Everyday Dangers
NON-CONFLICT ARMED VIOLENCE

INTRODUCTION

In December 2011, Mitch Landrieu, the mayor of New Orleans, said that 'a student attending John McDonogh [one of the city's high schools] was more likely to be killed than a soldier in Afghanistan' (Robertson, 2011). His assessment, while partly rhetorical, pointed to an uncomfortable truth. With a homicide rate of 51 victims per 100,000 population, New Orleans residents faced greater risks than the populations of such war-torn countries as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (32 homicides per 100,000), Somalia (30 per 100,000), and Afghanistan (21 per 100,000) (Gilgen, 2011, p. 53).[1] As counterintuitive as it may seem, fatalities due to armed violence in non-conflict settings account for the overwhelming majority of violent deaths worldwide. Between 2004 and 2009, an average of 526,000 people died violently each year, but only 10 per cent of them qualified as direct conflict deaths (p. 70).

International attention, however, has traditionally focused on interstate or civil wars. Violence that is not captured by the terms 'armed conflict' or 'post-conflict'—and that does not violate international human rights law—is normally left to the relevant country to address as best it can. However, many states simply are not able to tackle the entrenched forms of non-conflict armed violence that affect them. The resulting human and economic costs to societies—and the frequent erosion of the state's legitimacy and monopoly on the use of force—have triggered a rethink of international and national policies designed to address armed violence.

Non-conflict armed violence is the theme linking the first six chapters of the *Small Arms Survey 2013*. This chapter, the first in that series, briefly reviews the concepts and ongoing debates about non-conflict armed violence among analysts and practitioners. It also touches on some of the manifestations of non-conflict violence, including principal dynamics and drivers, all of which are examined in greater detail in the following chapters.

What is 'armed violence'?

Armed violence is 'the use or threatened use of weapons to inflict injury, death, or psychosocial harm' (OECD, 2011, p. ii). It is perpetrated by a range of actors, from insurgents, gangs, and organized criminal groups to police forces and armies, militias, and armed individuals (Kaldor, 2007). Armed violence is used to assert supremacy, to intimidate opponents and civilians, to defend territory and other resources, to eliminate rivals, and to protect business operations. While the term calls to mind hostile engagements such as electoral violence, clashes over natural resources or contested areas, and fights between rival gangs or organized crime groups, it also encompasses interpersonal violence, including crimes of passion and 'honour'.[2] In addition, armed violence includes legal interventions as well as excessive use of lethal force by law enforcement (Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2011).

The use of weapons is central to the definition of armed violence. But while 'weapons' may include blunt objects, knives, or any other tool used as a weapon, this thematic section uses the term 'armed violence' to refer primarily to

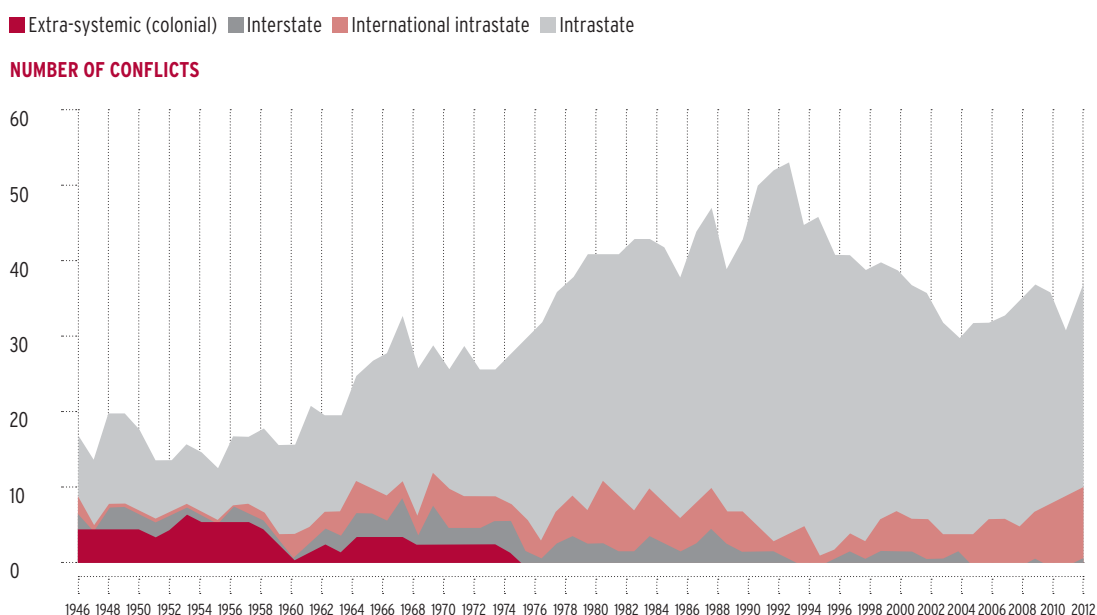## Box 1.1   Parsing conflict, post-conflict, and non-conflict armed violence

