CHAPTER 2
HOMICIDE TRENDS AND PATTERNS
Introduction to the concept of intentional homicide

Homicide is one of the most scrupulously recorded crimes and homicide data are considered among the most representative and comparable crime indicators, in particular for monitoring violent deaths. In some circumstances, homicide also represents a reasonable proxy for violent crime in general, as well as a robust indicator of levels of violence, both at the national level and for longitudinal and cross-national comparisons.

The definition of intentional homicide used in the Global Study on Homicide is the same as that developed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in the International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS), which defines intentional homicide as “Unlawful death inflicted upon a person with the intent to cause death or serious injury”. This definition contains three elements characterizing the killing of a person as intentional homicide:

1. The killing of a person by another person (objective element)
2. The intent of the perpetrator to kill or seriously injure the victim (subjective element)
3. The unlawfulness of the killing, which means that the law considers the perpetrator liable for the unlawful death (legal element)

For international statistical purposes, all killings that meet the three criteria listed above are considered to be intentional homicides, irrespective of the specific definitions used by countries in their national legislation or other national practices.

The definitions used at the national and international levels may differ, and the concepts shown in the violent deaths framework below may overlap in three contexts: armed conflict, terrorism and killings by State authorities. From a statistical point of view there is a clear distinction between killings by State authorities that are considered to be legal interventions and killings by State authorities that are considered unlawful and that must therefore be counted as homicide. The definition of intentional homicide in ICCS includes “extrajudicial killings” and “killings caused by excessive use of force by law enforcement/State officials”, but excludes killings due to legal interventions.

From a practical point of view, however, distinguishing between these two categories may be a challenge for some national and international data systems. As a result, killings by State authorities considered to be homicide may be undercounted.

In conflict situations it is often difficult to disentangle lethal violence that is part of a conflict (including deaths from war operations), or of a lower-intensity continuation of conflict, from homicidal violence (both by combatants and non-combatants). Similarly, it is sometimes difficult to separate typical combatant groups from organized crime groups and terrorist organizations, and, by extension, the deaths associated with their violent actions. The separation of these types of death is further complicated by the difficulties inherent in the statistical recording of homicides in the context of large-scale conflicts.

Killings by terrorists are deemed homicides under the ICCS classification if they meet the three criteria listed above (the specific category is sociopolitical homicide). There can, however, be considerable ambiguity as to whether a particular intentional killing should be attributed to con-
Homicide is a bigger killer than armed conflict and terrorism combined

Globally, homicide accounts for many more deaths than conflict-related killings and terrorist killings combined (figure 1). An annual average of around 440,000 deaths worldwide were caused by intentional homicide in the period 2019–2021, of which an estimated annual average of 22,000 can be attributed to terrorism. The annual average number of conflict-related deaths during the same period was 94,000, not including the lives lost in the Ukraine conflict. This means that homicide accounted for roughly five times as many deaths as armed conflict in the same period and for 20 times as many deaths as terrorism.

Despite an increase of more than 95 per cent in the number of conflict deaths recorded in the period 2021/22, which was primarily the result of escalating conflicts in countries such as Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali, Somalia and Ukraine, available homicide data indicate that the global burden of homicide in 2022 was still double that of conflict deaths.

In comparison with the number of deaths resulting from homicide, those attributable to terrorism and armed conflict are more variable over the years, with noticeable spikes in both types of killings recorded around 2014.
Considerations for classifying conflict-related deaths and intentional homicides, and their overlap in conflict situations

In conflict situations, recognizing and classifying deaths as intentional homicides or conflict-related deaths (or both) can be a complex matter due to the existence of legal, operational and statistical challenges. The International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS) defines intentional homicide as “unlawful death inflicted upon a person with the intent to cause death or serious injury”. This includes murder, honour killing, serious assault leading to death, death as a result of terrorist activities, femicide, infanticide, extrajudicial killings and more.

To determine whether conflict-related deaths should be counted as intentional homicide or not, the intent of the perpetrator and the legality of the killing need to be determined; in other words, the evaluation has both a subjective and legal element. As a statistical tool to classify offences, ICCS is not prescriptive about how countries should determine intent, nor has any bearing on the legal aspect, since the legality of a specific act is determined by Member States and international law.

ICCS offers statistical categories for conflict-related deaths that are not classified as intentional homicide based on the intent (as determined by the investigative authority) and legality principles (as determined in (international) law). For example, ICCS category 110131 related to homicide concerns unlawful killings associated with armed conflict. These are defined as “acts that result in death or serious injury, or intend to cause death or serious injury in violation of the laws and customs applicable in armed conflict as expressed in the Rome Statute and the Geneva Conventions (1949)”.

The specific classification of violent deaths in situations of conflict is particularly difficult as it is conceptually challenging to discriminate between different forms of lethal violence. For example, it can be difficult to distinguish typical combatant groups from organized crime groups and terrorist organizations. Moreover, forms of armed confrontations are growing increasingly complex (with the targeting of civilians or military hors de combat increasingly used as a conflict tactic, increased use of unmanned aerial vehicles, etc.).

In this continuum of violence, differentiating the count of deaths strictly related to conflicts from deaths related to unlawful killings is important for understanding the nature of the problem and the tools available to resolve it. From a policy perspective, it is important to distinguish between unlawful killings and other types of killings in all situations, including conflict-related deaths, since unlawful killings are to be prosecuted by criminal justice institutions, while the others are not.

The different categories of violent death in conflict situations have been defined and classified in ICCS and, depending on the definition of conflict, killings considered in ICCS as intentional homicide may partially overlap with conflict deaths. Considering the policy relevance of counting conflict deaths in their totality (including unlawful or lawful killings) and the need to maintain consistency with ICCS, four types of intentional killings can be identified when considering the totality of intentional homicides together with conflict-related deaths in the context of conflict situations:

1. Lawful conflict deaths due to war operations that fall outside of the scope of the criminal justice system.
2. Unlawful conflict deaths committed by combatants that are in breach of international humanitarian law and considered war crimes. These are covered under ICCS category 11013 “war crimes” and are considered criminal offences.
3. Unlawful conflict deaths committed by combatants outside of combat operations that do not amount to war crimes. These are covered under ICCS category 0107 “unlawful killing associated with armed conflict” and are considered criminal offences.
4. Intentional homicides unrelated to the conflict committed by non-combatants. These are covered under ICCS category 0101 “intentional homicide” (taking into account the exclusions listed in ICCS, such as death due to legal interventions and justifiable homicide in self-defence) and are considered criminal offences.

Overlap between intentional homicides and conflict-related deaths

Classifying armed conflict

Aside from the potential overlap with homicide, in order to properly designate a death as “conflict-related”, it is crucial to determine whether the situation in which the killing occurred can be classified as armed conflict. International humanitarian law broadly distinguishes between two types of armed conflict: (1) international armed conflicts, which exist wherever there is armed force between States; and (2) non-international armed conflicts (or internal armed conflict), which occur whenever there is protracted armed violence between governmental authorities and organized armed groups or between such groups within a State.
In the case of international armed conflicts, it is possible to distinguish between declared wars where the state of war is recognized by the parties concerned and other forms of inter-State armed conflict that do not depend on how the parties define them but rather on verifiable facts in accordance with established objective criteria. These conditions are characterized by hostility between States parties motivated by the intention to harm the other side.\(^a\)

In the case of non-international armed conflicts, hostilities take place either between one (or more) armed group(s) and government forces or solely between armed groups. A non-international armed conflict is distinct from situations of internal disturbances and tensions, such as riots, isolated and sporadic acts of violence and other acts of a similar nature.\(^b\) The difficulty lies in assessing whether a conflict situation has the characteristics of “protracted armed violence”. Some of the criteria that may be used for such assessment are the intensity of the violence and the organization of the parties.\(^c\) However, no definition exists in international law for either of these two concepts.

Another aspect that may be taken into consideration when defining an armed conflict is the motives of the non-governmental groups involved in the conflict situation.\(^d\) Groups that are aiming to achieve a political objective can be considered as parties to non-international armed conflicts, while purely criminal organizations such as mafia groups or territorial gangs would not be considered as parties to a non-international armed conflict. However, there is currently no legal basis for this position in international law. This would also prove difficult to implement in practice, as the motives of armed groups are never uniform and cannot always be clearly identified.

Adding to this conceptual complexity, the classification of armed violence also has a political dimension. States may be unwilling to label a conflict situation as armed conflict in order to deny applicability of international humanitarian law. There is no independent international body authorized to classify armed conflicts.

which can be attributed in part to the armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic (figure 2). Yet while armed conflicts can cause many more deaths at specific points in time, such as during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, homicide accounts for significantly more lives lost over time. Since 2000, approximately 9.5 million people worldwide have lost their lives to homicidal violence, compared with an estimated 340,000 deaths resulting from terrorist attacks and roughly 1.5 million related to armed conflict. The cumulative number of homicide victims recorded globally since 2000 is roughly equal to the entire populations of large urban agglomerations\(^e\) such as London (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), Tehran (Islamic Republic of Iran), Nagoya (Japan) or Hyderabad (India).

