

UNODC Global Study on Homicide 2023

HOMICIDE AND  
ORGANIZED CRIME IN  
LATIN AMERICA AND  
THE CARIBBEAN

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# HOMICIDE AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

The Americas have the highest regional homicide rate in the world, and high rates of homicidal violence related to organized crime. This research brief, excerpted from the *UNODC Global Study on Homicide 2023*, notes several recurrent patterns with respect to factors shaping criminal homicides in Latin America and the Caribbean:

- › Homicides related to organized crime and gangs are significantly more volatile than homicides perpetrated by intimate partners or other family members.
- › Subregions, countries and cities with a high homicide rate tend to be associated with a larger proportion of firearm-related homicide.
- › Settings with a high homicide rate also typically report a large proportion of homicides involving male victims.
- › High homicide rates are also usually associated with a proportionately higher number of homicides related to organized crime. Where there is a higher density of criminal organizations, there is a higher risk of homicidal violence.
- › Drug markets alone do not predict homicide but they are frequently associated with lethal violence, especially in the context of multiple competing criminal factions.

Amid mounting public concern with violent crime and low trust in police, some Latin American and Caribbean governments are enacting “states of emergency” in response to organized crime and violent gangs. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has expressed concern about the human rights impacts of states of emergency introduced to address organized crime and violence<sup>1</sup>, while the Secretary-General’s New Agenda for Peace policy brief<sup>2</sup> notes that over-securitized responses can be counterproductive and can reinforce the very dynamics they seek to overcome, as their far-reaching consequences – blowback from local populations, human rights violations and abuses, exacerbation of gender inequalities and distortion of local economies – can be powerful drivers for recruitment into terrorist or armed groups.

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## Organized crime as a driver of homicide trends

Nowhere is homicidal violence caused by organized crime more prevalent than in Latin America and the Caribbean, the subregion with the highest homicide rate worldwide. Although absolute numbers and rates vary across subregions, countries and cities, comparatively high levels of lethal violence are persistent in Latin America and the Caribbean.

One reason for this is the dynamic and dense ecosystem of organized criminal groups, including hundreds of drug trafficking organizations, mafia syndicates, gangs and militia, that alternately cooperate, collude and compete for the control of illegal markets. The incidence of lethal violence has also been attributed to other factors such as illicit drug markets, the proliferation of firearms<sup>34</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> OHCHR, “Ecuador: UN Human Rights Chief concerned at spike in violence and backward step on Indigenous Peoples’ rights” (27 July 2023).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, *Our Common Agenda, Policy Brief 9, A New Agenda for Peace* (July 2023).

militarized crime control interventions.<sup>3</sup> Across Latin America and the Caribbean, homicidal violence also correlates with structural risks such as weak rule of law, high levels of impunity, social and income inequality and youth unemployment.<sup>4</sup>

The intensity and scale of homicidal violence is unevenly distributed in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> Countries, states and cities that register comparatively high and volatile rates of homicidal violence also experience disputes between rival criminal factions, public security forces and local communities. Notwithstanding high levels of intimate partner and interpersonal violence across the subregion,<sup>6</sup> rapid surges in lethal violence are often a result of competition involving armed groups, as well as military and police action.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, countries, states, cities and border areas with a high concentration of rival criminal factions typically experience high rates of lethal violence. Likewise, prisons and detention facilities housing members of multiple criminal organizations tend to have a high risk of outbreaks of lethal violence.<sup>8</sup>

Homicidal violence is a result of multiple risk factors,<sup>9</sup> at least three of which contribute to above-average homicide rates across Latin America and the Caribbean. First, record-breaking drug production and trafficking lead to changes in the geography of lethal violence, as criminal organizations may use violence to protect plantations, transshipment routes and retail outlets.<sup>10</sup> Second, the proliferation and fragmentation of heavily-armed criminal groups and subsequent responses to crime influence the scale and scope of homicidal violence. Depending on whether criminal organizations dominate, form pacts or splinter, they may be inclined to resort to lethal violence.<sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup>Third, the use of firearms increases the risk of lethal outcomes in violent disputes between rival criminal groups. Weak gun control and/or poor enforcement in supply and destination markets can result in high-calibre weapons falling into the hands of criminal organizations.<sup>13</sup> When these three factors converge, homicide is more likely to increase.

**Fig. 1** Homicide rates (per 100,000 population) and share of homicide by type (percentage) in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2021 or latest year

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<sup>3</sup> Flores-Macías, G. and Zarkin, J., “The Militarization of Law Enforcement: Evidence from Latin America”, *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 19, No. 2 (December 2019), pp. 519–538.

<sup>4</sup> *Global Study on Homicide 2019* (United Nations publication, 2019)

<sup>5</sup> See chapter 2 of the present study. Also, consult Ajzenman, N. and Jaitman, L., “Crime concentration and hot spot dynamics in Latin America”, IDB (June 2016); Muggah, R. and Aguirre Tobon, K., “Reducing Latin America’s violent hot spots,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, vol. 47 (July/August 2019); Muggah, R., Aguirre Tobon, K. and Chaaney, S., “Targeting “hot spots” could statistically reduce Latin America’s murder rate”, *Americas Quarterly* (9 March 2017).

<sup>6</sup> See the section on interpersonal homicide, on page 9 of chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Global Study on Homicide 2019*, Booklet 2 (United Nations publication, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Bergman, M., “Insights from new studies on violence in Latin American prisons”, *International Criminal Justice Review*, vol. 30, No. 1 (December 2019); Pierce, J. and Fondevila, G., “Concentrated violence: the influence of criminal activity and governance on prison violence in Latin America”, *International Criminal Justice Review*, vol. 30, No. 1, (June 2019), pp. 99–130; Bergman, M. and Fondevila, G., In *Prisons and Crime in Latin America* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021); Macaulay, F., “The policy challenges of informal prisoner government”, *Prison Service Journal: Special Edition: Informal Dynamics of Survival in Latin American Prison*, No. 229 (January 2017).

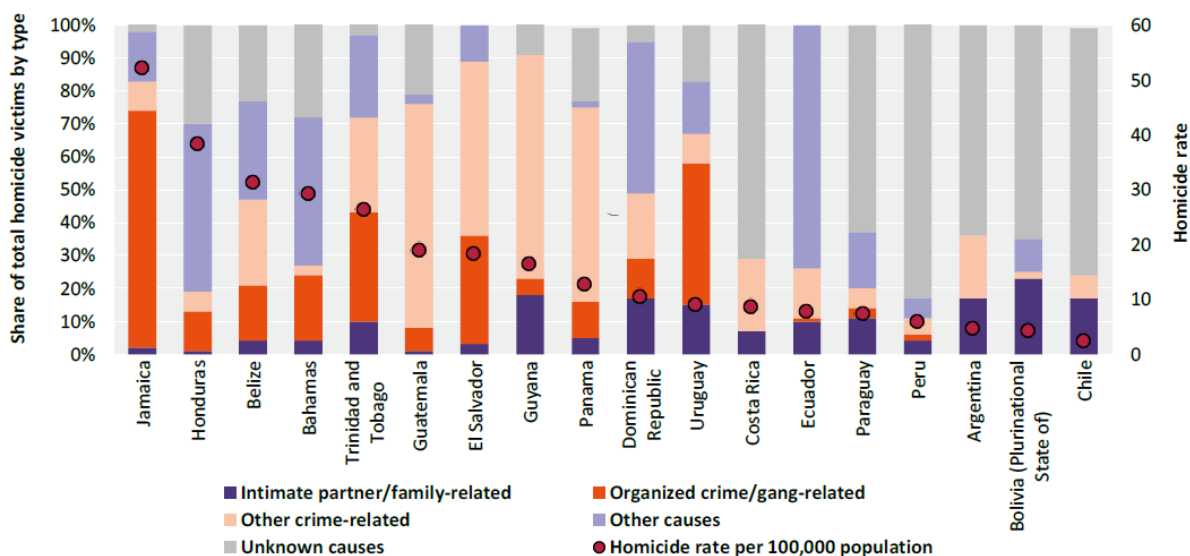
<sup>9</sup> See Croci, G. and Chaaney, S., “An institutional perspective to understand Latin America’s high level of homicide”, *British Journal of Criminology*, vol.63, No. 5 (September 2023); Sanhueza, A. et al., “Homicide among young people in the countries of the Americas and Caribbean”, *Revista Panamericana Salud Publica*, 47 31 (July 2023).

<sup>10</sup> UNODC; *Global Report on Cocaine 2023 – Local Dynamics, Global Challenges* (United Nations publication, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Mohor, D., “Surging gang violence across Latin America challenges aid sector to respond”, 17 May 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Brantingham, J., Valasik, M. and Tita, G. E., “Competitive dominance, gang size and the directionality of gang violence”, *Crime Science*, vol. 8, No. 7 (August 2019).

<sup>13</sup> See Solmirano, C., “Behind a rise in Latin America’s violent crime, a deadly flow of illegal guns”, *Americas Quarterly* (15 May 2023) and Aguirre, K. and Muggah, R., “Arming the Americas”, *Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Latin America* (October 2020).



Source: UNODC homicide statistics (2022).

### Subregional trends

Homicide rates have been high in Latin America and the Caribbean for decades and remained so, even increasing in some areas, during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>14, 15</sup> despite declines in other forms of violent and non-violent crime.<sup>16</sup> Latin America and the Caribbean not only consistently has the highest homicide rate of any subregion, but also had the highest proportion of homicides involving organized crime worldwide in 2021. Moreover, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean reported the highest proportion of homicides involving both male victims and firearms.<sup>17</sup> In 2021, 8 of the 10 countries with the highest homicide rates<sup>18</sup> worldwide were located in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Notwithstanding the high subregional homicide rate, there is considerable spatial and temporal variation across Latin America and the Caribbean. Homicide trends have fluctuated between and within the different parts of the subregion since 2010, including during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 (figure 2). In the Caribbean, annual changes in the number of homicide victims fluctuated between +12 per cent and -13 per cent between 2010 and 2021. By comparison, the fluctuation in Central America was between +11 per cent and -8 per cent during the same period and in South America, between +7 per cent and -12 per cent. More recently, at the national level, 13 countries registered increases in homicidal violence between 2021 and 2022 (most notably Ecuador and Haiti) and 11 countries reported decreases (most notably El Salvador and Mexico).

The Caribbean has experienced the most dramatic increase in homicidal violence in recent years, largely because of intense competition between gangs over drug markets. In 2022, the number of homicides in the Turks and Caicos Islands, a transit point between the Bahamas, Colombia and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), climbed to 28 in October 2022, compared with 13 during the whole of 2021.<sup>19</sup> In Jamaica, the homicide rate reached 53.3 per 100,000 in 2022, with about 70 per cent of homicides

<sup>14</sup> See Muggah, R. and Dudley, S., "COVID19 is reconfiguring organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean", *Small Wars Journal* (February 2021).

<sup>15</sup> UNODC, "Research brief: Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on homicide and property crime", Vienna, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Muggah, R. and Aguirre, K., "In the Americas, homicide is the other killer epidemic", *Foreign Policy*, 20 May 2022).

<sup>17</sup> As noted later in chapter 4 and in chapter 2 of the present study.

<sup>18</sup> These countries were Jamaica (52.1 per 100,000 population), South Africa (42.4), Saint Lucia (39.0), Honduras (38.2), Belize (31.2), Saint Vincent (30.7), Saint Kitts and Nevis (29.4), Trinidad and Tobago (29.4), Bahamas (29.2) and Myanmar (28.4). Note that not all countries reported data for 2021.

