

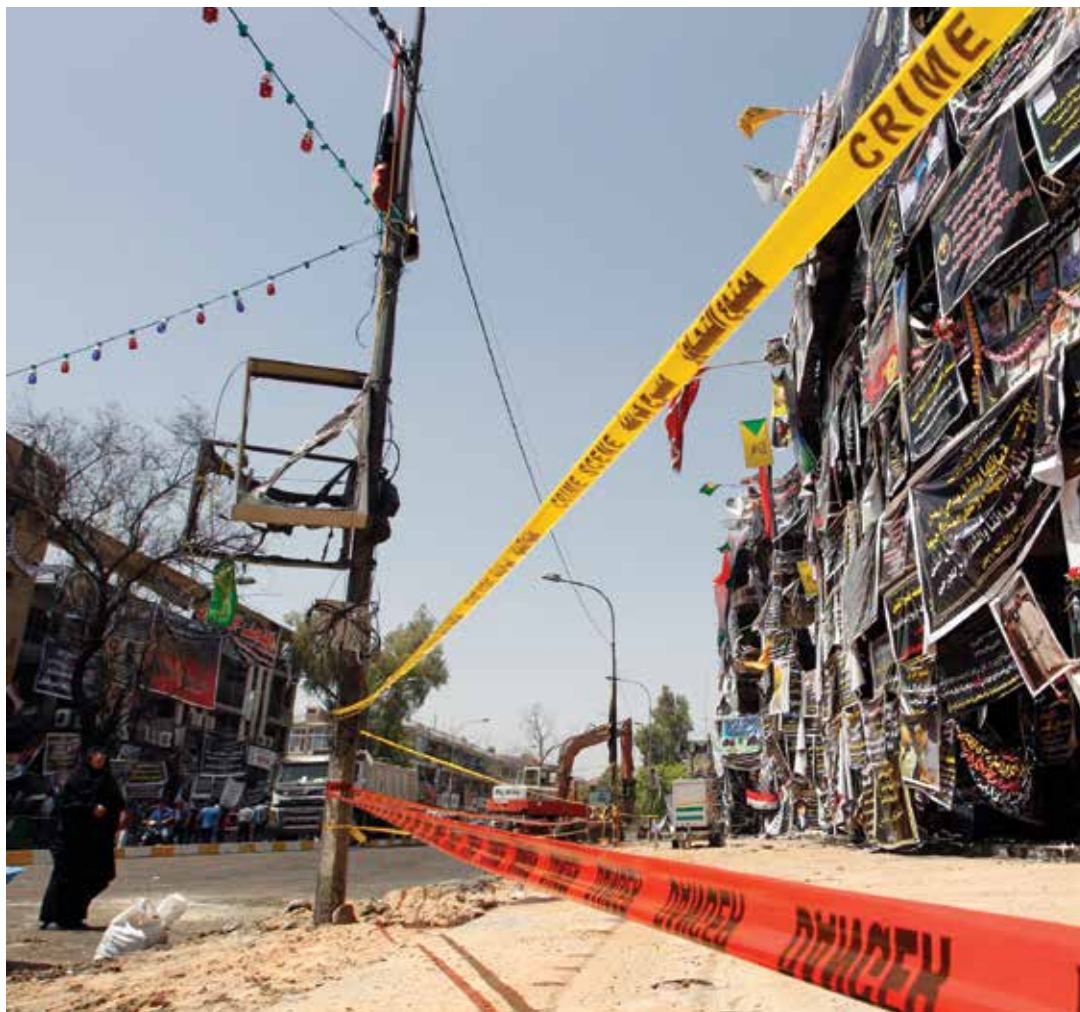
Monitoring Trends in Violent Deaths

Peace is one of the five areas of ‘critical importance for humanity and the planet’ in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations in September 2015 (UNGA, 2015, preamble). Specifically, Sustainable Development Goal 16 commits states to ‘[p]romote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’ (p. 14). The first target identified under this goal, Target 16.1, commits all states to ‘[s]ignificantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere’ (p. 25).¹ Under the 2030 Agenda, the rates of homicide (indicator 16.1.1) and conflict deaths (indicator 16.1.2) will be monitored to gauge changes in the incidence of violent deaths (UN Statistical Commission, 2016, p. 34).