**FIG. 2** Number of deaths caused by homicide, armed conflict and terrorism, 2000–2021

Sources: Homicide estimates are based on UNODC homicide statistics. Conflict death estimates are from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (available at https://ucdp.uu.se/exploratory) and include deaths from state-based violence, non-state violence and one-sided violence. Terrorist killings estimates are from the Global Terrorism Database (available at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/). Data on terrorist killings for the year 2021 are not yet available.

**Extent of intentional homicide in absolute numbers**

It is estimated that there were roughly 458,000 victims of intentional homicide worldwide in 2021, meaning that an average of 52 individuals lost their lives to homicidal violence every single hour. This global estimate is based on the updated UNODC homicide statistics database, which draws on national data submitted to UNODC by Member States through the annual United Nations Surveys on Crime Trends and the Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (UN-CTS) as well as other data sources.

Accounting for an estimated 176,000 victims, the largest number of intentional homicides in 2021 was in Africa, followed by the Americas, with more than 154,000 victims. In Asia, an estimated 109,000 people were killed intentionally in 2021, while the figure was 17,000 in Europe and 1,000 in Oceania (figure 4).\(^f\) This means that Africa accounted

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\(^c\) Common Article 2 of the Geneva Conventions.

\(^d\) Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Article 1 of Additional Protocol I.

\(^e\) Vité, S., “Typology of armed conflicts in international humanitarian law: legal concepts and actual situations”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 91, No. 873 (March 2009).

\(^f\) Article 1(2) of Additional Protocol II.

\(^g\) Vité, S., “Typology of armed conflicts in international humanitarian law: legal concepts and actual situations”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 91, No. 873 (March 2009).

\(^h\) Ibid.
FIG. 3  Magnitude of intentional homicide, by region and available country, 2021 or latest year available

Source: UNODC homicide statistics.
for roughly 38 per cent of all homicide victims globally in 2021, while the Americas accounted for 34 per cent, Asia for 24 per cent, Europe for 4 per cent and Oceania for fewer than 1 per cent.

Large disparities in homicide levels are also apparent at the national level. Indeed, a very small number of large, populous countries accounted for a significant share of the estimated global homicide toll of 458,000 victims in 2021. For example, Brazil and Nigeria, which jointly make up 6 per cent of the world population, accounted for around one fifth (20 per cent) of all homicide victims worldwide.\(^{15}\)

Taken together, the 10 countries with the largest absolute numbers of homicide victims account for around 58 per cent of all homicide victims worldwide, despite representing only 37 per cent of the global population (figure 3).\(^{16}\) As differences in absolute numbers of homicide victims between regions and countries are also a reflection of differences in the size of regional and national populations, however, it is important to examine the extent of homicide in terms of the homicide rate (per 100,000 population).

### Extent of homicide by rate

Although the magnitude of homicidal violence may be easier to conceive of in terms of the absolute number of victims, the homicide rate by population is better suited to capturing the relative risk of falling victim to homicide in a specific region or country. This is because the homicide rate takes into account differences across regions and countries in terms of population size and population growth. The global homicide rate in 2021 is estimated at 5.8 victims per 100,000 population.\(^{17}\) This estimate represents an improvement in data quality compared with the global estimates published in previous editions of the *Global Study on Homicide*, but there is still a considerable degree of uncertainty around the extent of homicide in numerous countries, in particular in Africa, Asia and Oceania.\(^{18}\)

Although the absolute number of intentional homicides was highest in Africa in 2021, there was a greater risk of being killed intentionally in the Americas than in any other region (figure 5), as the homicide rate in the Americas is estimated at 15 per 100,000 population as opposed to 12.7 in Africa, 2.9 in Oceania, 2.3 in Asia and 2.2 in Europe.
**FIG. 6** Countries with the highest or lowest homicide rates in selected subregions, 2021 or latest year since 2019 with available data

Source: UNODC homicide statistics. Data for Cuba are from 2019.

*Note: Countries and territories with a population of less than 1 million and countries with no available homicide data for the period 2019–2021 are not considered for the comparison.*
A total of 18 countries and territories had a homicide rate above 20 per 100,000 population in 2021, most of them in the Americas (14 in total), three in Africa (South Africa, Lesotho and Nigeria) and one in Asia (Myanmar). Taken together, these 18 countries and territories make up some 10 per cent of the global population, yet they accounted for more than 41 per cent of the global homicide toll in 2021. That said, eight of them are small islands in the Caribbean with a population of less than 1 million, which means that their homicide rates are highly variable and that just a few homicides can lead to a dramatic change in the homicide rate.

As regional homicide rates are effectively a combination of the homicide rates in all the countries located in a specific region, they inevitably mask considerable variability in levels of lethal violence within regions, subregions and between countries (figure 6). In 2021, the highest national homicide rate in South-Eastern Asia (Myanmar), for example, was roughly 28 times higher than the lowest (Singapore) and the highest national homicide rate in the Caribbean (Jamaica) was 12 times higher than the lowest (Cuba).

In Central America and South America, disparities between national homicide rates are also large, but less pronounced. For example, in 2021, the highest national homicide rate in Central America (Honduras) was roughly seven times higher than the lowest (Nicaragua) and the highest national homicide rate in South America (Colombia) was eight times higher than the lowest (Bolivia (Plurinational State of)).

In Europe, disparities between national homicide rates vary by subregion. In Western Europe, for example, the highest national homicide rate in 2021 (France) was roughly double the lowest (Switzerland), while in Northern Europe, the highest (Latvia) was seven times higher than the lowest (Ireland), comparable to the disparity between national homicide rates in Central America, albeit at a much lower level (figure 6). Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe, the highest national homicide rate (Russian Federation) was 15 times higher than the lowest (Czechia), a greater disparity than in the Caribbean.

Although several countries have yet to release their 2022 homicide figures, available data indicate a decrease in the global homicide rate in 2022, owing for the most part to a decrease in the number of homicides in Asia and to a lesser extent in the Americas. While this decrease partially offsets the significant increase in the global homicide rate observed in 2021, it is important to note that several countries in Africa and in the Caribbean that have reported 2022 data experienced an increase in the number of homicides from the previous year, indicating a probable rise in the homicide rate in those regions from 2021 to 2022.
Homicide data: criminal justice data sources versus public health sources

Homicide data are mostly derived from either criminal justice or public health data registries. In the former, data are generated by law enforcement authorities in charge of recording and investigating a criminal act, which are typically police departments or public prosecutions. Health authorities also collect data on cause of death, which is determined by national medical services. UNODC primarily collects criminal justice data through UN-CTS, in line with ICCS, as well as other available sources. Public health data on homicide, on the other hand, are sourced from national vital registration statistics provided by Member States or collected by the World Health Organization (WHO) and are categorized as deaths caused by violence according to the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD). ICD-10 codes X85–Y09 (injuries inflicted by another person with intent to injure or kill) and ICD-10 code Y87.1 (sequelae of assault), or ICD-11 codes PD50-PF2Z and PJ20-PJ2Z, generally correspond to the definition of intentional homicide.

In the case of countries where data are available from both sources, preference is given to criminal justice data, as they provide legal information on the criminal act, which is needed to align the data with ICCS. In such cases, public health data are still used to assess possible discrepancies and, in exceptional cases (such as Brazil and Mexico), are preferred over criminal justice data due to their comprehensiveness and quality. Where there are no criminal justice data available, public health data are used to complement data on total homicide counts, although the number of countries where this is necessary has decreased considerably over the years.

Finally, household surveys including a crime victimization module with questions on the prevalence of interpersonal killings in the household may be used to estimate the rate and number of intentional homicides in a country. A concrete example of such an approach is the Survey on Quality and Integrity of Public Services in Nigeria, which integrates a module enabling the estimation of intentional homicides. Another example is the National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Security (ENVIPPE), in Mexico, which includes questions on homicide.

Global homicide trend

Fluctuating between around 400,000 and 450,000 victims annually, the total number of homicides recorded worldwide each year has remained relatively stable over the past two decades (figure 7). Since 2007, there has been little improvement in the absolute number of homicide victims at the global level, with 2021 being an exceptionally lethal year in which roughly 458,000 people were killed intentionally, more than in any other year in the previous two decades (figure 7). Although the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on intentional homicides varied across countries in 2020, the noticeable spike in killings in 2021 can be attributed in part to the economic repercussions of COVID-related restrictions, as well as to an escalation of gang-related and sociopolitical violence in several countries, including Ecuador and Myanmar.