<sup>19</sup> United Kingdom, House of Commons Library, "Crime in the Turks and Caicos Islands", Research briefing, 9 December 2022.

being connected to organized criminal groups or gangs in 2021. Saint Lucia recorded a homicide rate of 36.7 per 100,000 in 2022, a slight decrease from the previous year, while Saint Vincent and Grenadines reported a homicide rate of 40.4 per 100,000. Meanwhile, the homicide rate in Trinidad and Tobago rose to 39.5 per 100,000 in 2022, an increase of more than 30 per cent from the previous year, largely due to the splintering of large gangs into smaller violent factions. The homicide rate reached 31.2 per 100,000 in the Bahamas in 2022, and in Haiti, it surged to 18 per 100,000 in 2022, an increase of more than 35 per cent from 2021, due in large part to deepening tensions associated with gang-violence.<sup>20</sup>

By contrast, the homicide rate stabilized and decreased in several countries in Central America. Despite continuing to experience the highest level of lethal violence in the subregion, Honduras saw its homicide rate decline to 35.1 per 100,000 in 2022 after crackdowns led to the dismantlement of over 38 gangs, according to national police media statements.<sup>21</sup> This represents a decrease of 8.1 per cent from 2021 and the lowest homicide rate in the country since the beginning of the century. Belize and Panama also experienced a decrease in the homicide rate from 2021 to 2022, from 31.3 to 27.9 per 100,000 in the case of Belize, and from 12.6 to 11.3 per 100,000 in the case of Panama. By far the most significant decline occurred in El Salvador, however, where there were 7.8 homicides per 100,000 in 2022 compared with 106.8 in 2015. Anti-gang crackdowns<sup>22</sup> and the imprisonment of more than 72,000 alleged gang members since the implementation of the state of emergency in March 2022<sup>23</sup> are credited by the Government for the sharp decline in the homicide rate in El Salvador.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere, Mexico's high homicide rate of 26.1 per 100,000 decreased slightly from 2021 to 2022.<sup>25</sup>

An exception to the decreasing trend in Central America is Costa Rica, which has experienced an uptick in the homicide rate in recent years, reaching 12.8 per 100,000 in 2022 as organized crime groups have been fighting for control of the port of Limón, a key distribution node to Europe.

Homicide trends have been more heterogeneous in South America, with countries long associated with a high homicide rate registering decreases and those with low levels of lethal violence registering increases. The homicide rate of Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), for example, declined from 41 per 100,000 in 2019 to 19.3 in 2021. Colombia also experienced a slight decline in the national homicide rate, from 25.7 per 100,000 in 2021 to 25.4 in 2022, with the rate being generally higher in areas where armed groups such as ex-combatants of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) were more active.<sup>26, 27</sup> A slight decrease in the homicide rate, from 4.6 per 100,000 in 2021 to 4.3 in 2022, was also recorded in Argentina. That said, the province of Santa Fe and the city of Rosario in particular have experienced a surge in homicides, reportedly owing to rivalries between two local drug factions, the Monos and Clan Alvarado.<sup>28</sup> In Brazil, the homicide rate remained steady, at roughly 21.3 per 100,000 in 2021,<sup>29</sup> after 2019, the second lowest homicide rate in the country since 2000. However, the north and north-east of Brazil remain violence hotspots owing to

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<sup>20</sup> At least 2,183 people were reportedly murdered in 2022 according to the Haitian National Police and United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti, up from 1,630 in 2021. See *Haiti's Criminal Markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking* (United Nations publication, 2023).

<sup>21</sup> See *El Heraldo*, "Cuáles han sido los logros del estado de excepción en Honduras", 3 January 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Rosen, J. D., Cutrona, S. and Lindquist, K., "Violence, and Fear: Punitive Darwinism in El Salvador", *Crime Law Soc Change* 79 (July 2022) pp. 175–194.

<sup>23</sup> Written information provided by the Government of El Salvador to UNODC.

<sup>24</sup> Government of El Salvador, Presidential Press Secretary, "El Salvador registra el promedio de homicidios más bajo de Centroamérica", 5 January 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Mexico reported 30,968 homicides in 2022, compared with 31,915 in 2021. Over 50 per cent were concentrated in just six states: Baja California, Chihuahua, Jalisco, Michoacan and the state of Mexico. See Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI), "Defunciones por homicidios enero a diciembre de 2022", 25 July 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Most notably in the departments of Arauca, Putumayo, Cauca, Chocó, Guaviare and Valle del Cauca, according to González Díaz, A., "12,221 homicidios en Colombia durante el 2022", *Universidad Externado de Colombia*, 20 December 2022.

<sup>27</sup> *Global Report on Cocaine 2023 – Local Dynamics, Global Challenges* (United Nations publication, 2023).

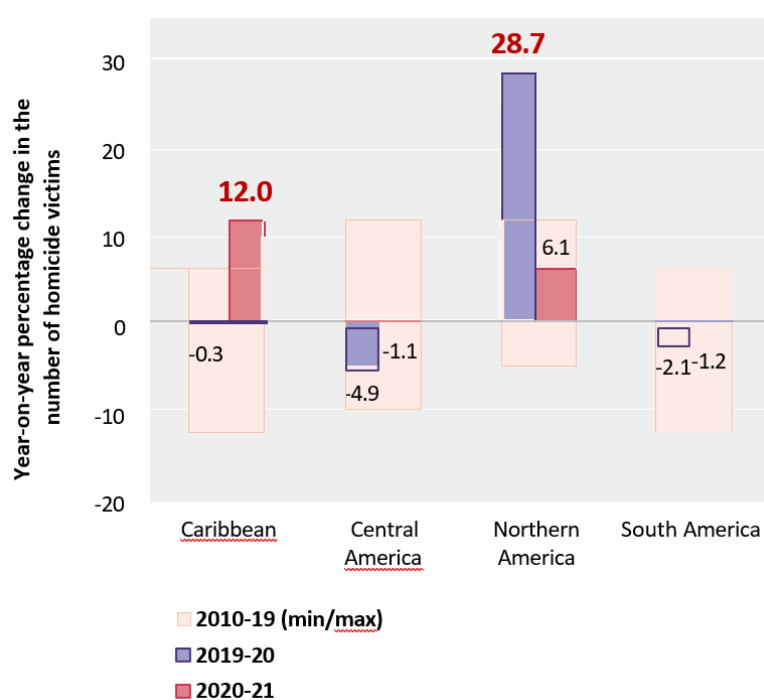
<sup>28</sup> See Mistler-Ferguson, S., "Rivals for the throne – can Argentina's Alvarado clan threaten the Monos?", *Insight Crime*, 16 June 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Data from Ministry of Health of Brazil, Information Technology Department of the United Health System (DATASUS).

tensions between the competing drug factions, Primeiro Comando da Capital and Comando Vermelho.<sup>30, 31</sup>

Conversely, several countries in South America have experienced rising homicide rates of late, linked in large part to tensions between criminal groups. In 2022, Ecuador experienced by far the sharpest rise in the homicide rate in the subregion, to 27 per 100,000, almost double the homicide rate recorded in 2021.<sup>32</sup> This surge in homicidal violence is attributed to intense clashes between rival transnational and local drug factions, in Esmeralda and Guayaquil in particular.<sup>33</sup> Although less dramatic, Uruguay reported a 25.8 per cent increase in homicide to 11.2 per 100,000 in 2022. Chile also experienced an increase in homicide, of 45.1 per cent, from 4.6 per 100,000 in 2021 to 6.7 in 2022, with the increase attributed to criminal gangs involved in trafficking in persons, drug trafficking and the timber mafia. Paraguay, however, reported a slight decrease in homicide, from 7.8 per 100,000 in 2021 to 7.0 in 2022.

**Fig. 2** Year-on-year percentage change in the number of homicide victims in the Americas 2010–2021



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

<sup>30</sup> Bessa Franciozo Diniz, V. and McBrien, J. L., “Children and drug trafficking in Brazil: can international humanitarian law provide protections for children involved in drug trafficking?” *Societies*, vol. 12, No. 6 (December 2022).

<sup>31</sup> *World Drug Report 2023* (United Nations publication, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> See “Drug gangs and surging violence in Ecuador” in chapter 4.

<sup>33</sup> The rival factions are called Choneros and Lobos, although Colombian, Mexican and Albanian drug cartels and crime syndicates are also increasingly involved. See Andrade, C., Margolis, M. and Muggah, R. “Ecuador’s crime wave and its Albanian connection”, *Americas Quarterly* (12 April 2023).

**Table 1** Homicide level in the Caribbean, 2019–2022 (total and rate per 100,000 population)

Country	2019		2020		2021		2022	
	Homicide	Homicide rate	Homicide	Homicide rate	Homicide	Homicide rate	Homicide	Homicide rate
Antigua and Barbuda	3	3.3	9	9.7	16	17.2	10	10.7
Bahamas	95	23.5	73	18.0	119	29.2	128	31.2
Barbados	48	17.1	41	14.6	32	11.4	43	15.3
Cayman Islands	2	3.0	3	4.5	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Cuba	500	4.4	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Dominica	13	18.2	15	20.8	10	13.8	#N/A	#N/A
Dominican Republic	1,026	9.4	961	8.7	1,172	10.5	1,389	12.4
Grenada	16	13.0	14	11.3	5	4.0	#N/A	#N/A
Haiti <sup>a</sup>	#N/A	#N/A	1,280	11.3	1,489	13.0	2,088	18.0
Jamaica	1,340	47.6	1,333	47.3	1,474	52.1	1,508	53.3
Puerto Rico	633	19.2	556	17.0	632	19.4	572	17.6
Saint Kitts and Nevis	12	25.2	10	21.0	14	29.4	#N/A	#N/A
Saint Lucia	46	25.8	52	29.0	70	39.0	66	36.7
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	19	18.1	33	31.5	32	30.7	42	40.4
Trinidad and Tobago <sup>b</sup>	539	35.5	399	26.3	448	29.4	605	39.5

<sup>a</sup> See Haiti's Criminal Markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking (United Nations publication 2023).

<sup>b</sup> Provisional data for 2021 and 2022 from the Central Statistical Office, Ministry of Planning and Development, Trinidad and Tobago.

Source: Data submitted by countries through the United Nations Survey on Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (UN-CTS), from govern- mental sources, or other sources reviewed by countries.

**Table 2** Homicide level in countries in Central America, 2019–2022 (total and rate per 100,000

Country	2019		2020		2021		2022	
	Homicide	Homicide rate	Homicide	Homicide rate	Homicide	Homicide rate	Homicide	Homicide rate
Belize	134	34.4	102	25.8	125	31.3	113	27.9
Costa Rica <sup>a</sup>	563	11.1	570	11.1	588	11.4	664	12.8
El Salvador	2,398	38.2	1,341	21.3	1,085	17.2	496	7.8
Guatemala	4,387	25.6	3,292	19.0	3,520	20.0	#N/A	#N/A
Honduras <sup>b</sup>	4,078	40.9	3,613	35.7	3,931	38.2	3,661	35.1
Mexico	36,661	29.3	36,773	29.2	35,700	28.2	33,287	26.1
Nicaragua	515	7.7	#N/A	#N/A	754	11.0	#N/A	#N/A
Panama	480	11.3	500	11.6	550	12.6	499	11.3

population)

<sup>a</sup> Data from Costa Rica Observatorio de la Violencia, "Homicidio doloso".

<sup>b</sup> Data for 2022 from Honduras Secretaría de Seguridad Policia Nacional, "Comportamiento de los homicidios en Honduras año 2022".

Source: Data submitted by countries through the United Nations Survey on Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (UN-CTS), from govern- mental sources, or other sources reviewed by countries.