'Armed conflicts' can be defined on the basis of the identities of the belligerents, whether state or non-state, or according to their intensity, which is generally measured in terms of the number of casualties. Interstate violence and civil war represent the two 'classic' types of armed conflict. If at least one party involved is a non-state actor and a certain level of sustained intensity is reached, the conflict is labelled an 'intrastate armed conflict' or 'civil war'. Such conflicts become 'internationalized' when a foreign state intervenes, either directly or by proxy, to assist, finance, or provide operational support to a non-state belligerent (Vité, 2009, p. 71).

International humanitarian law is often used as a marker for the existence of an 'armed conflict'. It applies to the kinds of armed conflict just mentioned–but not to situations such as riots or isolated or sporadic acts of violence, which are character-ized by armed violence that is less intense or less sustained (Vité, 2009, p. 76). Similarly, much academic research distinguishes between low- and high-intensity armed conflicts on the one hand,[3] and crises–including situations that involve the sporadic use of violence–on the other.[4] Crises are not usually considered 'armed conflicts'.

Figure 1.1 shows that war between states accounts for only a small portion of all armed conflicts. The total number of armed conflicts peaked in 1992 and then started to decline; extra-systemic, or colonial, conflict disappeared by 1974[5] and interstate conflict has been relatively infrequent since 2004. In the period 2000-09, the total number of armed conflicts, the majority of which were intrastate, fluctuated between 30 and 40 per year. These figures are consistent with the estimates of the Conflict Barometer of Heidelberg University, which counts 28 high-intensity conflicts and as many as 126 crises for 2010 (HIIK, 2010, pp. 1, 88).

The notion of a *post-conflict* period gained currency at the end of the cold war, when the international community stepped up its efforts to stabilize and rebuild states following a number of armed conflicts around the globe (Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom, 2008, p. 462). Armed conflict, however, does not always produce a clear outcome–such as a military victory or a peace agreement–and it may be unclear when the post-conflict period begins. Significant fighting, often referred to as residual violence, may still occur between old or new belligerents in the period following the formal end of hostilities (UNODC, 2011b, p. 15).

Figure 1.1   **Number of armed conflicts per year, 1946–2011**

■ Extra-systemic (colonial)   ■ Interstate   ■ International intrastate   ■ Intrastate

NUMBER OF CONFLICTS

Source: Themnér and Wallensteen (2012, p. 568)

This section uses the term non-conflict to define situations of contemporary armed violence that are neither 'conflict' nor 'post-conflict' in nature. Cutting across a range of sectors, including criminal justice and public health, the concept is necessarily broad and thus overlaps with other notions, such as that of a crisis. Other labels have been developed to describe situations related to non-conflict armed violence; for example, the terms fragile situations and fragile states are increasingly being used to characterize countries or territories where armed violence has become an endemic problem.[6] When cross-border dimensions apply, non-conflict armed violence may be identified as a transnational threat. One such threat, transnational organized crime, is the subject of a UN framework convention (UNGA, 2000).