When considering the global number of homicide victims in relation to the global population, the global homicide rate can be seen to have declined by 16 per cent between 2000 and 2021, from 6.9 to 5.8 per 100,000 population, which reflects the fact the absolute number of homicides has remained somewhat stable despite the rapid growth of the global population.

The homicide rate is one of the main indicators agreed on by Member States for measuring progress towards target 16.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals: “Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere”. Reducing the number of intentional homicides is crucial to this target because, as mentioned above, homicidal violence is responsible for many more deaths worldwide than armed conflict and terrorism combined.

Sources: Homicide estimates based on UNODC homicide statistics.
If the increase in homicide in 2021 is an indication of a trend reversal, target 16.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals will definitely not be met, as shown in the “pessimistic” scenario in figure 10. In a more “optimistic” scenario in which 2021 is considered to be an exceptional year with no bearing on future homicide trends, projecting the trend in the homicide rate from the period 2015–2020\textsuperscript{5} to 2030, the deadline of the Sustainable Development Goals, suggests that if this pattern of violence persists, the global homicide rate will be in the region of 4.6 per 100,000 population in 2030, resulting in an overall decrease of just 23 per cent from the homicide rate of 5.9 per 100,000 population in 2015, with a very similar decrease for both sexes (figure 8). This projected decrease in the global homicide rate would also fall short of the significant reduction referred to in target 16.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which can be translated as a decrease in the homicide rate of at least 50 per cent by 2030 (see dotted line in figure 8).
Regional homicide trends

Just as the regional homicide rate masks variability in levels of lethal violence within regions, subregions and between countries, the global trend in the homicide rate hides significant variability and disparities at the regional level. For example, the homicide rate in Europe has declined modestly over the past decade, whereas the homicide rate in the Americas has undergone greater fluctuation over time, with some significant decreases recorded since 2017 (figure 9). Nonetheless, in 2021, the homicide rate in the Americas remained more than six times higher than in Europe.

Africa is the region where the homicide rate has the greatest level of uncertainty because of the limited availability of trend data from countries in the region. The data available suggest, however, that the homicide rate in Africa has remained relatively stable over the past decade, although there was a marked uptick in killings recorded in 2021, almost two years into the COVID-19 pandemic (figure 10). Nonetheless, in 2021, the homicide rate in the Americas remained more than six times higher than in Europe.

A similar phenomenon occurred in Asia where, despite the homicide rate declining modestly over the past decade, from 2.7 per 100,000 population in 2010 to 2.3 in 2021, the downward trend was reversed in 2021 after a sharp increase in killings, most notably in Myanmar, drove the homicide rate back to a level not seen since 2016. In Oceania, the homicide rate has also remained relatively stable, fluctuating at around 2.9 per 100,000 population over the past decade (figure 10).
Estimating the homicide rate in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, primary research has been carried out on the extent of homicidal violence, but different data sources paint different pictures. Criminal justice data on homicide in Nigeria do not capture the full extent of lethal victimization in the country and seem incomplete. In 2017, for example, the Nigeria Police Force recorded 3,219 homicides, resulting in a homicide rate of roughly 1.6 per 100,000, which was lower than in Canada. This may indicate that only a limited share of all the homicides in the country make it to the official records, not least given that, based on a model that imputes homicide data based on socioeconomic indicators, WHO estimated that there were 33,817 victims of homicide in Nigeria in 2012. Homicide is not included among the leading causes of death of men and women in Nigeria by WHO, however. An alternative source to official statistics is open-source monitoring, recording violent deaths as they are reported in the media and other sources. Yet just as police sources may fail to record all homicides, not every homicide may be recorded in open sources and reliance on open sources can introduce bias. Intimate partner homicides, for example, are less likely to appear in the media than organized attacks, thus in order to capture killings that may be considered less dramatic, or that occur in more remote areas, an alternative is to gather data through household victimization surveys. To that end, in April and May 2016, the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, in cooperation with UNODC, conducted a survey with questions designed to elicit the number of homicides in the country. In total, 33,067 households were polled in all 36 of the country’s states and the capital territory. This resulted in a national estimate of roughly 64,000 homicides per year, corresponding to an annual rate of some 34 homicides per 100,000 population between 2013 and 2016. This figure is not only much higher than the official figures reported by the police but also most public health or media-monitoring estimates.

Estimated homicide rate in Nigeria, by sex, 2016 and 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Elaborated by UNODC with data from ACLED and UNODC homicide statistics.

A follow-up survey conducted in 2019 resulted in a significantly lower estimate of 44,200 homicides, corresponding to an annual rate of 22 per 100,000, between 2016 and 2019. The resulting decrease from the previous survey, while dramatic, was also reflected in other data sources, such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) conflict event fatality data. Questions remain about the validity of the estimates of intentional homicides resulting from the household surveys and refer mostly to whether respondents understood the questions accurately and excluded unintentional homicides and other deaths from their answers. Moreover, the household surveys did not cover certain groups of people, such as victims who lived in single-person households, victims who lived in closed settings, such as refugee camps, foster homes or prisons, and victims who lived in households with no surviving household members who could be interviewed. Other groups not covered in the survey samples included homeless people and people who had moved abroad between the reference period and the time the surveys were conducted.

Despite these limitations, the high estimates obtained in the two household surveys indicate that improvements in national data collection efforts and criminal justice statistics are urgently needed in order to more accurately determine the actual level of lethal violence in Nigeria and identify the underlying causes of any fluctuations.

Annual number of conflict fatalities estimated by ACLED and of homicides estimated by UNODC in Nigeria, three-year averages, 2013–2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>ACLED</th>
<th>UNODC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 2013-May 2016</td>
<td>9,053</td>
<td>23,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2016-June 2019</td>
<td>5,141</td>
<td>44,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Elaborated by UNODC with data from ACLED and UNODC homicide statistics.

For more information, see https://data.worldbank.org/country/Nigeria.™

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Subregional homicide trends

Europe

Since the early 1990s at least, homicide rates in the subregions of Europe have generally remained below the global average. The exception is Eastern Europe, which is also the European subregion where the most noteworthy homicide trend has been seen over the past decade. The homicide rate has declined significantly in Eastern Europe during this period, albeit from a much higher level than in the other European subregions (figure 11), from an estimated 6.9 per 100,000 population in 2010 to 4.3 per in 2021. Given that Eastern Europe includes the Russian Federation, which has a far larger population than any other country in the subregion, the declining homicide trend in Eastern Europe has been primarily driven by the trend in that country, which has reported a marked (40 per cent) decline in the annual number of homicides to UNODC, from roughly 17,000 in 2010 to less than 10,000 in 2021.

FIG. 11  Trends in the homicide rate in Europe, by subregion, 2010–2021

The trend in homicidal violence in the Russian Federation has been attributed to various drivers, including changes in alcohol consumption patterns, the availability of firearms and the socioeconomic upheaval resulting from the country’s transition from a communist to a capitalist society. Neighbouring Belarus has experienced a similar decline in homicidal violence, but at a much lower level than in the Russian Federation, at roughly 400 victims in 2010 to just over 200 in 2019, the latest year with available data. Other populous countries in Eastern Europe have not exhibited such a clear downward trend, however, suggesting that national homicide trends in Eastern Europe have not followed a singular trajectory over the past decade. In Romania, for example, the annual number of homicides has fluctuated at around 250 victims during the past decade, while Ukraine saw an increase in homicides at the beginning of the decade, followed by a decline from 2017 to 2021. The heterogeneity of these national homicide trends is hidden in the subregional trend for Eastern Europe.

In both Southern and Northern Europe, the subregional homicide rate has also declined over the past decade, albeit at a significantly lower level than in Eastern Europe (figure 11). By contrast, little progress in reducing the homicide rate has been recorded in Western Europe, where it has fluctuated around a relatively stable longer-term trend of around 1 per 100,000 population.

Americas

In the Americas, trends in the homicide rate have been diverging between the different subregions over the past decade (figure 12). In South America, the homicide rate has been on a downward trend since 2017, driven primarily by a decline in the annual number of homicides recorded in Brazil, the most populous country in the subregion, where homicides fell from a temporary peak of more than 63,000 in 2017 to less than 46,000 in 2021. Several possible causal factors behind the recent decline in homicide in Brazil have been identified in studies, such as demographic change, changes in policing and the increasing dominance of certain organized crime groups, as well as public policies, including those relating to gun control. What is clear is that the national homicide trend hides markedly diverging trends at the subnational level in Brazil, which suggests that no single causal factor is likely to provide a full explanation for the national trend.