Within the framework of the 2030 Agenda, this Note establishes a global baseline of

violent deaths for Target 16.1. The analysis relies on the latest data from the Small Arms Survey’s multi-source time-series database on violent deaths, which has served as the backbone of the *Global Burden of Armed Violence* reports (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008; 2011; 2015a; Small Arms Survey, n.d.). In presenting findings for the period 2010–15, the Note focuses on global trends in violent deaths as a composite indicator, which includes data on homicide and direct conflict deaths.²

The analysis extends beyond the national level, highlighting notable regional and global trends. Two forthcoming Notes will provide more in-depth analysis of available disaggregated statistics: the first on firearm-related violent deaths and the second on disaggregation by sex. Ultimately, this data should serve to inform effective responses to armed violence and insecurity.



A passer-by looks at posters commemorating the victims of a suicide attack that killed nearly 300 people in Kerrada district, Baghdad, July 2016.
© Sabah Arar/AFP Photo

Key findings of this Note include the following:

- In 2010–15, an average of 535,000 people were killed violently every year. This global estimate is higher than the ones for the periods 2004–09 and 2007–12.
- A growing number of people are dying in conflict: while an annual average of 70,000 deaths were recorded in 2007–12, the figure rose to 90,000 in 2010–15. The armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria are responsible for a large proportion of these deaths.
- The global homicide rate is continuing its decrease, but not enough to offset the increase in conflict deaths in 2010–15.
- The vast majority (83 per cent) of victims of lethal violence lose their lives outside of conflict zones. Direct conflict deaths account for the remaining 17 per cent.
- The global distribution of violence is becoming increasingly unequal: fewer countries are registering

high violent death rates (above 20 per 100,000 population), but their average violent death rates are on the rise.

- In absolute numbers, more lives were lost to violence in 2015 in large countries such as Brazil and India, which were not experiencing conflict, than in war-torn Syria.
- Of the 20 countries with high violent death rates in 2015, 11 were not affected by armed conflict.

What is violent death?

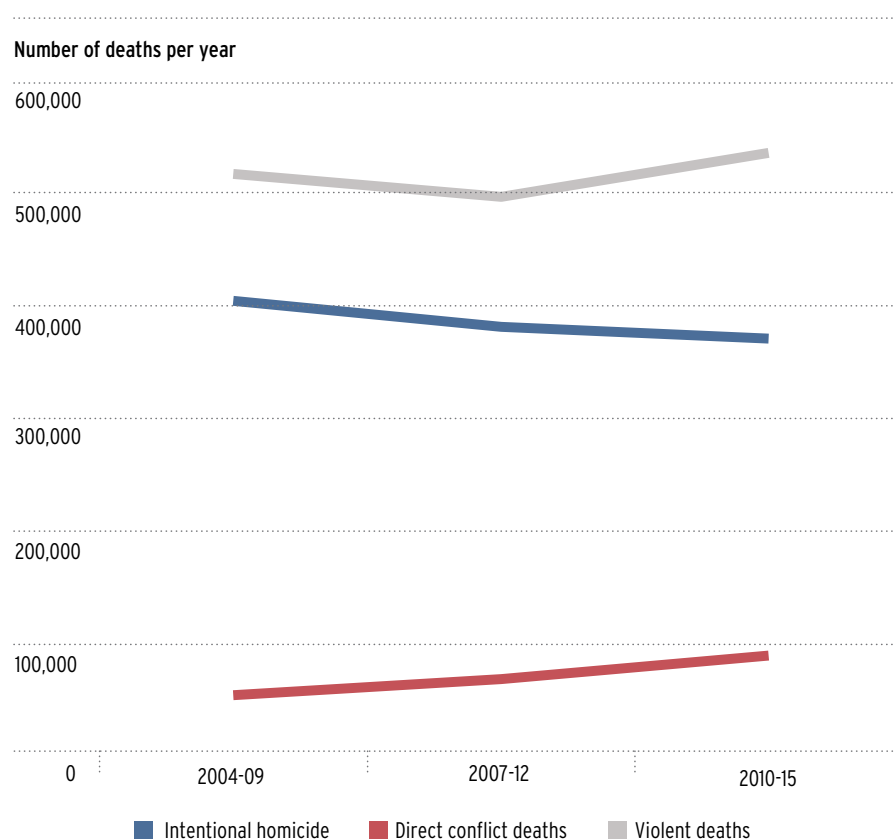
This Note covers violent deaths in any context, in armed conflict as well as in non-conflict settings. With the lines between conflict-related, criminal, and interpersonal forms of violence increasingly blurred, these deaths may be recorded under different categories—or not at all—depending on the context (Alvazzi del Frate and De Martino, 2015, p. 2). To provide as comprehensive a picture of violent deaths as possible, this Note draws

on data relating to direct conflict deaths, intentional and unintentional homicide, and killings that occur in the context of legal interventions, such as extra-judicial killings.³