**Table 3** Homicide level in countries in South America, 2019–2022 (total and rate per 100,000)

Country	2019		2020		2021		2022	
	Homicide	Homicide rate	Homicide	Homicide rate	Homicide	Homicide rate	Homicide	Homicide rate
Argentina	2,308	5.2	2,418	5.4	2,094	4.6	1,961	4.3
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	497	4.2	428	3.6	418	3.5	485	4.0
Brazil <sup>a</sup>	44,073	20.8	47,722	22.4	45,562	21.3	#N/A	#N/A
Chile	924	4.9	1,115	5.8	906	4.6	1,322	6.7
Colombia	11,750	23.4	11,452	22.5	13,223	25.7	13,166	25.4
Ecuador	1,187	6.8	1,372	7.8	2,496	14.0	4,859	27.0
Guyana	136	17.0	157	19.7	131	16.3	#N/A	#N/A
Paraguay <sup>b</sup>	554	8.5	481	7.3	525	7.8	472	7.0
Peru	2,385	7.3	1,903	5.7	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A	#N/A
Suriname	30	5.0	55	9.1	35	5.7	45	7.3
Uruguay	394	11.5	341	9.9	306	8.9	383	11.2
Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)	11,874	41.0	8,384	29.4	5,444	19.3	#N/A	#N/A

population)

<sup>a</sup> Data from Ministry of Health of Brazil, Information Technology Department of the United Health System (DATASUS).

<sup>b</sup> Data from Paraguay General Directorate of Prevention and Safety, “Estadísticas de homicidios años 2018 al 2022”.

Source: Data submitted by countries with the United Nations Survey on Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (UN-CTS), from governmental sources, or other sources reviewed by countries.

### Role of firearms

A key factor contributing to the disproportionately high rates of lethal violence in Latin America and the Caribbean is access to and misuse of firearms. In contrast to bladed weapons and blunt objects, firearms amplify the speed and scale of intentional and unintentional homicide. It is not necessarily the availability of firearms (for example, ownership) that is the key determinant, but rather weak oversight and control and the impunity associated with their use.<sup>34, 35</sup> Handguns such as revolvers and pistols, and to a lesser extent semi- and automatic rifles of various calibres and makes, are frequently procured and misused by criminal factions to settle disputes.<sup>36</sup> A study of a sample of prison inmates in Belize, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago, for example, described mixed motives for acquiring an illicit firearm, including personal protection, peer pressure, the pursuit of criminal activity and financial considerations.<sup>37</sup>

#### Drug gangs and surging violence in Ecuador

After years of a comparatively low rate of violent crime, Ecuador is experiencing an unprecedented escalation of lethal violence. Homicidal violence increased by roughly 407 per cent between 2016 and 2022 in the country, and the latest surge in homicides representing an increase of 94.7 per cent from 2021 to 2022 has been linked to increasingly violent competition between rival drug trafficking gangs.

For example, a number of criminal organizations are disputing lucrative cocaine routes, including in Guayaquil, home to one of the busiest ports in South America.<sup>a</sup>

vol. 30, No. 59 (January 2022).

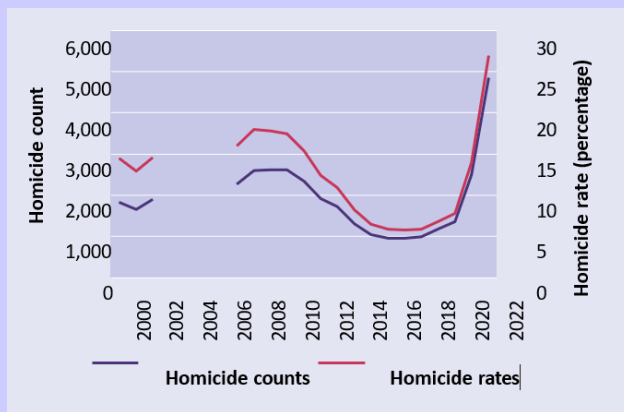
<sup>36</sup> Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020 (United Nations publication, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> See Fabre, A.S. et al., “Weapons compass: Caribbean firearms study”, Small Arms Survey (April 2023).

The homicide rate has also increased dramatically in other areas where criminal factions are competing, including the cities of Duran and Mahala and the coastal province of Esmeraldas, which experienced an almost fourfold increase in homicide from 23.5 per 100,000 in 2021 to 81.1 in 2022.<sup>b</sup> Indeed, the increase in the homicide rate from 2014 to 2022 was higher in the coastal or neighbouring provinces than elsewhere in the country.

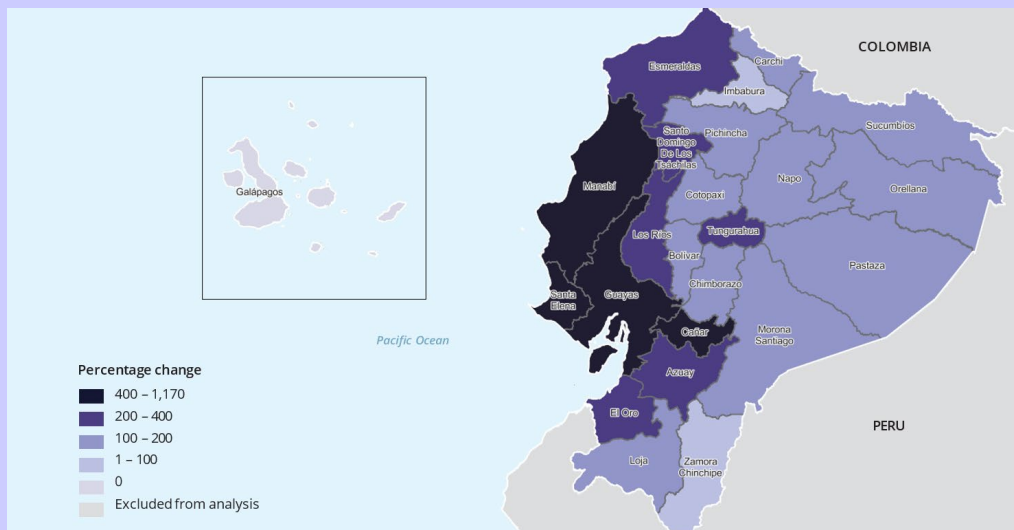
Record-breaking coca cultivation in neighbouring Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Colombia and Peru and increased cocaine trafficking through Ecuador en route to the major destinations markets in Northern America and Europe are driving violence in Ecuador. Drug-related violence began to increase in 2018, most of it related to disputes between local gangs or confined to prisons, but violence has spiralled over the past two years, reportedly owing to deepening tensions between transnational crime groups from Mexico, such as the Jalisco New Generation Cartel,<sup>c</sup> and Clan Farruku from Albania.<sup>d</sup>

Number of homicides and homicide rate per 100,00 population, Ecuador, 2000–2022



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Percentage change in the homicide rate in Ecuador, by province, 2014–2022



Source: Ministry of Interior for homicide number; National Institute of Statistics and Census for population figures.

Note: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

a Global Report on Cocaine 2023 – Local Dynamics, Global Challenges (United Nations publication, 2023).

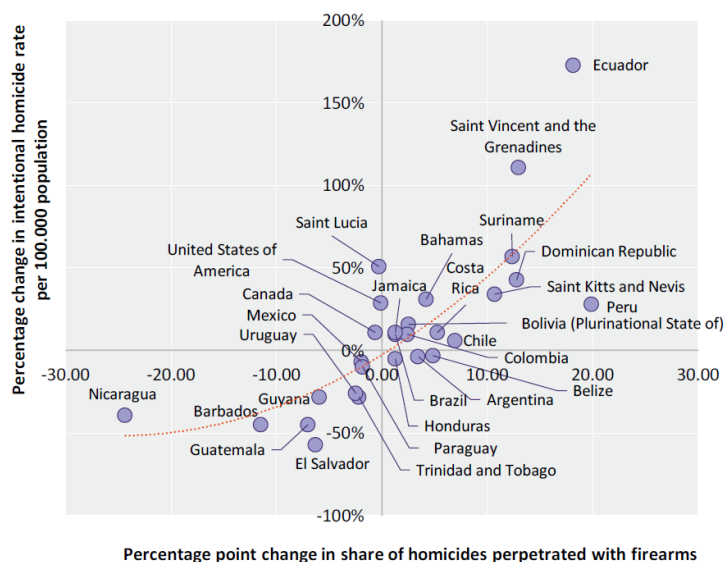
b Lizcano Villalba, J., “Murder record broken in northern Ecuador as gang feuds fuel violence”, Insight Crime, 28 Oct 2022.

c See Ferri, P., “Mexican cartels linked to Ecuador violence: ‘criminals have an incentive to say they belong to a renowned group’”, El País, 11 August 2023.

d See Sistermans, V., “‘Clan Farruku’ arrest highlight Albanian’s Latin America cocaine connections”, InSight Crime, 20 April 2023.

Fig. 3 Change in the homicide rate and change in the share of homicides perpetrated with firearms, the Americas, 2019–2021 or 2019–2020

Firearms can be acquired by organized criminal groups in multiple ways. With the exception of the Caribbean, where almost all firearms and ammunition are imported, whether legally or illegally,<sup>38</sup> firearms and ammunition can often be sourced domestically, either through private dealers, on the black market, or diverted from law enforcement arsenals and military stocks. More often than not, firearms are procured from foreign sources, most notably in Northern America and Western Europe, via both legal and illegal means.<sup>39, 40</sup> Weapons are frequently shipped by air and sea, on commercial passenger planes, and by



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

post.<sup>41, 42</sup> In this regard, there is growing concern about the “iron pipeline” involving networks of dealers and brokers who smuggle firearms, ammunition, parts and accessories from the United States in particular, to countries in the Caribbean, Central America and South America.<sup>43</sup>

Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean report the largest proportion of gun-related homicides worldwide. In 2021, there were at least 89,100 gun-related homicides in Latin America and the Caribbean, including 55,100 in South America, 29,900 in Central America and 4,100 in the Caribbean,<sup>44</sup> which translates into respective homicide rates of 9.3, 16.9 and 12.7 per 100,000. The share of homicides perpetrated with firearms ranged from 65 per cent in Central America to 67 per cent in the Caribbean and 70 per cent in South America in 2021, compared with 62 per cent in Northern America and 17 per cent in Europe. In general, an increase in the homicide rate is associated with a higher share of homicides perpetrated with firearms, and vice versa in the case of a decrease in the homicide rate (figure 3).

### Role of men

All over the world, the perpetrators and victims of homicide are disproportionately male. This is particularly the case in Latin America and the Caribbean, where roughly 91 per cent of homicide victims

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> See Aguirre, K. and Muggah, R., *Arming the Americas* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (United Nations publication, 2020).

<sup>41</sup> See Aguirre, K. and Muggah, R., *Arming the Americas* (Oxford University Press, 2020). For more in relation to Latin American arms transfer trends. See also Small Arms Survey (2023) for a treatment of transfer modalities in the Caribbean.

<sup>42</sup> *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (United Nations publication, 2020).

<sup>43</sup> See CARICOM Council, “CARICOM states join Mexico’s anti-gun lawsuit in the US”, 31 March 2023; United States Government Accountability Office, “Firearms trafficking: more information is needed to inform US efforts in Central America”, 11 January 2022; Henry Shuldiner and Anastasia Austin, “Across the Americas, governments aim to rein in flow of guns”, *InSight Crime*, 24 April 2023; Grillo, I., “US-made guns are ripping Central America apart and driving migration north”, *The Guardian*, 16 April 2021; Caribbean Community (CARICOM), “Declaration by CARICOM heads of government – war on guns”, 18 April 2023.

<sup>44</sup> UNODC data based on regional estimates rounded up to the multiple of 100.

in 2021 were male while the global average was 81 per cent. The countries with the largest share of male homicide victims in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2021 were the Bahamas (95 per cent), Guyana (93 per cent), Haiti (93 per cent), Colombia (92 per cent) and Brazil (92 per cent).

