Díaz (2013).
- 4 For example, the *Global Burden of Armed Violence* report (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011) estimated that between 2004 and 2009 El Salvador was the most violent country in the world, with a homicide rate of 61.9 per 100,000, which was higher than Iraq for the same period.
- 5 It is estimated that 2,860,000 firearms are circulating in Central America, two-thirds of which are illegal (UNDP, 2009, p. 169).
- 6 Note that these estimates consider *maras* only and are based on figures given in UNODC (2012). The US State Department estimates gang membership in the Northern Triangle to be as high as 85,000 (Brownfield, 2012).

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**For more information on the Small Arms Survey project in Honduras, please keep looking for updates on:**

**[www.smallarmssurvey.org](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org)**

## About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey serves as the principal international source of public information on all aspects of small arms and armed violence, and as a resource centre for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and activists. The Small Arms Survey, a project of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, hosts the Geneva Declaration Secretariat. For more information, please visit: [www.smallarmssurvey.org](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org)

## About the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development

This Research Note was published in support of the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, a high-level diplomatic initiative signed by more than 100 states, designed to support states and civil society to achieve measurable reductions in the global burden of armed violence by 2015 and beyond. For more information, please visit: [www.genevadeclaration.org](http://www.genevadeclaration.org)

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