This methodology is consistent with the aim of Target 16.1 as regards monitoring trends of lethal violence. It is worth remembering, however, that data on homicide and conflict deaths, even when combined, represents only a proxy for estimating the human toll of violence. Data on indicators such as indirect conflict deaths,⁴ non-lethal forms of violence and abuse,⁵ and perceptions of insecurity—or of the performance of justice and security institutions—is necessary to provide more comprehensive information on the wider impact of (armed) violence. While aggregate numbers of violent deaths will probably become more easily available, disaggregated statistics for a differentiated understanding of the causes and circumstances of violent death, paramount for policy and programmatic purposes, are still scarce.⁶

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Figure 1 **Global estimates of average numbers of violent deaths, intentional homicides, and direct conflict deaths per year, 2004–09, 2007–12, and 2010–15**



Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

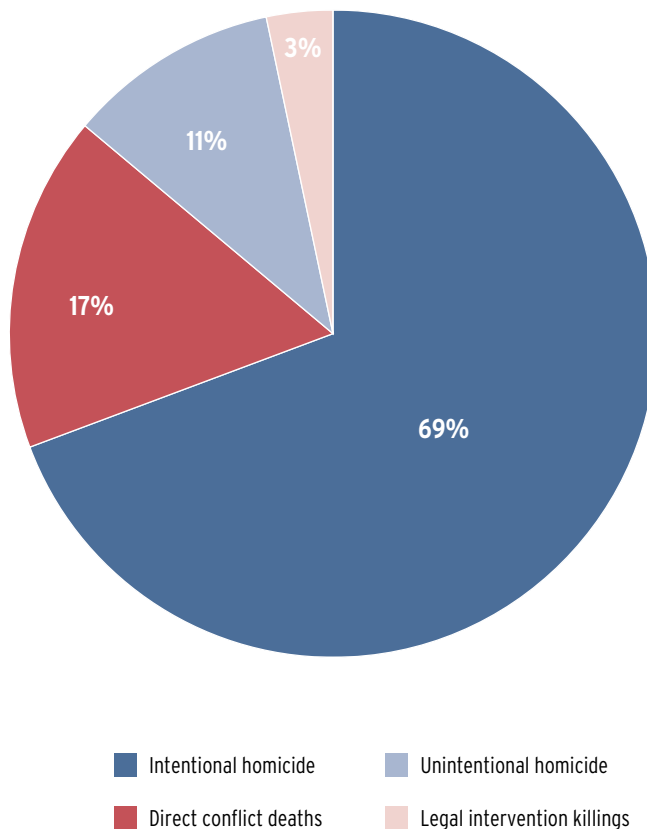
Violent deaths in 2010-15

In line with the methodology used in the *Global Burden of Armed Violence* reports, the average annual number of violent deaths worldwide in 2010-15 can be estimated at 535,000 (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011; 2015a). The average global violent death rate for 2010-15 lies at 7.5 violent deaths per 100,000 population. Figure 1 shows trends in homicides and direct conflict deaths, as well as the aggregate number of violent deaths.⁷

The proportion of different categories of violent death has changed over time, with intentional homicides continuously decreasing from 78 per cent in 2004-09 to 69 per cent in 2010-15, while conflict deaths have markedly increased from 11 per cent in 2004-09 to 17 per cent in 2010-15. Of the violent deaths that occurred in 2010-15, an annual average of 90,000 were conflict-related, while 371,000 were intentional homicides. Approximately 18,000 people were killed during legal interventions, representing 3 per cent of violent deaths in 2010-15 (see Figure 2).⁸

Figure 2 Violent deaths, by category, 2010-15

Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)



A photo lies on the floor of a damaged house in Jobar, Damascus, March 2016. © Bassam Khableh/Reuters

A decrease has also been observed in two sub-regions with very high rates of violence, the Caribbean and, to a lesser degree, Southern Africa.