The men involved in homicidal violence across Latin America and the Caribbean are also disproportionately young. This is partly to be expected since the subregion has a relatively large youth population, although the share of young people has been decreasing over time.<sup>45</sup> In the Americas, including Northern America, more than 45 per cent of homicide victims were aged between 15 and 29 years in 2021. Countries that registered the highest share of homicide victims in this age group included the Bahamas (52 per cent), El Salvador (49 per cent), Guatemala (48 per cent) and Colombia (46 per cent). Most victims in this age group were males. In El Salvador, for example, approximately 43 per cent of all homicide victims were males aged 15–29 even though this age group constitutes just 15 per cent of the country's population.

The large share of young male homicide victims in Latin America and the Caribbean is also linked to the demography of criminal organizations across the subregion. This is because, while the leadership of organized criminal organizations may be older, on the whole the rank and file of drug trafficking factions, militia groups, street gangs and other criminal entities is typically made-up of young men.<sup>46</sup> There are multiple motivations for joining criminal organizations, ranging from a desire to belong, to the pursuit of economic opportunity, with young Latin Americans, over 80 per cent of whom live in urban settings, being deeply concerned about their lack of education and employment opportunities.<sup>47</sup> These motivations were apparently exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the risk of recruitment of young people into criminal organizations increased.<sup>48</sup>

### Role of criminal groups

Trends in lethal violence are heavily influenced both by collaboration and competition between organized crime groups, drug factions and gangs. When criminal organizations seek to enforce their influence and compete to control drug routes and retail outlets, they often resort to coercive violence. Rival factions may seek to assert control over territory and, if co-optation is not possible, intimidate or eliminate their opponents. Likewise, drug trafficking organizations, militia and street gangs frequently use lethal violence in prisons, many of which face significant over-crowding and other challenges, in order to degrade and dissuade rivals.<sup>49</sup> An example of this emerged following the breakdown of the “non-aggression pact” between two rival drug trafficking groups, the Primeiro Comando da Capital and Comando Vermelho, in Brazil.<sup>50</sup> When the pact came to an end in 2016, waves of brutal prison violence followed in both public and private prisons across the country, including in Boa Vista, Manaus and Altamira in 2017/18, resulting in hundreds of deaths of inmates and sparking violent reprisals.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See *Population Trends in Latin America and the Caribbean, Demographic Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic* (United Nations publication, 2022).

<sup>46</sup> See Chávez, C., “What we know and what we don’t know about youth gangs in Latin America”, United Nations Children’s Fund, 27 September 2018; Jutersonke, O., Muggah, R. and Rodgers, D., “Gangs, urban violence, and security interventions in Central America”, *Security Dialogue*, vol.40, No.4/5 (September 2009), pp. 373–397.

<sup>47</sup> See Kalantaryan, S., Ueffing, P. and Nedee, A, *Youth Perspectives in Latin America and the Caribbean: Evidence from Latinbarómetro Survey* (Publications Office of the European Union, 2023).

<sup>48</sup> See *The Impact of COVID-19 on Organized Crime* (United Nations publication, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> See Dudley, S., and Bargent, J., “The prison dilemma: Latin America’s incubators of organized crime”, *Insight Crime*, 19 January 2017.

<sup>50</sup> See Lessing, B. and Willis, G., “Legitimacy in criminal governance: managing a drug empire from behind bars”, *American Political Science Review*, vol. 113, No. 2 (22 February 2019), pp. 584-606.

<sup>51</sup> See Muggah, R. and Szabo, I., Brazil’s deadly prison system, *New York Times*, 4 January 2017; Muggah, R., Taboada, C., and Tinoco, D., “Why is prison violence so bad in Brazil”, *Americas Quarterly*, 2 August 2019; and Muggah, R., “Brazil’s prison massacres send a dire message”, *NPR* (May 2019).

### Criminal pacts – “pax mafiosa”

The presence of organized crime groups does not always translate into a high rate of homicidal violence. In comparison with much of Latin America and the Caribbean and some countries in Africa, Asia and Europe appear to have much smaller shares of organized crime-related homicide, but that does not necessarily mean there is less organized crime in Asia and Europe than in other regions.

Types of organized crime such as large-scale drug trafficking can be managed in ways that may or may not promote violence,<sup>a</sup> as shown by the example of the countries in South-Eastern Europe that lie on the Balkan Route, along which tons of heroin are trafficked every year,<sup>b</sup> yet do not report high homicide rates. Similarly, in some countries in Asia, well known organized crime groups that are apparently important players both at home and abroad,<sup>c</sup> such as the Yakuza in Japan, continue to operate in a country with one of the very lowest homicide rates worldwide (0.23 per 100,000 in 2021).

Indeed, the dominance of a hegemonic organized crime group can have an impact on violent crime, particularly when it successfully exerts control over territory and criminal markets. Moreover, criminal organizations may also enter into “gentleman’s agreements”, including with state authorities, precisely for the purpose of avoiding violent confrontations, even if this effectively leads to the authorities ceding control of some local jurisdictions. Such informal pacts of non-interference can result in a “pax mafiosa”, a relatively low level of violence in territories dominated by criminal groups.<sup>d</sup>

The term “pax mafiosa” has been frequently used in Italy to describe how the leadership of organized crime groups have deliberately reduced the use of overt violence, leading to a drop in the number of mafia-related killings in the country.<sup>e</sup> The same concept has been applied in Mexico, Brazil and other parts of Latin America during the past two decades. In Mexico the concept of “pax narcotica” has also been applied referring to situations of tolerance in the twentieth century towards drug-trafficking activities which maintained low levels of drug-related violence in the country.<sup>f</sup> The leadership of the Sinaloa Cartel reportedly urged its sub-commanders involved in drug trafficking operations in Baja California to reduce homicidal violence because it was attracting too much government attention.<sup>g</sup> Meanwhile, in Sao Paulo, Brazil’s largest city, areas dominated by Primeiro Comando da Capital have reportedly experienced fewer violent crimes, which some studies indicate is because of the group’s monopoly over crime.<sup>h</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Global Study on Homicide 2019* (United Nations publication, 2019).

<sup>b</sup> *World Drug Report 2023*, Booklet 3, chapter 8 (United Nations publication, 2023).

<sup>c</sup> Finckenauer, J.O. and Chin, K., “Asian transnational organized crime and its Impact on the United States: developing a transnational crime research agenda: a final report,” *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 10, No. 2 (December 2006) pp. 18–107.

<sup>d</sup> *Global Study on Homicide 2019* (United Nations publication, 2019); Zabyelina, Y., “Transnational organized crime in international relations”, *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, vol.3, No. 1 (2009).

<sup>e</sup> See for example Ralazione Della, “Commissione parlamentare di inchiesta sul fenomeno delle mafie e sulle altre associazioni criminali”, *Camera Del Deputati Senato Della*, Doc. XXIII, N0.38 (February 2018) and “Relazione sull’attivita’ delle forze di polizia sullo stato dell’ordine e della sicurezza pubblica e sulla criminalita’ organizzata”, *Senato Della Repubblica*, Doc. XXXVIII, No.4 (January 2017).

<sup>f</sup> Chabat, J., “Combatting drugs in Mexico under Calderon: The inevitable war”, *CIDE*, No. 205 (2010).

<sup>g</sup> See Pachico, E., “Baja California: a test for Mexico’s pax-mafioso?”, *InSight Crime*, 14 April 2013.

<sup>h</sup> See Biderman, C. et al., “Pax monopolista and crime: the case of the emergence of the Primeiro Comando da Capital in Sao Paulo”, *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* (November 2018), pp. 573–605. See also Amorim, S. and Voitch, P., “SP: queda de homicídios se deve à hegemonia de facção criminosa”, *O Globo*, 18 July 2012. It is important to note that there are some disputes about the role of the Primeiro Comando da Capital’s (PCC) influence in reducing violent crime, including Justus. M. et al., “The Sao Paulo mystery: the role of the criminal organization PCC in reducing homicide in 2000s”, *Economia*, vol. 19, No. 2 (May 2018).

## More organized crime, less homicide? A look at municipality-level data in Mexico

There is no linear association between violence and the presence of organized crime in a community and Mexico, a country with high levels of organized crime, offers an example of how a greater presence of organized crime does not always translate into a higher level of violence.<sup>a, b</sup>

Although measuring organized crime remains a challenge,<sup>c, d, e</sup> survey data<sup>f</sup> on citizens' perceptions of safety, trust in public institutions and crime victimization in Mexico, from the National Survey of Urban Public Safety (ENSU), can help improve understanding of the connections between organized crime and violence. Data from the 2021 survey provide a range of indicators that can indirectly assess the presence of organized crime across 75 cities in Mexico and 16 areas in Mexico City and the level of certain crimes:<sup>g</sup>

1. "Seen gangs" – the proportion of respondents who have heard about or seen violent groups or gangsterism<sup>h</sup> around their homes.
2. "Seen illegal fuel" – the proportion of respondents who have heard about or seen theft of illegal sale of fuel around their homes.
3. "Victims of extortion" – the proportion of respondents who were victims of extortion.
4. "Victims of vehicle theft" – the proportion of respondents who were victims of vehicle theft.
5. "Victims of theft of vehicle parts" – the proportion of respondents who were victims of theft of vehicle parts.

Linking these indicators with homicide, the table below shows that the presence of organized crime, homicide and other violent crimes tends to co-occur within municipalities. Some combinations of crime are more likely to occur than others but, overall, the data suggest that organized crime, in relation to visible gangs in particular, correlates with violent crimes.<sup>j</sup>

Focusing on the relationship between homicide and the two indicators that measure the presence of organized crime and have the strongest associations with homicides – the proportion of respondents exposed to gangs near their home, and the proportion of respondents who were victims of extortion – suggests that a greater presence of organized crime goes hand-in-hand with a higher level of homicide,<sup>k</sup> although only up to a certain point. When the presence of organized crime reaches a certain level (more than 32 per cent of people reporting having seen gangs in the community) homicide starts to decline.

Once organized crime surpasses a certain level, its positive relationship with homicidal violence not only disappears but also turns negative, and the municipalities with the highest proportion of residents exposed to gangs do not actually experience the most homicides. For example, while 48.75 per cent of the population of San Luis Posi were exposed to gangs near their home, the community's homicide rate (35.50 per 100,000), although high, was well below the homicide rate of Fresnillo (279.66 per 100,000), where 24.00 per cent of residents were exposed to gangs. The municipalities with the highest levels of homicide were within a middle range of gang exposure, of between 20 and 40 percentage points.

Correlation matrix of variables of interest, Mexico, 2021

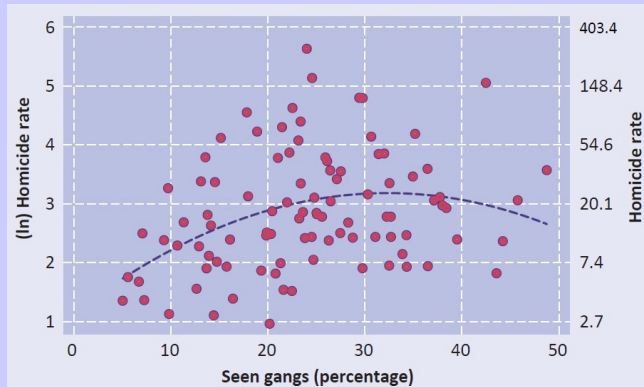
Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
<b>Organized crime indicators</b>								
(1) Seen gangs	1.00	0.35	0.52	0.59	0.39	0.28	0.27	0.58
(2) Seen illegal fuel	0.35	1.00	0.17	0.18	0.15	0.03	0.23	0.29
(3) Victims of vehicle theft	0.52	0.17	1.00	0.74	0.50	0.24	0.24	0.74
(4) Victims of theft of vehicle parts	0.59	0.18	0.74	1.00	0.54	0.13	0.33	0.71
(5) Victims of extortion	0.39	0.15	0.50	0.54	1.00	0.31	0.20	0.41
<b>Homicide, law and order</b>								
(6) (Ln) Homicide rate	0.28	0.03	0.24	0.13	0.31	1.00	0.15	0.03
(7) Victims of burglary <sup>i</sup>	0.27	0.23	0.24	0.33	0.20	0.15	1.00	0.10
(8) Victims of robbery	0.58	0.29	0.74	0.71	0.41	0.03	0.10	1.00

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI), ENSU 2021.