A perpetrator's motivations are relevant regardless of how an act of armed violence is defined. Incidents that are categorized according to their *nature* may be politically or economically motivated,[7] or they may be driven by hate or a perceived need to defend a sense of 'honour'. Violent events that are labelled according to their *setting* include cases of 'domestic violence' or 'urban violence'. Acts of violence may also be identified based on characteristics of the *victim,* such as 'gender-based violence', or of the *relationship* between the victim and the perpetrator, such as 'intimate partner violence'.

Any one incident may have multiple motivations, whether distinct or overlapping. An armed bank robbery may have terrorist roots. Armed groups may be engaged in a political struggle against or for the state and at the same time be involved in the trafficking of narcotics, as with insurgent forces in Colombia and Afghanistan.

Which approach is used to label or identify different types of armed violence depends largely on the outlook of the observer. While experts in international affairs or conflict studies may disregard—or even discard—information on the motivation behind the perpetration of a violent act, criminologists, sociologists, and, to some extent, public health professionals assess precisely that 'intention' to determine the nature of the violent act.

By examining various forms of armed violence under the broader 'non-conflict' umbrella, this section seeks both to provide a unified approach to armed violence and to facilitate the development of multi-sectoral responses to the challenges it poses.

Source: De Martino and Dönges (2012)

violence committed with firearms. On average, an estimated 42–60 per cent of lethal violence is committed with firearms worldwide (UNODC, 2011a, p. 10; Lozano et al., 2012, p. 2109; Geneva Declaration Secretariat, 2008, p. 67). For each person killed with a firearm, at least three more survive gunshot injuries (Alvazzi del Frate, 2012, p. 94). At the same time, the vast majority of violent deaths occur in countries and territories that are not considered conflict or post-conflict environments (Gilgen, 2011, p. 51). In short, most contemporary armed violence occurs in non-conflict settings.

One may expect the global distribution of firearms to reflect the global distribution of armed violence. The Small Arms Survey estimates that civilians hold some 650 million—or roughly 75 per cent—of approximately 875 million firearms possessed worldwide. Non-state armed groups and gangs hold a small proportion of these weapons—no more than 11.4 million. National armed forces and law enforcement agencies account for the remainder of the global stockpile, or less than a quarter (Karp, 2010, pp. 102–03). As discussed below, however, access to weapons does not, in and of itself, drive armed violence.

FLUID DYNAMICS: ARMED ACTORS AND VIOLENCE

Armed violence trends reflect complex relationships among different types of armed actors who engage in various forms of violence, which may evolve over time, along with motivations and objectives. Armed actors include

Table 1.1 Conflict and non-conflict armed violence, examples by type of armed actor						
	State security forces	**(Pro-government) militias**	**Insurgent armed groups**	**Private security companies**	**Gangs and organized crime**	**Individuals**
Interstate and civil war	✓	✓	✓			
(State) violence against civilians	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Terrorist attacks and violence		✓	✓		✓	✓
Community violence		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Gang and organized crime violence		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Violent assault and armed robbery		✓	✓		✓	✓
Domestic violence, violence against women	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

individuals as well as groups of varying sizes, affiliations, and structures, yet all of them have access to weapons (Hazen, 2010, p. 86).

While a distinct range of armed actors and types of armed violence may be identified, the relationships between them are complex. Table 1.1 provides a first attempt to plot these linkages. It does not imply an automatic relationship between different armed actors and various forms of armed violence, but instead provides examples of possible engagement of armed actors in violent acts. Often, these may be involved in various types of violence simultaneously. Furthermore, as the boundaries between different forms of violence may be blurred, different types of armed violence may overlap, interact, or mutually reinforce each other (Krause and Nowak, 2011, p. 34). In countries where armed violence is endemic, for instance, large-scale organized violence may coexist with criminal violence, human rights violations, terrorist attacks, and various forms of interpersonal violence (INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE).