At the regional level, the most marked increases in violent death rates since 2007–12 have taken place in Western Asia (a UN sub-region that encompasses the Middle East, including Syria and Iraq) and Northern Africa. Most other sub-regions register decreases, the most striking of which were in Middle and Western Africa, and in Southern Asia. A decrease has also been observed in two sub-regions with very high rates of violence, the Caribbean and, to a lesser degree, Southern Africa. Figure 3 shows the evolution of violent death rates by sub-region over the periods under review.

Overall, since 2004, the number of countries reporting medium (10.0–19.9 per 100,000 population) and high (20.0 and above) violent death rates has been decreasing; meanwhile, the number of countries reporting low

(3.0–9.9) and very low (below 3.0) rates has increased (see Figure 4). At the same time, however, the average rate of violent death in the most-affected countries has been increasing. This finding indicates that a decreasing number of countries account for a growing proportion of violent deaths, a trend that can in part be explained by the increase in direct conflict deaths in 2010–15.

Rising conflict death tolls

The annual number of direct conflict deaths—that is, deaths caused by war-related injuries and attacks, such as those inflicted by a bullet, bomb, mine, machete, or assault (SMART, 2006, p. 78)—increased over the reviewed periods, from an average of 55,000 in 2004–09, to 70,000 in 2007–12, and up to 90,000 in 2010–15. The most

Figure 3 Trends in average violent death rates, by sub-region, 2004–09, 2007–12, and 2010–15

Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

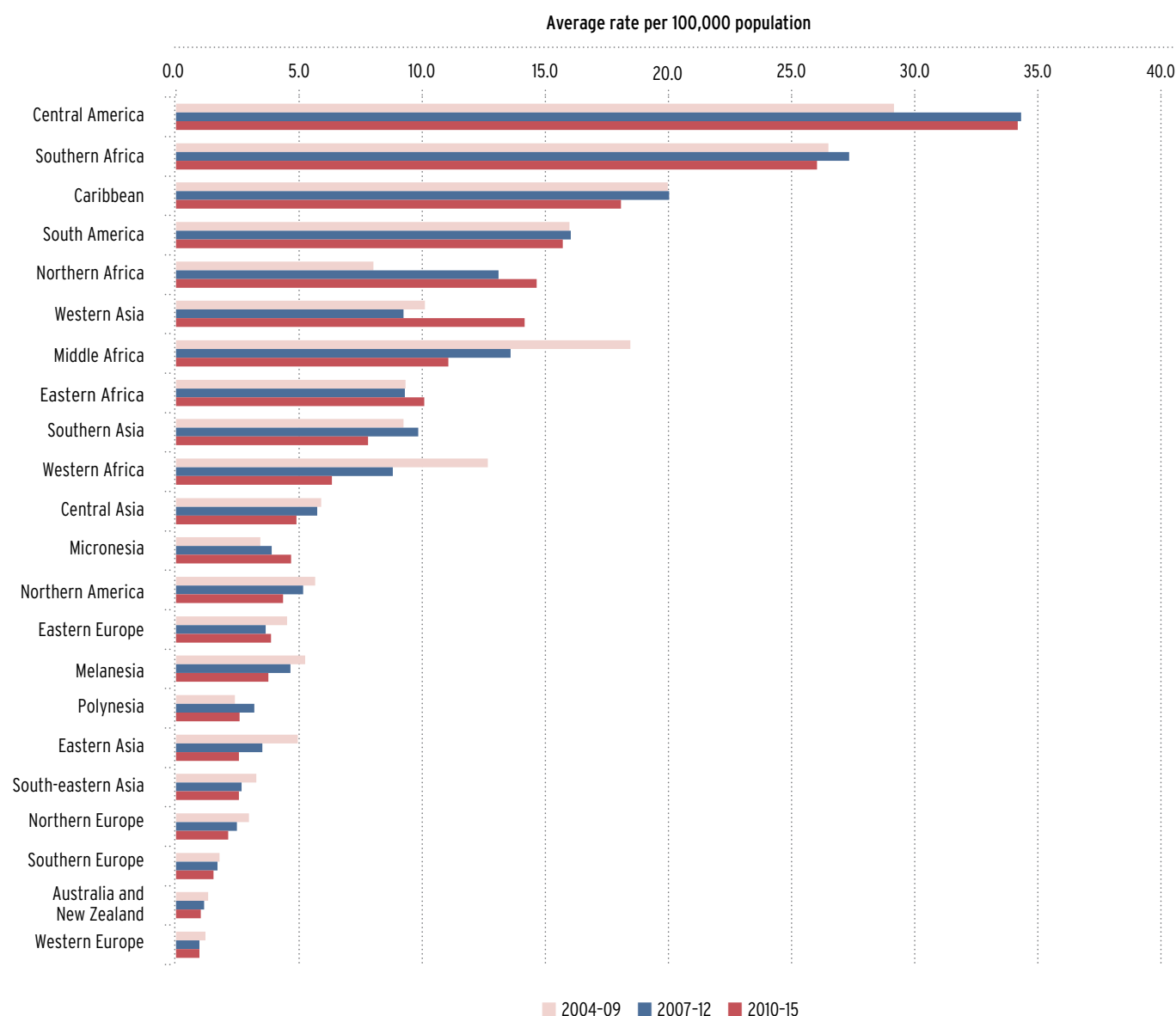
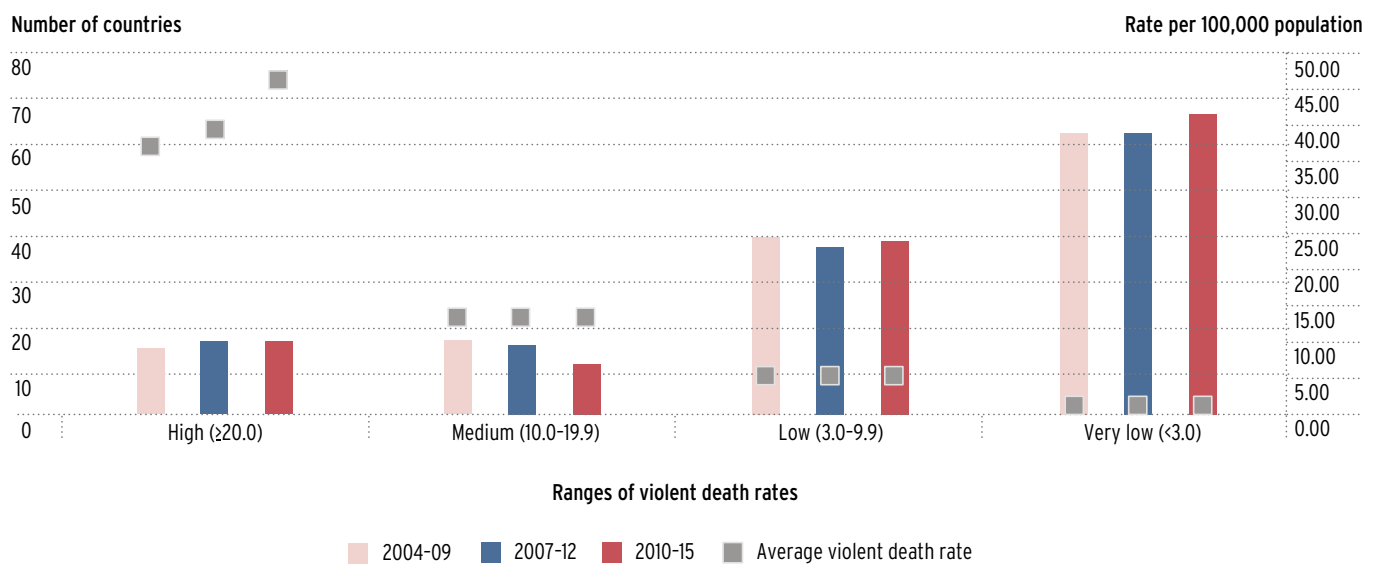


Figure 4 Countries by violent death rates, 2004-09, 2007-12, and 2010-15

Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)



violent conflicts in 2015 were in Syria (27,500 direct conflict deaths), Iraq (17,000), and Afghanistan (13,500). These three conflicts have consistently been the most lethal since 2012; together, they account for more than half of the total number of direct conflict deaths in 2015 (see Figure 5).

A peak in direct conflict deaths can be observed in 2014. Additional countries that registered an increase in conflict deaths that year include Nigeria, South Sudan, and Ukraine.