Likewise, Peru and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) have also recorded reductions in the number of annual killings in recent years, but that has not been the case in other countries in South America. Colombia and Ecuador, for example, both recorded significant increases in homicidal violence between the end of 2020 and the end of 2021, which in the case of Ecuador in particular can be attributed to organized crime and gang-related violence.

As in South America, the subregional homicide rate in the Caribbean has declined by around 19 per cent over the past decade (figure 12). This longer-term subregional decline in the Caribbean can be partly explained by a downward trend in homicidal violence in a few populous countries (and territories), such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, while other relatively populous countries in the subregion, most notably Haiti and Jamaica, have seen an increase in deadly violence in recent years, which can explain the reversal in the subregional trend since 2018. Indeed, 2022 data from several countries in the subregion show an increase in homicidal violence, for example, the number of homicides increased by 35 per cent in Haiti from 2021 to 2022. Initial data from other countries in the subregion, such as the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, also suggest an increase in the number of homicides in 2022.
In contrast to South America and the Caribbean, Northern America has seen an increase in the homicide rate over the past decade, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (figure 12). The recent homicide trend in Northern America is explained primarily by the national trend in the United States of America, which recorded an increase of nearly 30 per cent in the number of homicides from the end of 2019 to the end of 2020, followed by a smaller increase of around 6 per cent in 2021. Various explanations have been put forward to explain the surge in homicides in the United States in 2020, including the implementation of COVID-19 confinement measures, changes in police-community relations and record gun sales in the country. That said, estimates based on the recently implemented National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) and the Summary Reporting System (SRS) indicate that homicides in the United States decreased nationwide by 6.1 per cent from 2021 to 2022, and data from 30 American cities point to a decrease in homicides in the first half of 2023 compared with during the first half of 2022. In neighbouring Canada, the annual number of homicides has been increasing steadily since 2013, including by 10 per cent from 2019 to 2020. At 2.1 per 100,000 population in 2021, however, the homicide rate is still significantly lower in Canada than in the United States, where it is more than three times higher.

Central America continues to be the subregion in the Americas with the highest and most volatile homicide rate (figure 12). The national homicide trend in Mexico, which accounted for roughly 77 per cent of all homicide victims in the subregion in 2021, has driven the subregional trend over the past decade. The temporary dip in lethal violence around 2014 and the subsequent surge in killings between 2015 and 2018 in particular, can be largely attributed to organized crime-related violence in Mexico. Although the level of homicidal violence in Mexico has remained relatively high since 2018, several smaller countries in the subregion, most notably El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, have recorded significant reductions in the annual number of homicides in recent years, albeit from very high baseline levels. These dynamics can explain why, on average, the subregional homicide trend in Central America has been a declining one since 2018 (figure 12).

Asia

In Asia, there has been an overall moderate decline in the homicide rate over the past decade that hides substantially diverging trends at the subregional level (figure 13), including two particularly noteworthy developments. The first is the significant decrease in the homicide rate recorded in Central Asia, from 5.4 per 100,000 population in 2010 to 1.9 in 2021, a nearly threefold decrease. The decline in Central Asia can be attributed to a large extent to a reduction in the annual number of homicides in Kazakhstan, from around 1,400 in 2010 to 600 in 2020, the latest year with available data. The temporary increase in the homicide rate in the subregion around 2016 can in turn be attributed to a significant spike in killings recorded in Uzbekistan, the subregion’s most populous country (figure 13).

The second noteworthy development in Asia concerns the drastic increase in the homicide rate in South-Eastern Asia from the end of 2020 to the end of 2021 (figure 13). This increase can be traced to the escalation of sociopolitical violence in Myanmar, where a nearly tenfold increase in the reported number of homicides, from roughly 1,500 to more than 15,000 was recorded in that period. The continued presence of armed groups and thriving illicit markets, notably involving methamphetamine manufacture and opium cultivation, along with economic insecurity, may be contributing factors, but the lack of official data and disaggregated information on the situational context of homicides makes this challenging to determine.
Prior to 2021, the subregional homicide trend in South-Eastern Asia was driven primarily by the national trend in the Philippines due to the large size of its population relative to other countries in the subregion; vigilante violence and the activities of organized crime and terrorist groups play an important role in explaining the trend. Other populous countries in the subregion, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, have recorded reductions in the annual number of homicides over the past decade, which contributed to the general downward trend in the subregion prior to 2021. An important data gap in South-Eastern Asia exists in the case of Viet Nam, which has not reported data on the number of homicide victims since 2011.

The subregional trends in Eastern Asia and Southern Asia are respectively dominated by national trends in China and India, both of which have recorded steady declines in the annual number of homicides over the past decade (figure 13). In contrast to the other subregions in Asia, the homicide rate in Western Asia has shown little sign of improvement over the past decade, fluctuating at the relatively high level of roughly 5 per 100,000 population (figure 13).

**Spotlight on Myanmar**

Despite a lack of situational context, the increase in killings in Myanmar between the end of 2020 and the end of 2021, which according to data from the Myanmar Police Forces submitted to UNODC by the Central Statistical Organization increased tenfold to more than 15,000, can be attributed to a complex interplay between sociopolitical factors and deepening crises following the military takeover in 2021. This includes the activities of non-state armed groups, ethnic conflicts, economic insecurity, the breakdown of law and order and corruption.

The military takeover, which took place on 1 February 2021, and the increase in violence that followed it represent a watershed moment in the country. Although the military takeover was not immediately followed by violent responses by security forces, the use of lethal force against protesters was reported within a few weeks. Credible sources are reported to have verified 2,940 killings of civilians by the military between the military takeover and January 2023.

In this context, the continued presence of non-state armed groups in the country has been another factor in the rising level of violence and the country’s overall destabilization. The increased availability of weapons, may have further contributed to the rise in homicide, with at least $1 billion in arms, dual-use goods, equipment and raw materials for manufacturing weapons being imported into Myanmar between the military takeover in February 2021 and December 2022. Conflict between the Myanmar security forces and ethnic armed organizations and other anti-military elements have also contributed directly to the number of people killed. Antimilitary elements have publicly claimed responsibility for killings of current or former ward and village administrators and suspected military informants. Although not independently validated, information provided by the military has indicated that attacks by anti-military armed groups and elements had led to the death of 6,000 civilians by 30 June 2023.

The Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar to the Human Rights Council noted that the intensity and sustained nature of the violence and the degree of organization of the armed groups fighting against the Myanmar security forces appear to satisfy the threshold for the existence of an armed conflict. Due to a lack of verifiable information, it is difficult to assess to what extent the killings recorded in Myanmar since the military takeover were intentional homicides or conflict deaths. However, irrespective of the type of killing, it is important to note that similar trends in and levels of killings in Myanmar for the years 2020 and 2021 have been reported across different data sources (figure 14).

Data for 2022 reported by the Myanmar Police Force indicate that the number of homicides that year decreased to just over 2,000. Conversely, other sources indicate that there may have been an acceleration in lethal violence, further highlighting the difficulty of distinguishing between homicides and deaths related to armed conflict in the Myanmar context.

Economic factors may have played an important role in the evolution of crime trends in Myanmar. The political upheaval following the military takeover disrupted economic activities and livelihoods, leading to widespread financial

**FIG. 14 Fatalities caused by violent events in Myanmar, 2020–2021**

![Graph showing fatalities caused by violent events in Myanmar, 2020–2021](source: Myanmar Police Force and ACLED.

Note: "Number of fatalities recorded by ACLED" includes violence against civilians, battles, explosions/remote violence, protests, riots.)
difficulties, with the number of employed people in the country reportedly falling by 1.6 million, or 8 per cent, between the end of 2020 and the end of 2021. This may have been a factor in the surge in violence in the country, as some people have turned to criminal behaviour, including homicide, according to the media.

Between the end of 2020 and the end of 2021, confidence in the Government plunged from 86 per cent to 28 per cent and the political instability and prolonged unrest impacted public services, including law enforcement and emergency services. Indeed, the proportion of the population that feel safe walking alone around the area they live after dark fell from 69 per cent in 2020 to 39 per cent in 2021. Criminal activities seem to have thrived as a result of the weakening of law enforcement and oversight, leading to an overall increase in crime, including homicide, as reported in the media.

Moreover, there are signs that organized crime networks are expanding in the country. Opium poppy cultivation is estimated to have increased by 33 per cent from the 2021 season to the 2022 season, which began in November 2021. Opium poppy cultivation is closely linked to multi-dimensional poverty, insecurity and a lack of services and although only a small part of the proceeds of the illicit trade in drugs is generated within Myanmar, opium poppy cultivation is closely linked to insecurity and conflict in the country. An increase in drug production and trafficking can further accelerate and reinforce these linkages, particularly in light of the country’s current environment of insecurity, weakened rule of law and economy.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the lack of official data and disaggregated information on the situational context of killings makes understanding the interplay between the reasons behind the escalation in lethal violence in Myanmar a challenge. Accurate and comprehensive data are crucial to understanding the root causes and dynamics of the increase in killings and the development of effective strategies to address the issue.