Note: The Pearson Correlation Coefficient measures the linear association between the two variables and ranges between a minimum of -1 (a total negative linear relationship) to a maximum of 1 (a total positive linear relationship; in violet). The value of 0 indicates no linear relationship. The table displays a correlation matrix between each of these organized crime indicators and measures of homicide, law and order at the municipality level in Mexico.



### Homicide rate (ln) by the proportion of respondents who had heard about or seen violent groups or gangsterism near their home, Mexico, 2021



Source: INEGI, ENSU 2021.

Note: The above figure is a scatterplot comparing the homicide rate with the proportion of respondents who had heard about or seen gangs near their home. Each dot in the figure corresponds to one of the 75 cities in Mexico and 16 areas in Mexico City included in the sample. The homicide rates were also log-transformed, which is a common research technique to reduce the influence of extreme homicide rates on order to make results more representative of all municipalities. The untransformed homicide rate corresponding to each logged value is listed in the secondary y-axis. In addition, a dashed fit-line was included in the figure, which reflects the average association between the two variables, as estimated using a simple ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model (see annex 1 of the present chapter for the numeric estimates).

### Homicide rate (ln) by the proportion of respondents who had been victims of extortion, Mexico, 2021



Source: INEGI, ENSU 2021.

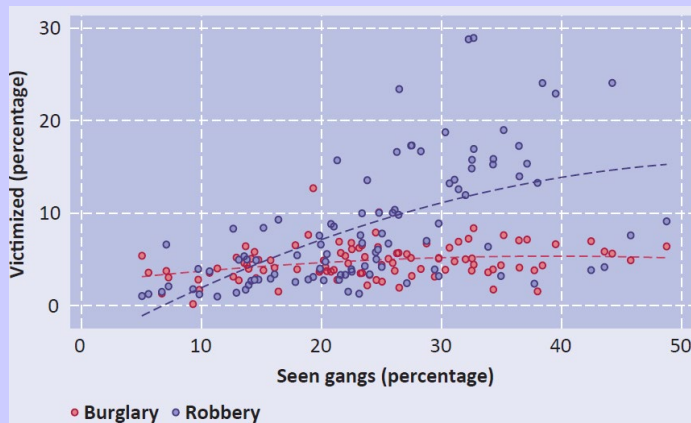
The same pattern can be seen using other indicators that measure the presence of organized crime. The proportion of respondents who were victims of extortion ranged from 1.35 per cent (in Boca del Rio, Veracruz) to a high of 22.38 per cent (in Irapuato, Guanajuato). Higher levels of extortion tend to be associated with an expected increase in the homicide rate, but that association plateaus once more than 15 per cent of residents have been victims of extortion.

The association between the presence of organized crime and property crime is similar but not the same as for homicide. As in the case of homicide, greater exposure to gangs has a positive association with robbery victimization rates, and a higher prevalence of extortion is strongly and positively related with a higher risk of public robbery. Increasing the proportion of respondents who were victims of extortion from 1 to 2 percentage points is associated with an increase of 1.568 in the percentage of respondents who were victims of robbery across municipalities.

Like homicide, when organized crime reaches a certain point (more than 18 per cent of residents are victims of extortion), robberies are more contained. Unlike homicide, however, even when the positive relationship weakens as extortions become more prevalent, the association between organized crime and robbery never clearly turns negative.

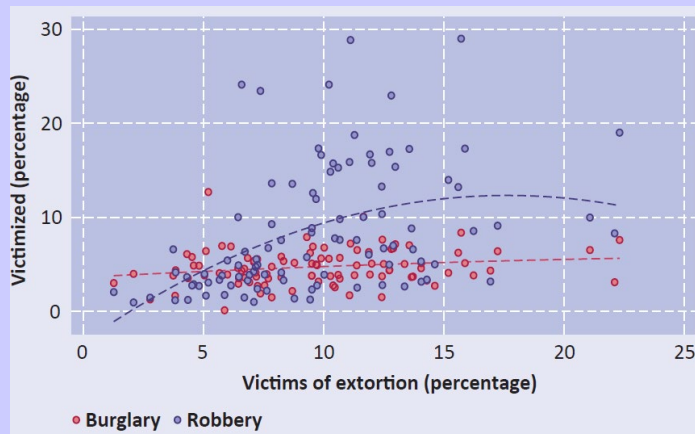
The decrease in homicide (but not robbery) as the presence of organized crime becomes more visible in a given municipality, suggests the particular role that violence may play in the operations of organized crime groups. Such groups may be more violent when establishing or asserting their presence, but once their operations have been consolidated and become visible, they may need to employ lethal violence to a lesser extent.

**Burglary and robbery victimization by the proportion of respondents who had heard about or seen violent groups or gangsterism around their homes, Mexico, 2021**



Source: INEGI, ENSU 2021.

**Burglary and robbery victimization by the proportion of respondents who had been victims of extortion, Mexico, 2021**



Source: INEGI, ENSU 2021.

a Aguirre, J. and Herrera, H. A., "Institutional weakness and organized crime in Mexico: the case of Michoacán", *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 16 (April 2013), pp. 221–238.

b Atuesta, L. H. and Pérez-Dávila, Y. S., "Fragmentation and cooperation: the evolution of organized crime in Mexico", *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 21, No. 3, (February 2017), pp. 235–261.

c Vander Beken, T., "Risky business: a risk-based methodology to measure organized crime", *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 41, (June 2004) pp. 471–516.

d Dugato, M., Calderoni, F. and Campedelli, G. M., "Measuring organised crime presence at the municipal level", *Social Indicators Research*, vol. 147 (August 2019), pp. 237–261.

e Van Dijk, J., "Mafia markers: assessing organized crime and its impact upon societies", *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 10, (October 2007), pp. 39–56.

f Mexico, Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI), Encuesta Nacional de Seguridad Pública Urbana (ENSU).

g These municipalities correspond to those that had at least 100 respondents to ENSU, as well as available homicide data.

h The term refers to the behaviour of gang members and their modi operandi.

i Burglary in this context refers to situations when victims were either present or absent from the property.

j A notable exception is the sale of illegal fuel, which has only modest correlations with most other indicators.

k An increase from 5 to 6 percentage points in the proportion of the population exposed to gangs is related to a significant increase of 11.2 per cent in a municipality's homicide rate, and an increased proportion of extortion victims from 1 to 2 percentage points is associated with an increase in the homicide rate of 15.3 per cent



Criminal organizations, most notably gangs, are contributing to increasing homicide in several Caribbean countries. On the one hand, this is because gangs are increasingly competing to control drug trafficking routes between drug-producing countries in South America and the markets in Northern America and Western Europe, in particular.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, and even more importantly, as inter-factional violence intensifies and state security forces seek to disrupt gang leadership, the composition of the gang changes.

In Trinidad and Tobago, the Strategic Services Agency of the Ministry of National Security noted the effect of the elimination of gang leaders by gang rivals or their incarceration for prolonged periods on the leadership of criminal gangs.<sup>53</sup> The emergence of younger and more violent leaders and the fragmentation of existing gangs have been accompanied by animosity between them.<sup>54</sup> Trinidadian gangs have also diversified into new types of illegal business, from fraud and money laundering to robbery, human smuggling and illegal gambling;<sup>55</sup> they are also accessing higher calibre weapons than in the past.<sup>56</sup> In Jamaica, law enforcement operations targeting major gangs and organized crime groups in the early 2010s led to a decrease in the number of homicides, from 1,682 in 2009 to 1,005 in 2014.<sup>57</sup> However, the crackdown strategy, which was not sustained over time, exacerbated the splintering of gangs, which expanded their activities to rural areas.<sup>58</sup> The number of gangs is reported to have doubled in the country from 191 in 2010 to at least 389 in 2019,<sup>59</sup> and the increase in the number of gangs was followed by an increase in homicide.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in Latin America, the fragmentation of organized crime groups that followed law enforcement activities in Mexico has also been put forward as a reason for the increase in homicidal violence in the country since 2014.<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile, an estimated 200 gang are operating in Haiti at present, some of them operating in federations (for example, G9, 400 Mawozo and G-Pep) with significant territorial control. Several gangs in the country have access to high-calibre firearms from the United States and are heavily involved in a range of criminal activities, from kidnapping and assassination to extortion and sexual violence.<sup>62</sup>

Criminal organizations are particularly active in border and coastal areas, partly because of the importance of moving drugs and other contraband across frontiers. Examples of this are the tri-border areas of countries in South America, including Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). A 2023 study detected one or more groups in almost 70 per cent (242 of 348) municipalities in border areas of the eight Amazon Basin countries.<sup>63</sup>

### Role of drugs

Latin America and the Caribbean is home to countries that are the world's primary producers of cocaine. The expansion of the transnational drug trade has contributed to the emergence of sophisticated and powerful organized crime organizations, and the surge in cocaine production in the Andean countries in particular, most notably since 2020, has increased competition, and consequently lethal violence,

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<sup>52</sup> Hernandez-Roy, C. and Bendsoe, R., "Building barriers and bridges, the Need for international cooperation to counter the Caribbean-Europe drug trade", Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (Washington, D.C., 2023).

<sup>53</sup> Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Ministry of National Security, *Strategic Services Agency, Annual Report 2021* (2021).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> See Douglas, S., "SSA: Police-sized guns returning to criminals' hands", *News Day*, 19 May 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Caribbean Policy Research Institute, *Guns Out: The Splintering of Jamaica's Gangs* (Kingston, 2020).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> See Linton, L., "JCF establishing special anti-gang task force", *Jamaican Information Service*, 21 May 2020.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> International Crisis Group. *Crime in Pieces: The Effects of Mexico's "War on Drugs", Explained* (2023).

<sup>62</sup> See *Haiti's Criminal Markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking* (United Nations Publication, 2023).