The national level

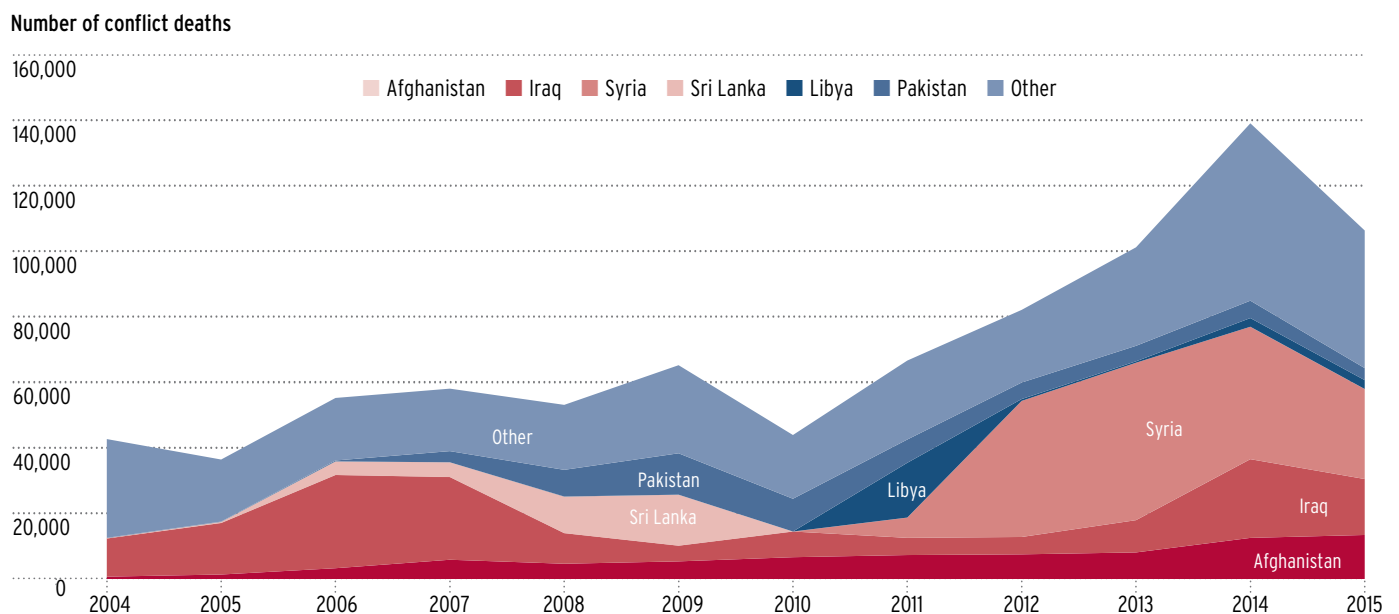
When conflict and non-conflict death statistics for 2015 are combined and countries and territories are ranked

according to their incidence of violent death, Syria exhibits the highest rate (as was the case in 2012), followed by El Salvador, Honduras, and Venezuela (see Figure 6). Of the 20 countries with the highest rates, only nine were affected by armed conflict in the observed period, highlighting that violence-related deaths are not solely an issue in countries affected by open conflict. It should be noted that in absolute numbers, more lives were lost to violence in 2015 in large countries such as Brazil (56,500), India (36,000), and Nigeria (28,000) than in Syria. In fact, Brazil's death toll for 2015 exceeds those of Iraq and Syria combined.

Most countries where an increase in violent death rates was observed between 2012 and 2015 were experiencing armed conflict (Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen). Among non-conflict countries, violent deaths increased in El Salvador and Venezuela, as well as in South Africa, which continues to stand out as a highly affected non-conflict country outside of Latin America. In contrast, Colombia was a conflict-affected country whose violent death rate dropped steadily, from 47.8 in 2005 to 30.4 in 2015. This reduction reflects a decrease in the intensity of the conflict as well as a decline in the homicide rate.