Africa and Oceania

Comprehensive data on homicide trends are not available for many countries in Africa and Oceania, which makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about longer-term trends at the subregional level in those two regions. In Oceania, reliable trend data are available only for Australia and New Zealand, where homicide rates have remained relatively stable over the past decade, other than for a short-term spike in 2019 in New Zealand that was attributable to the Christchurch mosque shootings.

Because of the very limited availability of reliable homicide data from countries in Africa, it remains very difficult to identify a general homicide trend for the region, given that homicide rates and trends can vary widely between countries and subregions. Some of the variations observed may reflect genuine differences in levels of criminal violence across countries but may also be due to different capacities of national authorities to record homicide data. In Africa, longer-term homicide trend data are only available for a selected number of countries and, even then, the time series frequently contains gaps (figure 15 and figure 16).

Although the available national data do not provide sufficient evidence to draw conclusions about a general regional trend, several national homicide trends in the different subregions of Africa are still noteworthy. In Southern Africa, for example, South Africa has recorded a steady increase in the homicide rate over the past decade, with a temporary decrease at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 followed by a significant spike in lethal violence in 2021, including an increase in crime-related homicide (figure 15). Available trend data from neighbouring Namibia indicate that the spike in violence almost two years into the COVID-19 pandemic observed in South Africa may not necessarily have affected other countries in the subregion, however, even those sharing a historical legacy of racial and economic inequality.

In Eastern Africa, available homicide trend data point to significant heterogeneity between countries, for example, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania have both recorded reductions in homicidal violence in recent years, while Kenya has seen a dramatic increase in annual homicides since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (figure 16). Moreover, in Northern Africa, available trend data from two relatively populous countries, Algeria and Morocco, suggest that homicide rates have been steadily increasing over the past decade while remaining at significantly lower levels than those observed in countries in other subregions of Africa (figure 16).
Demographics of homicide victims

Given that the overall homicide rate only provides an initial indication of the general level of lethal violence in a country, if the underlying reasons for fluctuations in the rate are to be understood and public policy targeted adequately, the homicide rate needs to be disaggregated by, for example, the sex and age of victims. It is well documented that both sex and age have a strong bearing, along with other factors, on the likelihood of victimization by homicide.\(^6\) The sex and age of homicide victims are also the two most readily available and comparable demographic characteristics at the global and regional levels.

Sex of homicide victims

Homicidal violence has a clear gender dimension. In 2021, more than 8 out of 10 homicide victims worldwide were men and boys (81 per cent) while fewer than 2 out of 10 were women and girls (19 per cent). This means that, at the global level, the male homicide rate was more than four times the female homicide rate, at 9.3 male victims per 100,000 male population as opposed to 2.2 female victims per 100,000 female population.

Although the male homicide rate exceeds the female homicide rate in all the regions, the “sex gap” in homicide victimization varies significantly between regions (figure 17). In 2021, the regions with the highest male homicide rates were the Americas (27.0 male victims per 100,000 male population) and Africa (20.8), while the regions with the lowest were Asia (3.2), Europe (3.4) and Oceania (4.1).

By contrast, there was much less variability in the female homicide rate between regions, with Africa being the region with the highest female homicide rate in 2021 (4.6 female victims per 100,000 female population) and Europe the region with the lowest (1.2).

As mentioned above, the male homicide rate varies considerably across regions (figure 17). Moreover, in regions with a high overall level of homicidal violence, such as Africa and the Americas, the difference between the male and female homicide rates is generally greater than in other regions and, consequently, the proportion of male homicide victims is higher. The relationship between the overall homicide rate and the male share of homicide victims not only holds at the regional level but also at the country level and countries with a higher overall homicide rate tend to have a larger share of male victims (figure 18 and figure 19). The sole exception to this pattern is Oceania, where this relationship cannot be seen in the only three countries with data. In 2021, just a handful of countries recorded more female homicide victims than male homicide victims and they were all countries with a relatively low overall homicide rate located in Europe: Austria, Czechia, Iceland, Latvia, Norway, Slovenia and Switzerland (figure 19).

The variation in the “sex gap” in homicide victimization between regions and countries largely depends on what drives national homicide rates.\(^6\) In regions or countries with relatively high homicide rates, male-to-male killings, often between gang members or organized crime groups, drive high levels of lethal violence and tend to be the dominant type of homicide, while in those with relatively low homicide rates, intimate partner/family-related homicide tends to account for a larger share of homicides. This type of homicide is predominantly the result of male-to-female...
violence and its level tends to be more stable across countries and regions than other types of homicide. Thus, male-to-male homicide explains much of the variability in overall homicide levels and uncovering the drivers of such homicides is crucial if global and regional homicide trends are to be fully understood.

**Age of homicide victims**

Disaggregated data on the age of homicide victims are not as readily available as data on the sex of victims. In the Americas and Europe, the availability of age-disaggregated data enables the production of regional estimates of the age profile of homicide victims, whereas in Asia, Africa and Oceania, the availability of such data is limited, making regional estimates of the age profile of homicide victims unreliable in those regions.

Age-disaggregated homicide estimates in the Americas and Europe suggest that young men are most at risk of homicidal violence. In 2021, young men aged 15–29 years in the Americas were those most at risk of homicide, with an estimated rate of 53.6 male victims per 100,000 male population in that age group – twice the average male homicide rate in the Americas (27) and more than five times the global male homicide rate of 9.3 per 100,000 male population (figure 20). In Europe, on other hand, men aged 30–44 years were the age group most at risk of homicide, with a rate of 5.7 per 100,000 male population in 2021 (figure 21). Women and girls face a much lower homicide risk than men and boys across all age groups, both in the Americas and Europe. The relative age-specific homicide risks are comparable across the sexes, however, with women and girls aged 15–29 years also facing the highest risk of homicide in the Americas and women aged 30–44 years are those most at risk in Europe.

Data for the years 2008 to 2017 show that globally 6 out of 10 victims of intentional homicide under the age of 15 in that period were male. The overall homicide rate increases with age, with the sex disparity increasing sharply after the age of 14 years. The preponderance of male victims starts to become apparent from 10–14 years of age in the Americas, while in Europe this is the case from 18–19 years of age.

Data for the period 2015–2021 indicate that broad regional age patterns of homicide victimization remain relatively stable over time (figure 20 and figure 21). It is nonetheless useful to investigate age-specific homicide rates over time because changes in such rates may indicate the target populations where prevention policies are working as well as those where they are not. Sex and age-specific homicide trend estimates for Europe and the Americas suggest that while the recent decrease in the regional homicide rate in the Americas has been primarily concentrated among young men aged 15 to 29 years (figure 20), the decline in the regional homicide rate in Europe appears to have been spread equally across the sexes and different age groups (figure 21). One explanation for the concentrated age- and sex-specific decrease in the Americas between 2015 and 2021 is that homicide related to organized crime – the predominant homicide type in the Americas – tends primarily to affect young men, and a decrease in...
organized crime-related homicide may have affected the decrease in the number of young male homicide victims. Trends in organized crime-related violence tend to be more volatile than trends in interpersonal homicide, the predominant homicide type in Europe.\(^7^1\)

### Patterns and trends in child homicide

Previous research has indicated that intentional killings of young children are mainly perpetrated by family members.\(^7^2\) Among other factors, such killings tend to be linked to gender stereotypes, family violence and mental health problems among the victims’ parents.\(^7^3\) As children grow older, they are more likely to fall victim to homicide perpetrated outside the family context. In the Americas, young men are particularly at risk of homicide related to organized crime and gang-related violence.\(^7^4\) At the global level, systematic information on the situational context of child homicide remains limited, however, with homicide data provided to UNODC by Member States not capturing the relationship between victims and perpetrators disaggregated by the age of victims.\(^7^5\)

Globally, children\(^7^6\) make up a relatively small share of the total number of homicide victims. It is estimated that around 71,600 homicide victims in 2021 were children, which equates to just over 15 per cent of the estimated total that year.\(^7^7\) The disproportionate victimization of men and boys\(^7^8\) observed globally (83 per cent of adults) is less pronounced in young age groups, but male victims

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**FIG. 20** Homicide rate in the Americas, by sex and age group, 2015 and 2021

![Graph showing homicide rate in the Americas by sex and age group, 2015 and 2021](image1)

*Source: Estimates based on UNODC homicide statistics.*

**FIG. 21** Homicide rate in Europe, by sex and age group, 2015 and 2021

![Graph showing homicide rate in Europe by sex and age group, 2015 and 2021](image2)

*Source: Estimates based on UNODC homicide statistics.*
Still account for more than two thirds (67 per cent) of child homicide victims (figure 22).