Uses of force: public and private

It is generally claimed that, in order to guarantee their citizens a certain level of physical security, including the security needed to pursue basic livelihoods, states must retain the monopoly on the legitimate use of force (van der Wilt, 2012, p. 1114). States sometimes decide to delegate or outsource the use of force to others, such as private security companies, if there are financial or other advantages to doing so (Bailes, 2007, p. 1).

In other cases, armed groups—including insurgents, separatists, vigilantes, and criminal organizations and gangs—may challenge the state's monopoly and its capacity to control violence in part or all of its territory. It is not uncommon for such actors to use armed violence simultaneously against the state and the civilian population. Thus, for example, a rebel group acting against state security forces may, at the same time, kidnap civilians in order to fund its military operations.

A man grieves for his brother who was killed in a bomb blast in Quetta, Pakistan, February 2013. © Naseer Ahmed/Reuters

Some states are ill equipped to respond to widespread non-conflict violence, particularly if they suffer from poor governance or pronounced ethnic and social divisions (Malby, 2011, p. 107; SOUTH AFRICA). Some governments abuse their monopoly on the use of force, using violence against their population for policy ends. Such is the case, for example, when police use excessive force to stop demonstrations, political leaders employ gangs to quash opponents, or security forces conduct violent civilian disarmament campaigns. Countries that have weak institutions or that routinely use violence against civilians generally report high homicide rates (Malby, 2011, p. 103).

Poor performance with respect to the rule of law damages a state's legitimacy and the population's trust (Malby, 2011, p. 88). If the people do not trust government institutions to protect them, they may pursue their own means of security, such as by procuring arms, supporting local vigilante-type defence forces, or refusing to disarm (LAND CONFLICT IN AFRICA and GANG EVOLUTION). In turn, these steps can lead to a downward spiral as violent private actors increase their power at the expense of governments.

The underlying drivers of armed violence

Although the use of weapons is one of the main vectors of armed violence, access to weapons—including to firearms—does not in and of itself determine whether armed violence will take place; multiple other factors also affect the likelihood, severity, and nature of armed violence. The relationship between *access* and *use* of weapons is complex. On the one hand, the presence of a gun in the home increases the risk of lethal violence in the case of domestic disputes (Hemenway, 2011, p. 7; INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE); on the other hand, there is no clear link between access to firearms and overall levels of armed violence in a country. That said, high economic inequality, a history of conflict,

violent events in neighbouring countries, and massive migration or repatriation flows have been associated with changes in levels of armed violence. In the past, a desire to secure access to land and natural resources—in situations of both resource abundance and scarcity—acted as a prime driver of many colonial wars, separatist insurgencies, and civil wars; today it continues to stoke non-conflict armed violence, such as violent communal clashes, in various parts of the world (SOUTH AFRICA and LAND CONFLICT IN AFRICA).

Non-conflict armed violence is often fuelled by the involvement of armed groups in legal and illegal economic activity as they use violence for political, as well as economic, ends (Cortright, 2012; Mulaj, 2010). Highly structured groups, such as gangs and organized criminal organizations, often employ violence in pursuit of profit and economic gain, or as a mechanism for resolving disputes (MAFIA VIOLENCE). Armed actors may use illicit economic activity to fund military operations or to expand their power, for example by increasing their control over territory (Hazen, 2010, p. 88; UNODC, 2010, p. 234).