Figure 5 Direct conflict deaths, 2004-15, cumulative

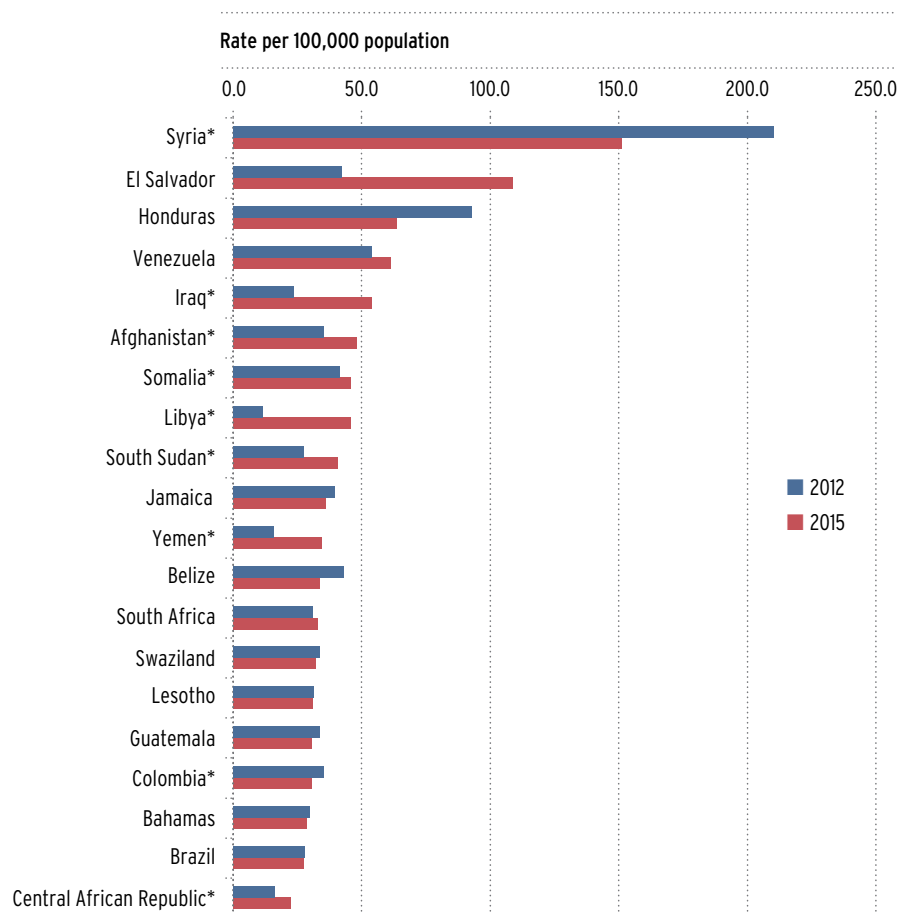
Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)





A man runs away from the scene of a car bomb attack and gunfire at the Ambassador hotel in Mogadishu, June 2016. © Mohamed Abdiwahab/AFP Photo

Figure 6 Countries with violent death rates above 20 per 100,000 population, 2012 and 2015



Note: * Countries with an active armed conflict during the period under review.

Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

Violent deaths in El Salvador and Honduras

While Honduras exhibited the second-highest violent death rate in the world in 2012, it had the third-highest by 2015. Concurrently, El Salvador, which had the sixth-highest rate in 2012, registered the second-highest just three years later. The divergent

evolution of violent death rates in these two countries deserves closer examination (see Figure 7).

El Salvador saw its homicide rate decrease by almost half in 2012–13, during a government-backed gang truce (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2015a, p. 65). Eighteen months later, the government reverted to a hard-line approach; homicide rates surged

again, reaching 108.6 per 100,000 in 2015 and rendering El Salvador the most violent country not affected by an open armed conflict.⁹

In contrast, Honduras witnessed a peak in its homicide rate in 2011 (Sánchez, Díaz, and Nowak, 2014; Nowak, 2016). Honduran national media have pointed to a number of criminal justice and crime prevention measures—

Figure 7 Intentional homicide rates, El Salvador and Honduras, 2004-15

Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)



such as increased arrests, the deployment of additional security forces, and the establishment of citizen security observatories—as factors that may have contributed to the subsequent decline in the rate (Amador, 2015; *El Proceso*, 2014; *La Tribuna*, 2014). In 2012 the government also launched the Safer Municipalities Program (*Municipios más Seguros*), which focuses on community-based violence prevention (Berg and Caranza, 2015). Yet, as violence levels fluctuate based on the activities and strategies of organized criminal groups, it is not clear to what extent these policies have contributed to the observed downward trend in homicide rates.

Conclusion

The global rate of violent deaths is on the rise. This trend is driven in part by an increase in direct conflict deaths, particularly in Syria, but also in Iraq and Afghanistan. While the number of countries registering medium to high levels of violence has decreased, the average violent death rate in the highest category has increased, pointing to a growing proportion of violent deaths in a decreasing number of countries. Meanwhile, the global homicide rate continues its decline, particularly in Middle and Western Africa, Southern Asia, and the Caribbean. In contrast, Central America and Southern Africa show divergent patterns; the regions continue to exhibit the highest rates of violent deaths in non-conflict settings.

In the spirit of the 2030 Agenda, all countries have committed to pursuing a significant reduction of violence and related deaths, regardless of their baseline in terms of violent death rates. Key here will be not only the ability of states to devise tailored policies and programmes so that each country may lower its particular types and levels of violence, but also the international community's concerted efforts to provide technical and political support to the most-affected regions.