The gender disparity in the homicide rate among children and young people increases with age, as it does in the total homicide rate. There tends to be parity in the homicide rate among male and female child victims aged 0–9 years, while in older age groups, males become significantly more likely than females to fall victim to homicide. Research suggests that the killing of young children in the context of domestic violence tends to affect male and female children to a similar extent. By contrast, in the case of older children and young adults, who are more likely to fall victim to non-domestic homicide, young males are more vulnerable than young females because they are more exposed to organized crime and gang-related violence.

Although disaggregated trend data on the age of homicide victims are not readily available at the global level, in the Americas and Europe, the availability of reliable age-disaggregated data enables the production of regional trend estimates of child homicide victims. By contrast, in Asia, Africa and Oceania, the availability of age-disaggregated data is more limited, making regional trend estimates of child homicide victims unreliable in those regions.

In the Americas, trend estimates for the period 2010–2021 suggest that trends in the male and female child homicide rates tend to move in tandem over time and that, to some extent, they mirror the trend in the total homicide rate observed over the same period in the region, with decreases recorded in recent years after a temporary peak around 2017. The male child homicide rate in the Americas is more than five times the female child homicide rate, however, and year-on-year fluctuations in the male child homicide trend appear to be stronger than in the female child homicide trend (figure 23).

As in the Americas, trends in the male and female child homicide rates in Europe also tend to move in tandem. Over the period 2010–2021, the male and female child homicide rates also moved largely in the same direction as the total homicide trend in the region, although declining at a more moderate pace. A noticeable exception is the period between the end of 2020 and the end of 2021, where both the male and female child homicide rate increased in Europe while the total homicide rate continued to decrease (figure 24).
How the COVID-19 pandemic has affected homicide trends

There are many possible causal mechanisms through which the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 may have affected homicide trends globally, regionally and nationally. Arguably, the most relevant mechanisms are those that have resulted from the COVID-19-related mobility restrictions (“lockdowns”) imposed by Governments to curtail the spread of the virus. These restrictions include a whole range of policy measures, each of which may have resulted in different impacts on homicide trends, both in the short term and the longer term. Restrictive measures range from social distancing and bans on gatherings in public spaces, the closure of hospitality and educational establishments, businesses and factories, to travel restrictions and electronic surveillance of the daily movements of citizens.

When assessing the possible impact of lockdowns on homicide trends it is useful to distinguish between the short-term impact that may have occurred within the first few days or months of the implementation of lockdowns and the longer-term impact. In the short term, the crime “opportunity” mechanism may have affected homicide in different ways, as lockdown restrictions may have reduced the “opportunity” to commit crimes such as street robbery and gang-related violence, while the “opportunity” to commit homicide by intimate partners and family members, which typically occurs behind closed doors, may have increased domestic homicides. In the longer-term, the negative social and economic repercussions of lockdowns, which may include increased stress and anxiety, unemployment or loss of income, can be expected to affect homicide trends by creating an environment of “strain” that drives individuals to commit crime. The influence of the “strain” mechanism is likely to have a more long-lasting effect on homicide trends, even after lockdowns are lifted (figure 25). It is important to acknowledge that no single lockdown-related mechanism can be expected to explain all variations in homicide trends. Furthermore, homicide trends are likely to be influenced by the level of support provided by Governments to mitigate lockdown-related challenges, as well as by pre-existing conditions in countries in terms of crime and governance.

Although empirical research has not definitively established a causal link between the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on mental health and an increase in interpersonal conflict and violence, there is a possible connection. The COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide. Mental health services were also impacted by the pandemic, which reduced their ability to respond to the demand for services. Furthermore, the economic strain and social isolation resulting from the pandemic may have exacerbated existing tensions within households and communities, further increasing the potential for violence. Previous research has highlighted how mental health challenges resulting from violent crime can perpetuate a cycle of violence. Traumatized individuals may become more prone to engaging in violent acts as a maladaptive coping mechanism or to seek retribution. Additionally, the fear of victimization can lead individuals to arm themselves in self-defence, potentially escalating conflicts and increasing the overall level of violence in society. Addressing mental health challenges is a crucial factor in breaking this cycle and promoting safer communities.

**FIG. 25** Simulation of crime trends based on causal mechanisms that influence crime during a pandemic


More than three years into the COVID-19 pandemic, there is increasing cross-national evidence on the short-term impact of the lockdowns on homicide trends, albeit with a preponderance of evidence from countries in the Americas and Europe. By contrast, cross-national evidence on the longer-term impact remains limited and largely inconclusive.

Evidence on the short-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on homicide

Available cross-national evidence suggests that while the short-term impact of the lockdown measures on homicide trends was highly heterogeneous and context-specific, it appears to have been relatively limited and short-lived overall.

Monthly data from 21 countries (mostly in the Americas and Europe) show diverse trends in the number of homicide victims recorded after the introduction of lockdown measures, with no clear overall pattern emerging. In 7 out of 10 countries where it was possible to use pre-COVID-19 monthly trends for comparison, the decrease in the number of homicide victims recorded from March to April 2020 was more than 25 per cent larger than the average change recorded during the same months over the period 2015–2019. Any significant changes in national homicide trends were short-lived, however, and pre-pandemic dynamics soon returned.

Using daily crime data from 27 cities across 23 countries in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East and Asia, a recent interrupted time series analysis suggested that the lockdowns were associated with considerable but relatively short-lived reductions in urban crime, with substantial variations across cities and types of crime. However, in contrast to other types of crime such as robbery, theft and assault, all of which declined significantly during the lockdowns, homicide trends were found to be much less affected, with some notable exceptions in the cities of Cali (Colombia), Lima (Peru) and Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). The study hypothesized, but did not show empirically, that the limited impact of the lockdowns on urban homicide trends in the short-term could be explained in part by the large share of domestic homicides not affected by the related reduction in the number of daily encounters in cities, as well as the share of homicides related to organized crime groups, whose activities may be less impacted by changes in the daily routines of ordinary citizens.

Another possible explanation is that the overall limited impact of the lockdowns on homicide trends can be explained by the different effects they may have had on different types of homicide, with, for example, increases in domestic homicide “cancelling out” decreases in non-domestic homicide.

Several country-specific studies point to the highly heterogeneous and context-specific impact of the lockdowns on homicide trends in the short-term. A recent study in Mexico, for example, where organized crime is an important driver of homicide trends, also supports the hypothesis that trends in organized crime-related homicide may have been relatively unaffected by the lockdowns. Using weekly crime data for 2019 and 2020 from 16 districts in Mexico City, the study found no evidence that the lockdowns had a discernible effect on homicide trends, while other types of crime such as domestic violence, burglary and vehicle theft reported to the authorities decreased sharply. However, the decrease in reported domestic violence was not interpreted as an actual decrease in victimization.

By contrast, evidence from Bihar (India) suggests that the lockdowns resulted in a significant (60 per cent) decrease in homicides recorded by police departments; studies in Peru and South Africa also point to significant short-term reductions in homicidal violence. The short-term decrease in South Africa has been linked to a nationwide ban on alcohol sales implemented in March 2020 that, according to a recent study, reduced recorded homicides by 21 per cent and injury-induced mortality by at least 14 per cent. In this regard, it is important to note that decreases in recorded or reported homicide during the lockdowns may also reflect the reduced capacity of the criminal justice and health registration systems to record homicide victims accurately in that period.

Spotlight on Colombia and Guatemala

Colombia

In Colombia, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant short-term impact on homicide trends. Initially, the strict lockdown measures implemented in March 2020 resulted in a notable reduction in the number of homicide victims. In April 2020, there were 32 per cent fewer victims than the average recorded in the same month over the period 2015–2019. This decline in homicides was short-lived, however, as the monthly number of victims had returned to pre-pandemic levels by June. As a result, Colombia recorded 11,452 victims of intentional homicide in 2020, a slight decrease of 300 victims from the 2019 figure. This was followed by a significant surge in homicides in 2021, with the number rising to 13,223 victims, a 15.5 per cent increase from the previous year.

A study exploring the impact of the pandemic on homicide rates in Colombia found that in municipalities where there was a high number of COVID-19 infections and organized criminal groups had a strong presence, there was an increase in homicide during the first five months of the pandemic, whereas in those where there was a low number of infections and organized criminal groups had a weak presence, the opposite occurred.
criminal groups seem to have displayed adaptability during the pandemic by adjusting their operations to bypass lockdown measures. This suggests that certain criminal opportunities persisted despite the measures, enabling organized criminal activities to remain relatively stable.

