

# Mapping the Divide

## FIREARM VIOLENCE AND URBANIZATION IN BRAZIL

Brazil, a country with almost no record of violent conflict in its history, stands out today for its high levels of firearm violence. Firearm victimization increased steadily from the 1970s to 2004, when the first signs of a tapering-off were publicized. The firearm death rate grew threefold from 7 to 21 deaths per 100,000 in the period 1982–2002.

The news media have covered the country's escalating gun violence extensively but simplistically. News accounts focus on spectacularly violent attacks by organized criminal organizations in Brazil's main cities, but overlook the deadlier effects of common, routine firearm violence, which is a rural as well as urban phenomenon.

**Brazil's firearm victimization rate surpasses that of some countries at war.**

Brazil is a society with rates of firearm victimization that surpass some countries at war. In the absence of major political conflicts, explaining this phenomenon requires examining other causes; it also means focusing on 'micro' contexts where individuals and small groups interact and act against each other. In the language of public health, it requires focusing on the risk and protection factors at work in firearm violence in Brazilian society.

This chapter reviews the incidence of firearm violence in Brazil's 5,507 municipalities. Among its main findings are the following:

- Firearm homicide is correlated to urbanization, but firearm suicide is not.
- Men are 17 times more likely to be victimized by firearm violence in urban areas than women, but that difference diminishes in rural areas.



Two young men, one holding a gun, protect their identities as they are filmed about their lives in a favela. © Viva Rio

- Handguns and automatic weapons are more common in urban than in rural areas, where shotguns predominate. Particular types of arms are highly associated with particular kinds of uses and users.
- Social inequality is correlated with firearm violence, while poverty as such is not.
- An important risk factor for firearm violence is being young (aged 15–29 years), out of school, and out of work.
- The variable ‘single-parent families headed by women with children under the age of 21 years not working’ is clearly associated with firearm violence.
- Risk for firearm homicide victimization varies according to ethnic group, with blacks and those of mixed race more likely to be victims than whites, while whites are more likely to commit suicide than black or people of mixed race.
- The lower the income, the higher the chances of being a victim of firearm homicide. The opposite is true for suicides, however: higher income is associated with self-inflicted injury and death.
- Participation in religion (the Catholic and Protestant churches) is a protection factor against firearm violence.
- While firearm ownership is more prevalent in rural than in urban contexts, rural areas experience a lower incidence of firearm deaths.

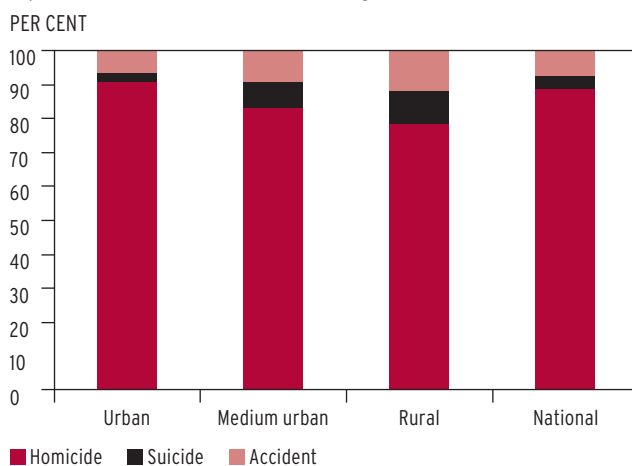
The chapter uses official sources for demographic information and data on firearm deaths, as well as a study on firearm availability by the ISER (the Instituto de Estudos da Religião), Viva Rio, and the Small Arms Survey. It describes the patterns of homicides and suicides by municipality, age, gender, and ethnic group. It then presents the results of multiple regression analysis applied to a range of key social determinants of urban and rural firearm violence for both firearm homicide and firearm suicide.

**Young people are at highest risk in Brazil, particularly the unemployed school drop-outs.**

The chapter looks beyond the broad measures used to analyse risk in cities (X events per 100,000 inhabitants), finding that these mask significant internal differences. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, the southern portion of the city concentrates resources and protection against the threat of firearm violence, in contrast to the northern and western zones of the city, which are seldom seen by tourists. The homicide rate in São Conrado, a beautiful neighbourhood in the southern region, is 50 times lower than in Bonsucesso, in the northern part of the same city. ‘Alemão Complex’ in Bonsucesso is almost 100 years behind São Conrado in terms of human development, at current rates of growth.

Finally, the chapter looks at some of the outliers among municipalities. Municipalities whose rates of firearm homicides were higher than expected included those on roads leading to and from international borders, where trade in drugs, guns, and other illicit goods is intense; roads leading from the ‘Marijuana Polygon’ in the state of Pernambuco to coastal centres where the drug is consumed; and those near or on the sites of chronic land conflicts. Municipalities whose rates of firearm homicides were lower than expected often enjoyed special protective circumstances such as best practices in public administration and human development, and religious or environmentally oriented tourism.

**Figure 7.1 Firearm deaths in Brazil by cause (%), 2000**



The study demonstrates that even the complex phenomenon of firearm violence in Brazil can be broadly explained using social science and public health methodologies. It shows that no single factor is responsible for firearm violence in Brazil. Accordingly, interventions and public policy will benefit from integrating several approaches and agencies in a multi-sector and multilevel effort that encompasses social development, the supply and demand for small arms, and law enforcement capacity. To prioritize populations at highest risk of firearm violence, educational and work opportunities for young people must be improved and health-based prevention strategies to curb rates of early pregnancy and single parenthood must be introduced. ■