Improving the quality of data is a crucial step in enabling the tracking of armed violence against relevant indicators, particularly in Africa and South-east Asia. Enhancing monitoring mechanisms to allow for disaggregation of data by sex, age, instrument of violence, and other relevant indicators is particularly useful in this regard. While Target 17.18 grants states until 2020 to develop their capacity for the 'data revolution' (UNGA, 2015, pp. 9, 38), some states will probably need to revisit their funding priorities to do so.

Data source and methodology

The Small Arms Survey tracks national violent death indicators worldwide through its database on violent deaths, which contains data from 2004 to the present and includes conflict deaths and homicide data sets (Geneva Declaration Secretariat,

2015b).¹⁰ All data used in this report is drawn from this source. This Note features estimates as of 1 August 2016. The full database is accessible online at <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/tools/interactive-map-charts-on-armed-violence.html>.

Notes

- 1 For an analysis of Target 16.4 on illicit arms flows, see McDonald and De Martino (2016). For an overview of the alignment of the 2030 Agenda with arms control efforts, see Alvazzi del Frate and De Martino (2016).
- 2 Since its establishment in 2006, the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development has employed composite indicators in its analyses; see Alvazzi del Frate and De Martino (2015). Five-year averages are sometimes used to offset statistical errors due to varying data quality and changes in definitions and methodologies at the national level.
- 3 Self-inflicted violence is not included. For further discussion of the unified approach to armed violence, see Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2011, ch. 1). For details on definitions and methodologies, see Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2011, pp. 69–80).
- 4 The lethal impact of armed conflict goes beyond the number of persons killed in battle or combat. Indirect conflict deaths result from a variety of specific causes related to the worsening of social, economic, and health conditions in conflict-affected areas. See Geneva Declaration Secretariat (2008, pp. 31–33).
- 5 See Alvazzi del Frate and De Martino (2013).
- 6 The data used in this report, disaggregated by sex and instrument used, will be presented in forthcoming Notes.
- 7 Due to regular updates of the Small Arms Survey's database on violent



A forensic technician makes notes while performing an autopsy on a crime victim at the Forensic Institute morgue in San Salvador, July 2015. © Jose Cabezas/Reuters

deaths, estimates presented here may differ slightly from previously published data. Based on data available in August 2016, the global estimates of violent deaths are 517,000 for 2004–09 and 496,000 for 2007–12 (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

- 8 Monitoring and reporting of deaths due to legal interventions is very uneven, and these figures are probably underestimated. For more information, see Carapic and De Martino (2015). Trends in unintentional homicides depend largely on legal definitions and codification of this indicator, which vary widely across countries. Comparisons across different countries and jurisdictions may thus not be feasible.
- 9 Arce (2016); Calderón (2016); Partlow (2016); Valencia and Martínez (2015a; 2015b).
- 10 Conflict mortality data is tracked for 36 countries and territories that are experiencing or have experienced armed conflict: Afghanistan, Algeria, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Palestinian Territories, the Philippines, the Russian Federation, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, Ukraine, and Yemen.

Non-conflict violent deaths are monitored in 221 countries and territories. For 64 countries, half of which are in Africa, only estimates were available at the time of data collection. For the remaining 157 countries and territories, multiple sources were identified. For these countries, a single source was selected on the basis of the following criteria: length of the time series; clarity; consistency; and accessibility. For analytical purposes, small countries and territories have been aggregated into four entities: Caribbean Islands, the Lesser Antilles, Micronesia, and North American Islands. See Small Arms Survey (n.d.).

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About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a global centre of excellence whose mandate is to generate impartial, evidence-based, and policy-relevant knowledge on all aspects of small arms and armed violence. It is the principal international source of expertise, information, and analysis on small arms and armed violence issues, and acts as a resource for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and civil society. It is located in Geneva, Switzerland, at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

For more information, please visit: www.smallarmssurvey.org

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Authors: Mireille Widmer and Irene Pavesi

Contributors: Anna Alvazzi del Frate and Luigi De Martino

Copy-editor: Tania Inowlocki

Layout and design: Julian Knott

Proofreading: Stephanie Huitson

Contact details

Small Arms Survey
Maison de la Paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E
1202 Geneva, Switzerland

t +41 22 908 5777

f +41 22 732 2738

e info@smallarmssurvey.org

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