The lockdown measures also provided criminal groups with opportunities to consolidate their control over territories and communities by exploiting pandemic-induced vulnerabilities.105

Similar to the total number of intentional homicides, the number of killings of women because of their gender, or “femicides”, also dropped in the initial aftermath of the implementation of the lockdown measures. Information collected online by Colombia’s Femicide Observatory showed a decrease in the number of such killings of women in April and May 2020 (monthly average of 29), both compared with during the first quarter of the year (monthly average of 42) and during April and May 2019 (monthly average of 62).106 Subsequently, however, the number of “femicides” gradually increased during the rest of the lockdown, which was lifted at the end of August.

Another violence dynamic visible during the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia was a surge in killings of social leaders and vulnerable groups in 2020, possibly because police resources and access to support were limited during the pandemic, although other, non-pandemic-related factors likely played a role also, including disputes over territories considered to have been abandoned by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), and the vulnerabilities of rural inhabitants involved in government programmes aimed at curbing drug trafficking.107 The strict lockdown measures initially reduced these killings, but as the health crisis continued, the security situation in rural areas deteriorated, leading to a resurgence in attacks.

The department of Antioquia, a long-term criminal hotspot,108 reportedly accounted for the majority of the decrease in homicides in the country in 2020, but the department continued to see active operations by various criminal groups, reflecting their efforts to maintain control and dominance during the pandemic.109

Guatemala

In 2020, Guatemala experienced a substantial fall in its annual number of homicides to a total of 3,292 victims from 4,387 in 2019, representing a decrease of 25 per cent. This positive development occurred in the context of the measures implemented from mid-March to the end of June to contain the spread of COVID-19 and their impact on crime reported to the police. Between January and June 2020, the total crime rate in the country underwent a decline of 12.2 per cent compared with during the same period in the previous year.110 This reduction was mainly driven by a significant decrease in crime in the public sphere, such as property crime, although there was an increase in crime in the private sphere, in particular incidents of domestic violence.111

During the lockdown period, there was a turning point in June 2020 as the number of incidents rose compared with during the previous months, reflecting an easing of lockdown measures. Although the increase in homicides that month represented the largest number since the implementation of lockdown measures, it remained below the figure for June of the previous year.112

Municipalities with higher levels of urbanization saw the steepest decline in homicide during the first half of 2020 (January–June) as the containment measures were more strictly implemented and there were more serious reductions in mobility in such areas.113

However, the available evidence points to an increase of 26.3 per cent in the number of cases of domestic violence handled by the National Civil Police between January and June 2020. Moreover, the Public Prosecutor’s 1572 hotline reported an increase in emergency calls related to physical violence during the same period.114

Guatemala registered a relatively small number of “femicides” in 2020, although there may have been delays in recording them that can be attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Submissions from women’s organizations and other civil society actors to the United Nations Femicide Watch Initiative back up this interpretation, suggesting that the recording of “femicide” cases by authorities may have been negatively affected in several countries during the first year of the pandemic.115 Delays in recording cases may have skewed the reported figures and obscured the true extent of the problem. Authorities documented at least 455 “femicides” in 2020, a decrease from the 701 cases reported in the previous year. Nonetheless, the number of “femicide” cases increased substantially in 2021.116

The decrease in the number of homicides during the lockdown period can be attributed to the restrictions of mobility and economic activities, which hindered the capacity and opportunities of criminal groups to commit murder and engage in extortion. However, with the restoration of economic activity and mobility once lockdown restrictions were lifted, criminal violence began to increase again and criminal groups adapted to the new circumstances. Extortion rackets intensified and gangs found alternative ways to generate revenue, resulting in a rebound in homicide in the subsequent months.117 Homicides related to organized criminal groups or gangs increased from 2019 to 2020. Firearms and explosives, which are often indicative of violence triggered by gangs and organized crime, were the most prevalent means of committing homicide.118
The reduction in crime during the lockdown period in Guatemala may also be partly attributed to factors external to the COVID-19 pandemic related to the implementation of new crime policies introduced in January 2020. These policies included intelligence-led initiatives, cross-border operations to counter drug trafficking and the establishment of regional and municipal commissions for community outreach, which were having positive outcomes even before the implementation of strict lockdown measures.\textsuperscript{119}

### Evidence on the longer-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on homicide

Assessing the longer-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on homicide trends is challenging, given that an increasing number of causal factors are likely to intervene and moderate the relationship as time passes. These causal factors, which include food price increases or inflationary pressure, may be only marginally related to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns or largely unrelated to the pandemic. The eruption of sociopolitical conflicts, for example, is likely associated with a combination of economic, social and cultural changes that were already in motion before the onset of the pandemic. Moreover, conclusions about the longer-term impact of the pandemic may change and some patterns in homicide will only become visible in the years to come.

With these caveats in mind, it is possible to shed some light on the possible longer-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on homicide trends by comparing year-on-year changes in homicide trends observed in 2019, 2020 and 2021, with year-on-year changes observed over the previous decade, starting in 2010. This approach makes it possible to establish whether homicide trends in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 and 2021) were "exceptional" in comparison with those observed over the period 2010–2019, although directly attributing such exceptional changes to the impact of COVID-19-related lockdowns is not possible with this approach.

### Americas

The available evidence suggests that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had heterogeneous impacts on homicide trends in the different subregions of the Americas (figure 26). Between 2019 and 2021, in both Central America and South America, year-on-year changes in the estimated total number of homicide victims were recorded that were well within the range of year-on-year changes observed over the previous decade. In Northern America, by contrast, an extremely "unusual" increase of almost 30 per cent in the number of homicide victims was recorded during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a further, more modest increase of roughly 6 per cent in 2021. The reasons behind this sudden surge in homicidal violence in Northern America, and in the United States in particular, remain contested, but it is likely that lockdown-related factors, including a surge in unemployment, increased gun ownership, as well as COVID-19-related anxiety and stress, played an important role.\textsuperscript{120} Nonetheless, recently released estimates indicate that homicides in the United States decreased nationwide by 6.1 per cent from 2021 to 2022.\textsuperscript{121}

In the Caribbean, the percentage change in the number of homicide victims observed between the end of 2019 and the

![FIG. 26 Year-on-year percentage change in the number of homicide victims in the Americas in 2020 and 2021 compared with the largest year-on-year percentage change between 2010 and 2019, by subregion](image)

Source: Estimates based on UNODC homicide statistics.
end of 2020 does not appear to have been “exceptional”. However, the increase of 12 per cent observed between the end of 2020 and the end of 2021 was significantly larger than any year-on-year changes observed over the previous decade (figure 26). While a surge in organized-crime related homicide in the subregion can explain some of this year-on-year variation, it may also indicate that some of the “strain”-related causal mechanisms associated with the lockdowns, such as unemployment, loss of income, etc., started to push up homicide rates in the Caribbean some two years into the pandemic.

**Europe**

In contrast to the situation observed in the Americas, the evidence available for Europe suggests that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had a relatively limited longer-term impact on overall homicide trends in Europe’s four subregions (figure 27). Between 2019 and 2021, all four subregions recorded year-on-year changes in the estimated total number of homicide victims that were well within the range of year-on-year changes observed over the previous decade (figure 27). Western Europe was the only European subregion to record an increase (4.7 per cent) in homicides during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by an increase in killings in Germany. That said, the previous year-on-year fluctuations observed in the subregion in 2015, 2016 and 2019 were significantly larger, suggesting that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic did not bring about a major change in the homicide rate (figure 27).

**FIG. 27** Year-on-year percentage change in homicide in Europe in 2020 and 2021 compared with the largest year-on-year percentage between 2010 and 2019, by subregion

Source: Estimates based on UNODC homicide statistics.

**FIG. 28** Year-on-year percentage change in homicide in selected subregions and globally in 2020 and 2021, compared with the largest year-on-year percentage change between 2010 and 2019

Source: Estimates based on UNODC homicide statistics.
Asia and Oceania

Beyond the Americas and Europe, the limited availability of reliable national trend data means that sufficiently precise trend estimates can only be reported for a selected number of subregions and countries. In Australia, the change in the total number of homicide victims observed between the end of 2019 and the end of 2020 does not appear to have been "unusual" in comparison with changes observed in the previous decade, but the massive increase, of more than 100 per cent, in killings observed in the subregion between the end of 2020 and the end of 2021 was indeed "exceptional" (figure 28). In this case, however, the increase can be mainly attributed to a spike in sociopolitical violence in Myanmar and is largely unrelated to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In South-Eastern Asia, the change in the estimated total number of homicide victims observed between the end of 2019 and the end of 2020 was well within the range of changes observed in the previous decade (figure 28). It should be noted, however, that India and Pakistan, the two most populous countries in the subregion for which time series data are available, have both recorded slight increases in homicide (Pakistan in particular) since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, following a decade of continuous decline. This may indicate that "strain"-related causal mechanisms associated with the lockdowns have been gradually pushing up homicide rates in Southern Asia, although more research is needed if the factors that have driven this increase are to be understood.