<sup>63</sup> See *Infoamazonia*, "Welcome to the Amazon underworld", 3 August 2023.

between global organized crime organizations both in the Amazon Basin<sup>64, 65</sup> and in neighbouring countries such as Argentina and Chile.<sup>66, 67</sup>

The surge in drug trafficking in the Caribbean<sup>68</sup> is associated with increasing homicide rates across the region, which has corrosive implications for sustainable development.<sup>69</sup> The transshipment of drugs through Caribbean countries is hardly new, of course, with more than three quarters of all cocaine seized between South America and the United States during the 1980s being intercepted in Caribbean countries.<sup>70</sup> The creation of the North American Free Trade Association and the temporary void created by the dismantling of some Colombian drug cartels in the first half of the 1990s diminished the importance of the Caribbean cocaine route in relation to the route through Mexico.<sup>71</sup> However, increasing demand in Europe led to the resurgence of large-scale cocaine trafficking in the Caribbean, including via the Dominican Republic.<sup>72</sup>

Among the many victims of organized crime-related homicide are human rights defenders. OHCHR documented the killing of at least 1,921 human rights defenders between 2015 and 2022 in Latin America and the Caribbean alone, over 60 per cent of the global total.<sup>73</sup>

### States of emergency

Amid mounting public concern about violent crime and a low level of trust in the police,<sup>74</sup> some Governments in Latin America and the Caribbean have introduced a “state of exception”. In Central America, several countries have issued emergencies to address public security crises, while deploying the military alongside law enforcement and increasing the involvement of citizens in crime control efforts. In 2022, for example, the Honduran authorities declared a state of emergency in over half the country,<sup>75</sup> which was extended in 2023.<sup>76</sup> Following the extension of the state of emergency, OHCHR urged authorities in Honduras to reinforce the internal and external oversight of military operations in the country.<sup>77</sup>

El Salvador also introduced a state of emergency in 2022 to fight the gangs MS-13 and Barrio 18. According to information provided by the Government of El Salvador, through Legislative Decree 333 of 27 March 2022, emergency measures were introduced, and as a consequence, the constitutional rights and guarantees regulated in articles 7, 12 second paragraph, 13 second paragraph and 24 were suspended for an initial period of 30 days. These measures have been maintained with successive extensions issued by the Legislative Assembly, in accordance with article 30 of the Constitution. The Government reported that arrests carried out using these legal tools are made on the basis of evidence that those individuals are members of an organized crime group, which constitutes the crime of illicit association, as regulated by article 345 of the Salvadoran Penal Code, which is punished with a prison sentence, provided that group membership has the characteristics of unlawfulness. According to the Government, more than

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<sup>64</sup> See Muggah, R., “How cocaine is destroying the Amazon”, *Foreign Policy* (6 August 2023); and *The Nexus Between Drugs and Crimes that Affect the Environment and Convergent Crime in the Amazon Basin* (United Nations publication, 2023).

<sup>65</sup> *Global report on Cocaine 2023 – Local Dynamics, Global Challenges* (United Nations publication, 2023).

<sup>66</sup> See Muggah, R., “Latin America’s crime surge is fueled by surging cocaine production”, *Small Wars Journal*, 22 May 2023.

<sup>67</sup> *Global report on Cocaine 2023 – Local Dynamics, Global Challenges* (United Nations publication, 2023).

<sup>68</sup> Hernandez-Roy, C. and Bendsoe, R., “Building barriers and bridges, the need for international cooperation to counter the Caribbean-Europe drug trade”, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (Washington, D.C., 2023).

<sup>69</sup> See Horace Chang, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Security, “Transnational organized crime from a Caribbean perspective”, in a statement to High Level Security Conference of the Guiana Shield, Paramaribo, Suriname, 21/22 April 2022.

<sup>70</sup> *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean – A Threat Assessment* (United Nations publication, 2012).

<sup>71</sup> *World Drug Report 2000* (United Nations publication, 2001).

<sup>72</sup> *Global report on Cocaine 2023 – Local Dynamics, Global Challenges* (United Nations publication, 2023).

<sup>73</sup> See Sustainable Development Goal indicator 16.10.01 at Sustainable Development Goal global database.

<sup>74</sup> See Ray, J., “Global progress on safety, confidence in police stalls”, *Gallup*, 26 October 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Honduras, Diario Oficial de la Republica de Honduras, *Decreto Ejecutivo Número PCM 29-2022* (Honduras, 2022).

<sup>76</sup> Honduras, Diario Oficial de la Republica de Honduras, *Decreto Ejecutivo Número PCM 15-2023* (Honduras, 2022).

<sup>77</sup> OHCHR, “Honduras: Militarization of public security”, Press Briefing Notes, 7 July 2023.

72,000 gang members and leaders have been arrested since the introduction of the state of emergency, leading to a reduction in criminal activities.<sup>78</sup> OHCHR has expressed deep concern about the prolonged state of emergency in El Salvador, and reported excessive use of force, detention and ill treatment, as well as amendments to criminal law and procedure.<sup>79</sup> Prior to Honduras and El Salvador, in 2017, Guatemala introduced a state of emergency in municipalities neighbouring Mexico, ostensibly to fight drug trafficking.<sup>80</sup>

In South America, faced with rising lethal violence, including in the country's prisons, Ecuador recently declared a state of emergency.<sup>81</sup> The country has introduced 10 separate states of emergency since 2021 and deployed the military to tackle the problem.<sup>82</sup> Elsewhere in the subregion, Chile recently enacted a privileged legitimate defence bill (or "Naín-Retamal" law) in order to counter drug trafficking groups, which provides legal certainties and guarantees to the law enforcement authorities when they carry out their duties. Some senators in the country pointed out that the law could be considered a trigger-happy one.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Written information provided by the Government of El Salvador to UNODC.

<sup>79</sup> OHCHR, "El Salvador: Concern at measures in response to rising gang violence", Press briefing notes, 5 April 2022.

<sup>80</sup> These municipalities included Ixchiguan and Tajumulco in the department of San Marcos. Guatemala, Ministerio de Gobernación, *Segundo año de Gobierno: Memoria de Labores 2017* (Guatemala, 2017).

<sup>81</sup> Ecuador, Government of Ecuador, Decreto Ejecutivo No. 824 (Ecuador, 2023).

<sup>82</sup> See Agence France Presse, "Ecuador declares emergency rule in major port to combat crime", *Barron's*, 1 April 2023.

<sup>83</sup> See Senate of Chile, "Ley Naín-Retamal ya una realidad", 6 April 2023.

## ***HOMICIDE TRENDS AND PATTERNS***

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In the Americas, trends in the homicide rate have been diverging between the different subregions over the past decade (figure 4). 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.<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup>

Likewise, Peru and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) have also recorded reductions in the number of annual killings in recent years,<sup>87</sup> 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. 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.<sup>88</sup> 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.

**Fig. 4** Trends in the homicide rate in the Americas, by subregion, 2010–2021

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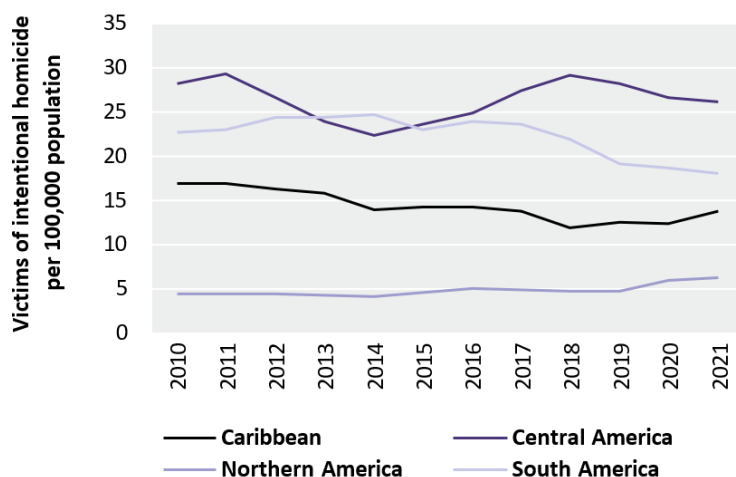
<sup>84</sup> The homicide series in Brazil is based on vital registration data from the Ministry of Health. Available at <https://datasus.saude.gov.br/>. An alternative source of data on homicide in Brazil is the Ministry of Justice, which recorded a similar decline over the same period, albeit at a lower absolute level. Available at: <https://dados.mj.gov.br/dataset/sistema-nacional-de-estatisticas-de-seguranca-publica>.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Forum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública, *Anuário Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2022*. Available at: <https://forumseguranca.org.br/anuario-brasileiro-seguranca-publica/>.

<sup>86</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see the section on organized crime as a driver of homicide trends in chapter 4 of the present study.

<sup>87</sup> The out-migration of a large share of its youth population has been identified as one of the key drivers behind the decline in reported homicides in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in recent years. See, for example, Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, “Informe anual de violencia 2021”. Available at <https://observatoriodeviolencia.org.ve/news/informe-annual-de-violencia-2021/>.

<sup>88</sup> UNODC. *Haiti’s criminal markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking (2023)*.



Source: Estimates based on UNODC homicide statistics.

Central America continues to be the subregion in the Americas with the highest and most volatile homicide rate. 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.<sup>89</sup> 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.<sup>90</sup> These dynamics can explain why, on average, the subregional homicide trend in Central America has been a declining one since 2018.

### Sex of homicide victims

Although roughly 8 out of 10 homicide victims worldwide in 2021 were men and boys (81 per cent) and 2 out of 10 were women and girls, the available data show that women and girls are disproportionately affected by homicidal violence within the family, perpetrated by intimate partners or other family members<sup>91</sup>. In general, countries that record higher rates of female intimate partner homicide also tend to record higher rates of female family-related homicide. However, rates of female intimate partner homicide exhibit much greater variability across countries in various regions than rates of female family-related homicide. In Latin America and the Caribbean in particular, women and girls are significantly more likely to be killed by intimate partners than by other family members, whereas the shares of female intimate partner and family-related homicides tend to be more equal in countries in other regions.

### Age of homicide victims

Age-disaggregated homicide estimates in the Americas 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 5). Women and girls in the Americas face a

<sup>89</sup> See the section on organized crime as a driver of homicide trends in chapter 4 of the present study. For more information on the situation in Mexico, see Calderón, L. Y. et al., eds., *Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico: 2021 Special Report, Justice in Mexico* (University of San Diego, October 2021).

<sup>90</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see the section on organized crime as a driver of homicide trends in chapter 4 of the present study.

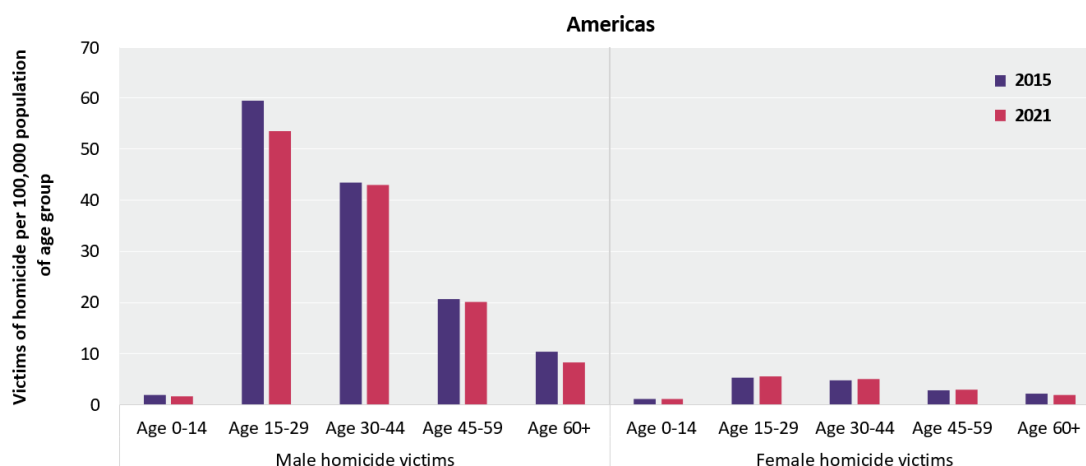
<sup>91</sup> UNODC and UN Women, *Gender-related killings of women and girls (femicide/feminicide): Global estimates of female intimate partner/family-related homicides in 2022* (November 2023).

much lower homicide risk than men and boys across all age groups. The relative age-specific homicide risks are comparable across the sexes, however, with women and girls aged 15–29 years facing the highest risk of homicide in the Americas.

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.<sup>92</sup> The preponderance of male victims starts to become apparent from 10–14 years of age in the Americas.<sup>93</sup>

Data for the period 2015–2021 indicate that broad regional age patterns of homicide victimization remain relatively stable over time. 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 the Americas suggest that the recent decrease in the regional homicide rate in the Americas has been primarily concentrated among young men aged 15 to 29 years. 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 –<sup>94</sup>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.<sup>95</sup>

**Fig. 5** Homicide rate in the Americas, by sex and age group, 2015 and 2021



Source: Estimates based on UNODC homicide statistics.

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 6).