> **Box 1.2 The implications of definitions**
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> Whether violence is tied to an 'armed conflict', 'post-conflict', or 'non-conflict' situation is more than semantics. The populations involved in a clearly defined armed conflict can access international resources that may be denied in the absence of explicit labelling. More specifically, the armed conflict label can trigger UN Security Council interventions, the deployment of international peacekeeping missions, and the provision of relief aid.
>
> High levels of non-conflict violence can be as destructive in human and economic terms as a war, but affected countries typically benefit from little or no international support. Instead, these states are expected to respond using law enforcement, criminal justice, and public health tools. Yet in many countries the burden of non-conflict violence outweighs the capacity of state institutions to respond.
>
> Marked by their severity, such situations are now attracting more attention. Some countries, such as Mexico, have declared 'war' on organized crime groups and are using military tactics in an effort to curb the threat (Peterke, 2012, p. 2). Other countries–notably in Central America–have adopted *mano dura* (iron fist) strategies that are based exclusively on repression. These tactics often lead to an unintended escalation of violence (Lessing, 2012).
>
> In order to help affected populations, humanitarian agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières have recently started to deploy missions to countries such as Brazil, Honduras, and Mexico (IRIN, 2013).
>
> A new practice of granting refugee status to persons fleeing forced gang recruitment is also emerging, extending an important protection previously accorded only to persons fleeing armed conflicts (Cheng, 2011; Grayner, 2012).

In fact, the relationship between land, territory, and community appears crucial to understanding non-conflict violence. In general, the more a group is organized, the more likely it is to be interested in dominating territory, be it a rebel group, gang, or organized crime group (UNODC, 2012, p. 21). Such groups use violence to establish and preserve their power. Among them, groups that have close links to their communities, such as *pandillas* in Nicaragua, use violence more sparingly. They may function as security providers for the communities in which they operate—either formally, as private security companies, or informally, like the 'defence crews' in Jamaica (Small Arms Survey, forthcoming). In many cases, gangs or other non-state armed groups provide a social safety net that the state refuses, or is too weak, to offer (Williams and Godson, 2002, p. 316). In contrast to such community-based groups, those with transnational origins—such as the *maras* in Latin America—are often less constrained in their use of violence (GANG EVOLUTION).

CONCLUSION

As this chapter has discussed, non-conflict armed violence has many forms and causes. It severely burdens people, societies, and states worldwide, sometimes imposing costs that dramatically outstrip those generated by armed conflict and its aftermath. Nevertheless, countries afflicted with high levels of non-conflict armed violence must typically
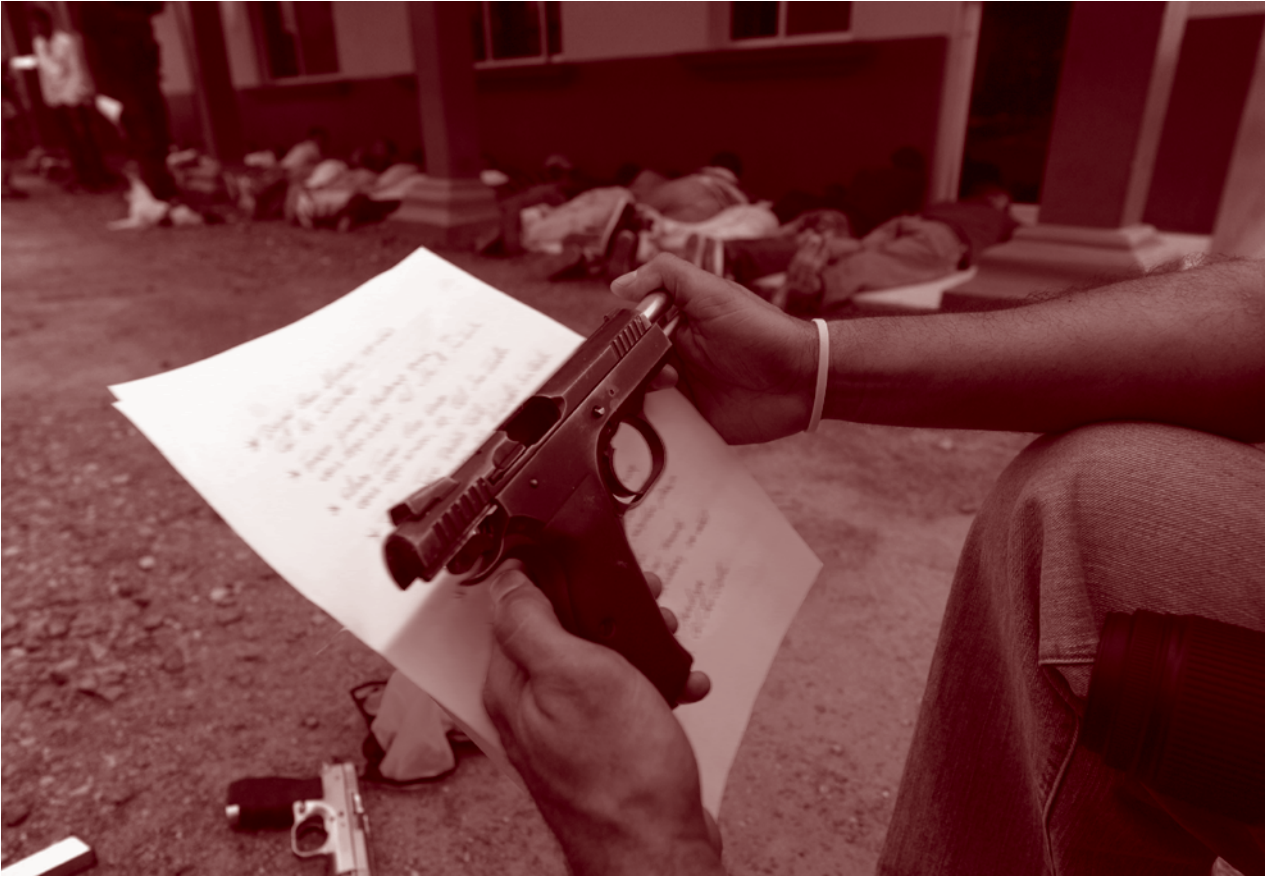
Police seize a cache of weapons from alleged gang members in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, June 2012. © Orlando Sierra/AFP Photo