Africa

In Africa, the limited availability of reliable trend data makes drawing firm conclusions about the longer-term impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on homicide trends very difficult, with the evidence available for three populous countries in the region not painting a clear picture. For example, both Kenya and South Africa recorded significant increases in homicides two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, which may indicate that "strain"-related mechanisms such as unemployment and loss of income have been pushing up homicide rates in those countries as well as a rise in crime-related homicides in South Africa, whereas Uganda recorded a continuous decline in the homicide rate during the first two years of the pandemic. This suggests that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on homicide trends in Africa has been highly heterogeneous and context-specific (figure 29).

Spotlight on South Africa

In 2021, the number of victims of homicide in South Africa reached a total of almost 25,000, or roughly 5,000 more than in 2020, representing the largest increase in Africa in absolute numbers in 2021. Data on homicide offences in the country show that the increase continued in 2022.

After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa initially experienced a decline in homicide, with 35.8 per cent fewer homicides occurring in the period April–June 2020 than during the same period in 2019. From June to September 2020, the number of homicides in the country continued to be lower than during the same period in 2019, by 6.2 per cent. COVID-19-related measures such as a ban on alcohol sales may have contributed to the short-term decrease in homicide after the onset of the pandemic, but the number of homicides began to increase beyond the level recorded in the same period in the previous year from October 2020. In 2022, the number of homicides continued to surpass pre-pandemic levels, with an alarming increase of approximately 25 per cent from the 2019 level and an increase of 14 per cent from the 2021 level. Economic challenges, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, have negatively affected both the legal and illegal economies in South Africa, which has led to greater competition between criminal groups and an increase in violence. The pandemic’s far-reaching consequences, including travel restrictions and a reduction in economic activity, have led to job losses, declining incomes and financial hardship for many individuals and businesses. In turn, the subsequent expansion of organized crime is having a negative impact on the economy of South Africa.
Although the youth unemployment rate and total unemployment rate have varied by around 1 per cent each year during the past decade, both increased much more sharply in 2021. The youth unemployment rate (people aged 15–24 years) rose from 43.5 per cent in 2020 to 49.9 per cent in 2021, representing an increase of 6.4 percentage points, and the total unemployment rate rose from 24.3 per cent to 28.8 per cent, or 4.5 percentage points, over the same period. Since youth unemployment has been linked to increases in homicide, the increase in unemployment and in youth unemployment in particular, may have contributed to the surge in homicides in South Africa in 2021.

Data on the situational context of homicides in South Africa are available for less than half of all offences, so it is difficult to assess the type of homicide that most contributed to the surge in homicides between the end of 2020 and the end of 2021. Nevertheless, evidence shows that crime experienced by households has increased since 2020, reversing the decreasing trend from 2018 to 2020, which could indicate an increase in gang-related and other crime-related homicides such as killings linked to robberies. Furthermore, although targeted killings only account for a small share of the overall homicide rate, there has been a reported increase of 33 per cent in political killings, with 30 cases in 2021 and 40 cases in 2022, driven by increasing competition for local municipal office positions.

Trends in the homicide rate vary across the country and the impact of COVID-19 measures and subsequent economic hardship differs from one province to the next. High unemployment, for example, coupled with economic inequalities and other factors contributed to unrest in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng in July 2021. The unrest, which included high levels of violence, led to at least 354 deaths, although not all of them were intentional homicides, and extensive destruction of property.

The Eastern Cape has been grappling with a high homicide rate for years, with a projected annualized rate of 75 homicides per 100,000 in 2022/23, making it the province of South Africa with the highest rate of homicidal violence. By contrast, Northern Cape and Free State have experienced a decline in the homicide rate over the past decade, while in Gauteng the homicide rate rose in tandem with population growth in the province, although the per capita increase has been lower than in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape.

Broader, systemic issues may have contributed to the escalating homicide rate in South Africa. The ability of the police to solve homicide cases has declined since 2012, with the detection rate falling from 31.1 per cent in 2011/2012 to just 14.5 per cent in 2021/2022. The effectiveness of law enforcement and the criminal justice system has been hindered by both a decrease in the budget of the South African Police Service and a lack of comprehensive trend analysis, resulting in the ineffective allocation of police resources and a limited capacity to understand and address the increasing homicide rate. This suggests that strengthening law enforcement and the criminal justice system is key to reversing the current homicide trend in South Africa.
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2 According to the ICCS classification, unlawful killings by State authorities refer to deaths resulting from “the use of force by law enforcement or other State officials that exceeded the limits, set by national and international standards, of what is strictly necessary and required for the performance of their duty.” Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 See box on considerations for classifying conflict-related deaths and intentional homicides, and their overlap in conflict situations of this chapter.

5 Ibid.


8 The United Nations does produce a list of individuals and groups against which the Security Council has agreed to levy sanctions: the “1267 List” (named after Security Council resolution 1267 (1999)). However, this list is limited to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups and individuals. Many countries regard militant nationalist groups within their borders as “terrorist” organizations, but there is no universal consensus on these classifications.

9 It is important to note that there is definitional overlap between intentional homicide, conflict-related deaths and terrorist killings. For example, according to ICCS, death as a result of terrorist activities is counted as intentional homicide, while some types of killings committed in the context of armed conflict (such as targeted killings by combatants of civilians or others not during combat operations) are also classified as intentional homicide. This means that, for statistical purposes, categories of killings are not mutually exclusive.

10 Terrorist killings estimates are from the Global Terrorism Database. Available at https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/. The Global Terrorism Database defines a terrorist attack as “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.” This definition does not coincide with the United Nations definition (United Nations International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, 1999: E/RES/54/109).

11 Conflict death estimates are from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (available at https://ucdp.uu.se/exploratory), and include deaths resulting from state-based violence, non-state violence and one-sided violence.

12 Conflict death estimates are from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo (UCDP/PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset. Conflict deaths include deaths from state-based violence, non-state violence, and one-sided violence. Deaths from state-based armed conflict and non-state conflict refers to deaths where there is use of armed force between warring parties in a conflict dyad. This includes traditional battlefield fighting, guerrilla activities (e.g. hit-and-run attacks, ambushes, and attacks on military units, cities and villages etc). Both deaths of military and civilians are included. One-sided violence deaths refer to deaths stemming from attacks carried out by organized actors, targeting unarmed civilians.


14 The global and regional estimates are produced based on available national data and through a statistical model imputing missing values at the country level. They are complemented by an interval of uncertainty that accounts for possible estimation errors due to the imputation of missing values at the country level. The bands do not represent probabilistic confidence intervals. For more information, see the methodological annex to this report.

15 For a more detailed discussion about homicide in Brazil and Nigeria, see chapter 4 of the present study.

16 The 10 countries with the largest absolute number of homicide victims are, in order of magnitude, Brazil, Nigeria, India, Mexico, South Africa, United States of America, Myanmar, Colombia, Russian Federation and Pakistan.

17 The term “homicide rate” is used throughout the present study as a shorthand to refer to the total number of homicide victims per 100,000 population.

18 The 2021 estimate of a global homicide rate of 5.8 per 100,000 population is not directly comparable to the 2017 figure (6.1) published in the Global Study on Homicide 2019 and the 2012 figure (6.2) published in the Global Study on Homicide 2013 because of an improvement in the coverage of national data and refinements in the statistical model.

19 For further information about homicidal violence at the national level in different regions, see the sections on regional trends in this chapter and chapter 4 of the present study.

20 Given that they experience large year-on-year fluctuations in homicide rates owing to their small population, countries and territories with a population of less than 1 million are excluded from the comparison of national homicide rates.

21 For further information about the number of homicides in countries in the Caribbean in 2022, see chapter 4 of the present study.


24 Between 2000 and 2021, the global population increased from 6.1 to 7.9 billion, representing an increase of around 29 per cent. See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “World population prospects 2022”. Available at https://population.un.org/wpp/.

25 The year 2021 was not included in the projection.


28 The homicide series in Brazil is based on vital registration data from the Ministry of Health. Available at https://datasus.saude.gov.br/. An alternative source of data on homicide in Brazil is the Ministry of Justice, which recorded a similar decline over the same period, albeit at a lower absolute level. Available at: https://dados.mj.gov.br/dataset/sistema-nacional-de-estatisticas-de-seguranca-publica.

29 See, for example, Forum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2022. Available at: https://forumseguranca.org.br/anuario-brasileiro-seguranca-publica/

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