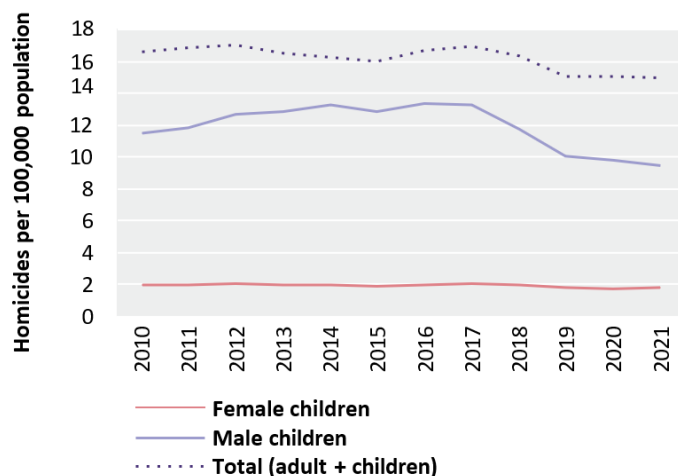
**Fig. 6** Trends in the child homicide rate in the Americas, by sex, 2010–2021

<sup>92</sup> Global Study on Homicide 2019, Booklet VI, Killing of Children and Young Adults (United Nations publication, 2019).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> For more information on trends by type of homicide, see chapter 4 of the present study.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

## 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. 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.

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,<sup>96</sup> for example, where organized crime is an important driver of homicide trends,<sup>97</sup> 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.

### 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

<sup>96</sup> Balmori de la Miyar, J. R., Hoehn-Velasco, L. and Silverio-Murillo, A., “Drug lords don’t stay at home: COVID-19 pandemic and crime patterns in Mexico City”, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, vol. 72 (2021).

<sup>97</sup> See the section on organized crime as a driver of homicide trends in chapter 4 of the present study.



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.<sup>98</sup> Organized 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.<sup>99</sup>

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).<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup> 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,<sup>102</sup> 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.<sup>103</sup>

## 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

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<sup>98</sup> Martínez, L. I., “Chronicles of an announced pandemic: homicides in Colombia”, Universidad de los Andes, December 2020.

<sup>99</sup> Gomez, C. T. “Organised crime governance in times of pandemic: the impact of COVID-19 on gangs and drug cartels in Colombia and Mexico”, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 39, No. 1 (December 2020), pp. 12–15.

<sup>100</sup> Observatorio feminicidios Colombia, Reporte Dinámico Feminicidios Colombia.

<sup>101</sup> Castro, C. et al., “Understanding the killing of social leaders in Colombia during COVID-19”, Latin America and Caribbean Centre, 6 October 2020. Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2020/10/06/understanding-the-killing-of-social-leaders-in-colombia-during-covid-19/>.

<sup>102</sup> Caracol Radio Medellín, “Antioquia aportó el 55% de la reducción de homicidios del país en el 2020”, 19 January 2021.

<sup>103</sup> Alsema, A., “Medellin’s violent crime statistics drop significantly”, Colombia Reports, 17 August 2022. Available at <https://colombiareports.com/medellin-violent-crime-rates-drop-significantly/>.



same period in the previous year.<sup>104</sup> 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.<sup>105</sup>

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.<sup>106</sup>

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.<sup>107</sup>

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.<sup>108</sup>

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.<sup>109</sup> 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.<sup>110</sup>

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.<sup>111</sup> 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.<sup>112</sup>

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

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<sup>104</sup> InfoSegura, Guatemala Analysis of the State of Violence and Citizen Security First Semester 2020 (1S-2020).

<sup>105</sup> Gobierno de Guatemala, Secretari Tecnica del Consejo Nacional de Seguridad, “Reporte Estadístico Junio 2020”.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> InfoSegura, Citizen Security Analysis First Half of 2020, Central America and the Dominican Republic, August 2020.

<sup>108</sup> InfoSegura, Guatemala Analysis of the State of Violence and Citizen Security First Semester 2020 (1S-2020).

<sup>109</sup> UNODC and UN Women, *Gender-related Killings of Women and Girls (Femicide/Feminicide)* (Vienna, 2022).

<sup>110</sup> Asmann, P. and Jones, K., “*InSight Crime’s 2020 homicide round-up*”, 29 January 2021. Available at <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/2020-homicide-round-up/>.

<sup>111</sup> International Crisis Group, “Virus-proof violence: crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle”, 13 November 2020. Available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/83-virus-proof-violence-crime-and-covid-19-mexico-and-northern-triangle>.

<sup>112</sup> Gutiérrez-Romero, R. and Salgado, N., “New trends in south-south migration: the economic impact of COVID-19 and immigration enforcement”, *Applied Geography*, Vol. 154 (May 2023).

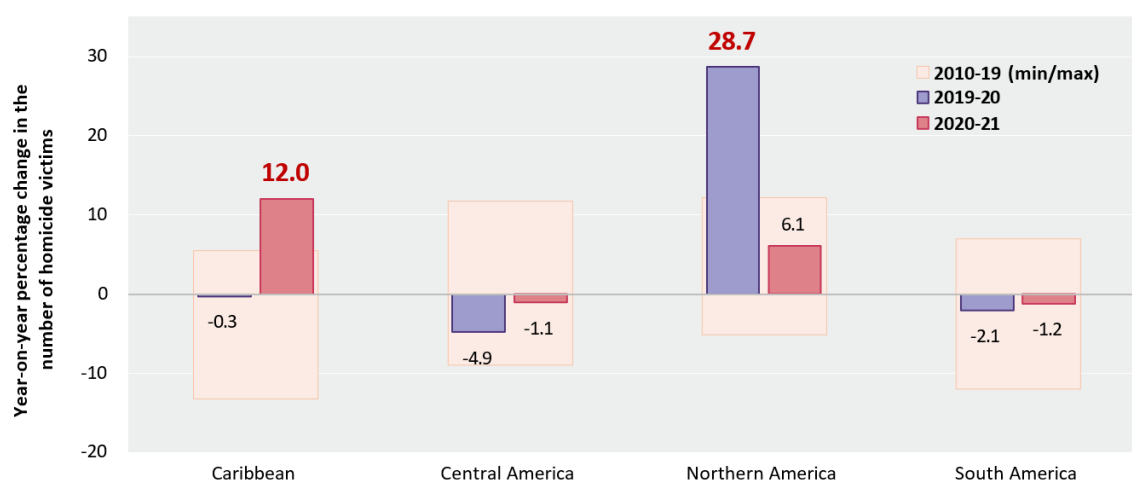
trafficking and the establishment of regional and municipal commissions for community outreach, which were having positive outcomes even before the implementation of strict lockdown measures.<sup>113</sup>

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

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 7). 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.<sup>114</sup> Nonetheless, recently released estimates indicate that homicides in the United States decreased nationwide by 6.1 per cent from 2021 to 2022.<sup>115</sup>

In the Caribbean, the percentage change in the number of homicide victims observed between the end of 2019 and the 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. While a surge in organized-crime related homicide in the subregion can explain some of this year-on-year variation,<sup>116</sup> 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.

**Fig. 7** 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



Source: Estimates based on UNODC homicide statistics.

<sup>113</sup> The Economist Group, “Guatemala sharp drop in homicides likely to reverse in 2021”, 27 January 2021.

<sup>114</sup> Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, *A Year in Review: 2020 Gun Deaths in the U.S.* (April 2022).

<sup>115</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI Releases 2022 Crime in the Nation Statistics (16 October 2023). Available at <https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/fbi-releases-2022-crime-in-the-nation-statistics>.

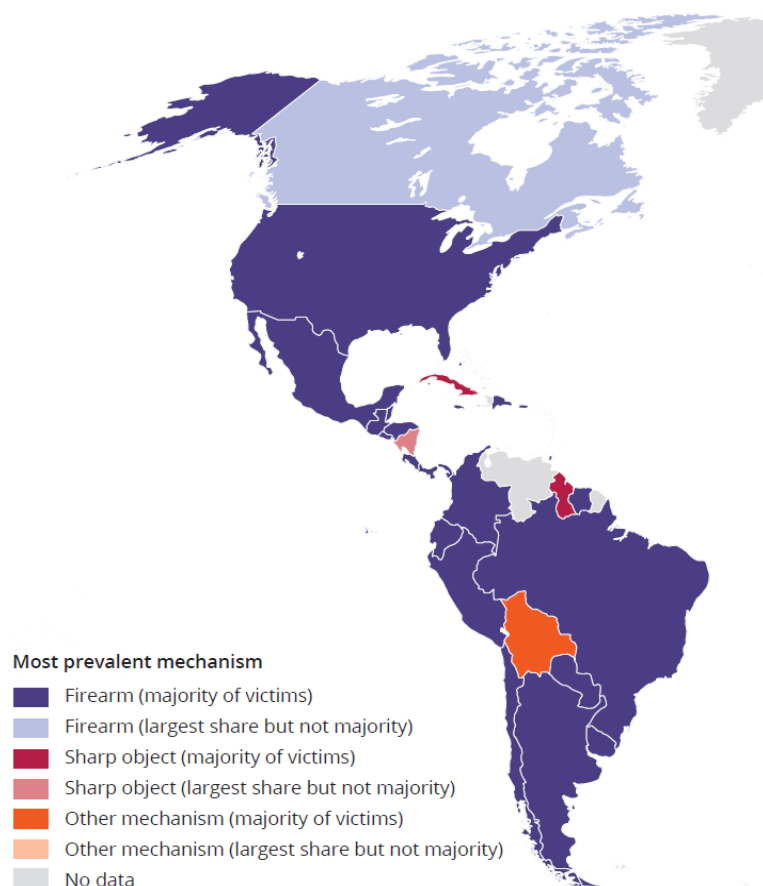
<sup>116</sup> See the section on organized crime as a driver of homicide trends in chapter 4 of the present study.

## Mechanisms of homicide

Compared with the global distribution, the predominant mechanism used to perpetrate homicide differs significantly across regions, but the overall distribution within each region does not appear to have changed much over time (figure 9). In the Americas, which accounted for an estimated 34 per cent of all homicides globally in 2021, at least 67 per cent of homicides were perpetrated with firearms. In other words, 23 per cent of all homicides globally in that year can be attributed to firearm homicides in the Americas.<sup>117</sup>

The country-level pattern of mechanisms used to perpetrate homicide is more aligned with the regional picture in the Americas, where the majority of homicide victims in most countries were killed with firearms in 2021 (map 1). That was not the case in seven countries in the region, but in some of those countries, such as Bolivia (Plurinational State of) and Guatemala, there is no information on the mechanism used in over half of the homicides recorded. In Cuba, Guyana and Nicaragua, sharp objects accounted for the largest share of all homicide mechanisms used. In this context, a question may arise about whether this could be attributed to strict gun legislation; however, studies argue that there is no clear relationship between homicide and such legislation and that other factors such as the efficiency of institutions, the presence of organized crime and access to illegal firearms play an important role.<sup>118</sup>

**Map 1** Most prevalent mechanism used in the perpetration of homicide in the Americas, 2021 or latest available year



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

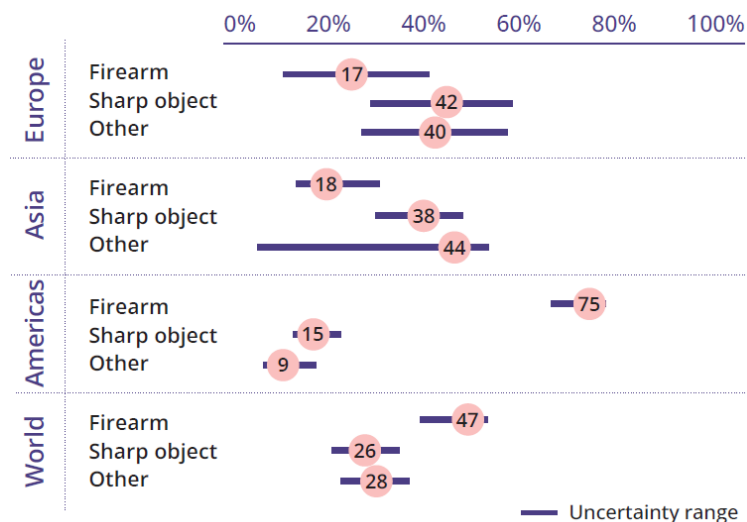
<sup>117</sup> The 67 per cent figure represents the lower bound of estimates.

