

Gangs, Groups, and Guns

AN OVERVIEW

Across the globe, every day, numerous actors engage in acts of violence. These range from clashes on traditional war battlefields to limited engagements in urban environments, from disputes over land to struggles over access to natural resources such as diamonds, from rape to murder, from armed robbery to domestic violence. Some of these acts are organized, premeditated, or systematic, while others are simply crimes of opportunity.

Armed violence—both in crime and in conflict—claims an estimated 740,000 lives each year. The vast majority of these deaths (540,000) result from direct experience of violence. Nearly two-thirds (490,000) occur in non-conflict situations. These estimates are likely to underestimate the actual numbers killed through violence.

No single policy response can address all types of gangs or other armed groups.

Current information does not provide sufficient detail to delineate the percentages of violence and death attributable to individuals, groups, and states. States and armed groups (including gangs) are probably responsible for the majority of conflict-related deaths. It is much more difficult to determine the perpetrators of non-conflict violence.



Street kids from a gang in Kinshasa, June 2001. © Tim A. Hetherington/Panos Pictures

This chapter, together with the thematic section it introduces, concentrates on the perpetrators of violence, which includes a wide range of armed groups, such as gangs. It shifts the focus from location, acts, and impacts to the actors themselves, covering a broad range of groups involved in violence. Thousands of non-state groups contribute to the global burden of armed violence. Some groups are widely known: the Mara Salvatrucha (commonly known as MS or MS-13) in the United States and Central America, the Taliban in Afghanistan, the FARC in Colombia, the terrorist network al Qaeda, and the 'janjaweed' in Sudan, among many others that appear in the headlines on a daily basis. Yet these are just the tip of the iceberg.

Armed groups differ tremendously in their composition, activities, and roles in society. Some armed groups pose a challenge to law and order by representing a significant source of violence, while others threaten to depose the government directly. In other cases, armed groups offer a form of security to communities. In other instances armed groups seek to operate under the radar of the law and without directly challenging the state. Whatever their approach, the presence of armed groups raises concerns about violence and other negative social, economic, and political impacts resulting from their activities.

Armed groups differ from one another and from gangs in distinct ways. Acknowledging such heterogeneity is important in order to understand the group of interest and to design and implement effective strategies to reduce the group's ability to violently challenge the state or to harm society. A number of characteristics are relevant to distinguishing among armed groups. These include the relationship of the group to the state; the relationship of the group to the community; the relationship of the group to the legal economy; the group's use of violence; and the territorial presence and reach of the group.

Besides revealing important similarities and differences among armed groups, a comparative study also highlights a number of common themes. First, there is a need to address gangs and armed groups given their predilection for violence and disproportionate impact on security. Second, limited data about gangs exists outside of the United States context. Information is also limited on numerous armed groups across the globe. Third, 'what gets measured gets managed'. While more information about gangs and armed groups can aid in understanding these groups—their origins, actions, goals—it is not simply that more information is better. How information is measured also matters. Fourth, limited knowledge exists about the possession and use of small arms by various armed groups and gangs. While gangs and armed groups are known to be violent, their use of violence, their patterns of weapons procurement, and their reasons for employing violence instead of other means to achieve their goals remain poorly understood. As the knowledge base about armed groups expands, the next challenge that looms will be how to convert this information into effective policy in various contexts. ■