tackle the problem on their own. No peacekeepers are sent to assist the state in its efforts, which may be uncoordinated, focused exclusively on one sector, or generally limited if institutions are weak. Multilateral initiatives that aim to reduce armed violence in both conflict and non-conflict settings, such as the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, remain underutilized (Geneva Declaration, 2006).

Non-conflict armed violence varies according to culture and country, but many 'local problems' are in fact shared by societies around the world. Relationships between actors and their use of violence are complex and can change over time. The following chapters flesh out the dense landscape of non-conflict violence in greater detail. ▄

ENDNOTES

1   These are average annual rates for the period 2004–09.

2   The World Health Organization defines *interpersonal violence* as violence between individuals, including family and intimate partner violence, as well as community violence (Krug et al., 2002, p. 6).

3   The Uppsala Conflict Data Program defines an *armed conflict* as 'a contested incompatibility which concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths. If a conflict generates more than 1,000 battle deaths a year, it is considered a war' (UCDP, n.d.).

4   The Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research defines a *crisis* as a 'tense situation in which at least one of the parties uses violent force in sporadic incidents' (HIIK, 2010, p. 88).

5   The Uppsala Conflict Data Program defines *extra-systemic conflict* as 'a conflict between a state and a non-state group outside its own territory. [. . .] This category basically contains colonial conflicts' (UCDP, n.d.).

6   The World Bank defines *fragile situations* as those with either: a) a harmonized average Country Policy and Institutional Assessment country rating of 3.2 or less; or b) the presence of a UN or regional peacekeeping or peace-building mission during the past three years. The list of fragile situations for 2013 includes some 35 countries (World Bank, 2013). The Organisation for the Economic Co-operation and Development defines *fragile states* as those 'failing to provide basic services to poor people because they are unwilling or unable to do so' (OECD, 2006, p. 147).

7   Political motivations include 'ethnic or religious hatred, political repression, political exclusion, and economic inequality' (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004, p. 570). Greed and profit-seeking are often cited among economic motivations; see Collier and Hoeffler (2004, pp. 564–65) and Arnson and Zartman (2005).

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