<sup>118</sup> See: Sanjurjo, D., *Gun Control Policies in Latin America* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Note: The following countries do not have information on the mechanism for more than 50 per cent of homicides: Plurinational State of Bolivia, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

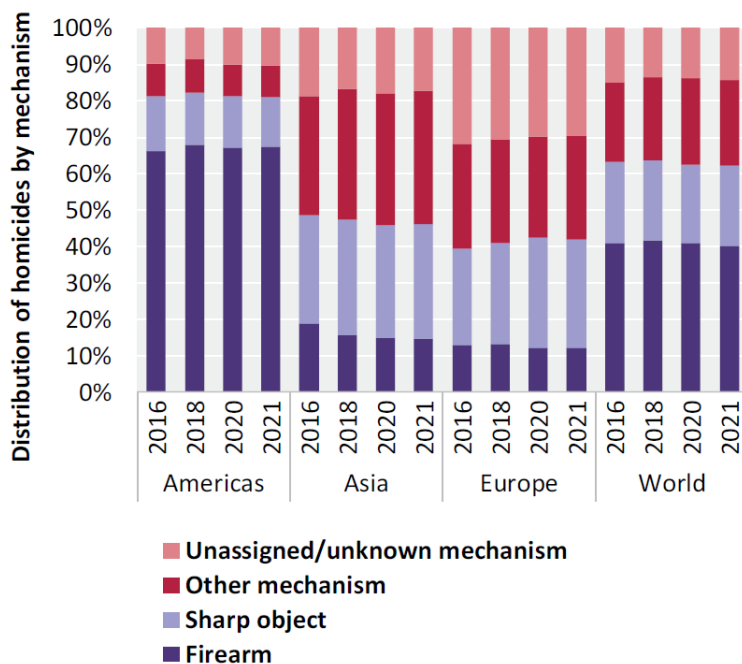
**Fig. 8** Regional shares of homicides by type of known mechanism, 2021



Source: Estimates based on UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: The lower bound share refers to the proportion of homicide victims killed with a specific mechanism over the total number of homicide victims. The best estimate share refers to the proportion of victims killed with a specific mechanism over the sum of all victims for which a mechanism was reported (excluding the unassigned/unknown homicides). The upper bound share refers to the proportion of the sum of victims by a specific mechanism plus the victims of unassigned/ unknown mechanism over the total number of homicide victims.

**Fig. 9** Distribution of homicides by type of mechanism, worldwide and in selected regions and selected years

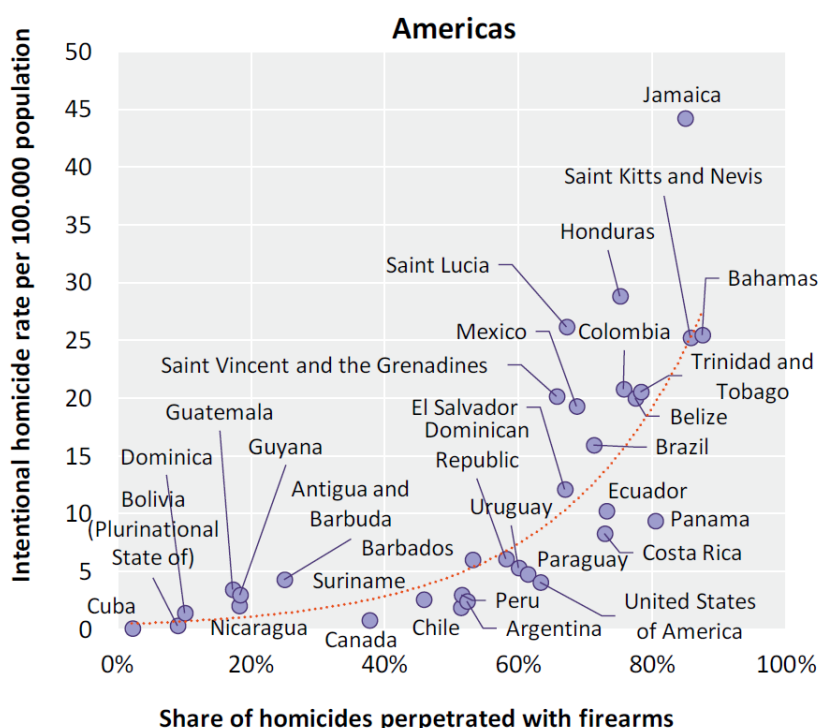


Source: Estimates based on UNODC homicide statistics. The percentages here are equivalent to the lower bounds presented in figure 8

Countries that suffer from a high level of violence associated with organized crime are also likely to record a large share of homicides perpetrated with a firearm. This is the result of more than just a proliferation of firearms, as many countries in Europe have a higher rate of firearm ownership than countries in Latin America, yet still have a smaller share of homicides committed with a firearm, in addition to a lower overall homicide rate.

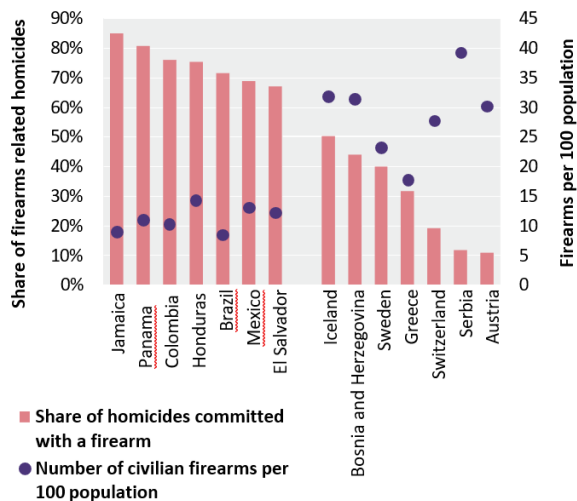
Even in the United States, the country with the highest recorded number of firearms per capita worldwide, only 63 per cent of homicides were committed with a firearm in 2020, according to UN-CTS data. By contrast, in a number of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, more than two thirds of homicides are committed with a firearm (figure 11).

**Fig. 10** Homicide rate versus proportion of homicides involving firearms, selected regions, 2019–2021



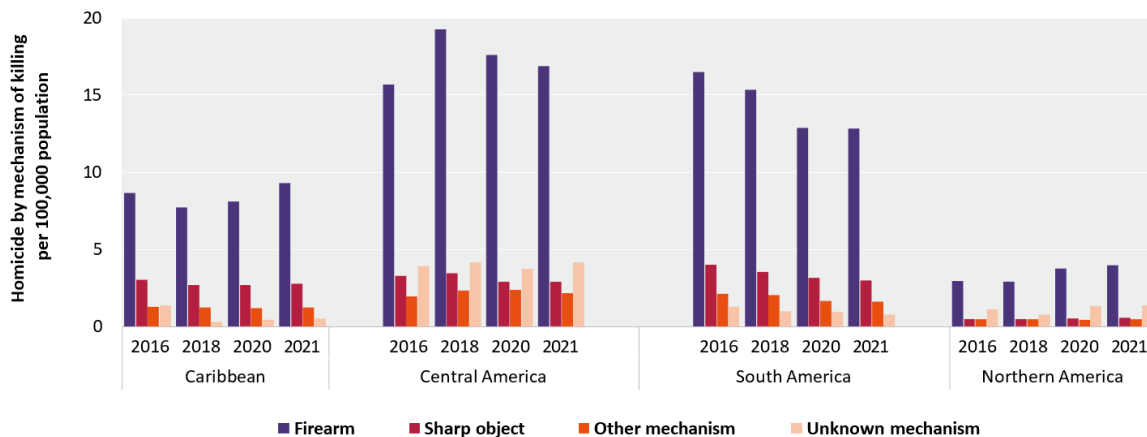
Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

**Fig. 11** Average share of homicides committed with a firearm in 2021, or latest year available, and estimated firearms per 100 citizens in 2017



Source: UNODC statistics and Small Arms Survey.

**Fig. 12** Homicide rate by mechanism of killing in the Caribbean, Central America and South America, selected years



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

### Subregional trends in homicide mechanisms in the Americas and Europe

The distributions of the different mechanisms used to perpetrate homicides has remained roughly the same both in the Americas and Europe in recent years, yet there are some notable subregional trends in the homicide rate by mechanism that can be examined due to the availability of data in those two regions.

In the different subregions of the Americas, changes in the homicide rate usually follow the same trend as changes in the rate of firearm homicide (figure 12). Given that around two thirds of all homicides in the region in recent years have been attributable to the use of firearms, this is not surprising. In the Caribbean, the rate of homicide has undergone a gradual increase since 2018, driven primarily by developments in the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and several other smaller island nations in the subregion.

Even though there has been a decline in recent years, Central America continued to have the highest rate of homicide perpetrated with a firearm of all the subregions in the Americas in 2021, as shown most notably in the cases of Honduras (28.8 per 100,000) and Mexico (19.3). Central America also had the

highest rate of homicide perpetrated without a known mechanism in the Americas – higher than the rate of homicide perpetrated with sharp objects or other mechanisms.

In South America, the homicide rate by each of the different known mechanisms of killing, most notably firearms, decreased from 2016 in line with a drop in the overall homicide rate in the subregion. South America also had a relatively high rate of homicide perpetrated with a sharp object compared with other subregions in the Americas, a mechanism that is relatively prevalent in Colombia, for example.

### Firearm homicides as drivers of trends in the Americas

Although firearm homicides can drive the total homicide trend in some countries, they may be much less significant in others. As indicated in the previous section, available data in the Americas suggest that most countries in the region fall into the former group.

The country examples in the figure below provide further proof that spikes or drops in the total number of homicide victims are mainly driven by changes in the number of firearm homicides, while other types of mechanism play a more limited role in explaining national homicide trends. A notable exception is Chile, where up until 2019 the number of homicides perpetrated with sharp objects and firearms were at the same level, whereas the increase in homicides in 2020 was driven more by firearms and the subsequent decrease in 2021 by sharp objects.

In the United States, gun sales increased greatly in 2020.<sup>119</sup> According to open sources, this was in connection with anxiety related to the COVID-19 lockdowns and also with upheavals related to social and political protests.<sup>120</sup> An analysis by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) also showed that there was an increase in guns recovered by the police with a short “time-to-crime”,<sup>121</sup> an indicator of newly purchased guns being used in crimes. In the same year, the United States recorded the highest number of homicides perpetrated with firearms since 2005 at least, an increase of around 30 per cent compared with 2019.<sup>122</sup> Data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention also showed that, in 2020, firearm-related injuries were the leading cause of death among children and young people between the ages of 1 and 19, which was likely related to the increase in mass shootings.<sup>123</sup>

Record gun sales has been put forward as an explanation for the surge in homicides perpetrated using firearms in the United States.<sup>124</sup> However, the extent to which the increase in sales of firearms contributed to the spike in firearm killings is contested. A study focusing on state-level firearm purchasing and violence<sup>125</sup> during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that excess purchasing was only associated with increases in violence in the domestic context in the months with the strongest physical distancing restrictions, with no such relationship being observed in months with fewer restrictions.<sup>126</sup> This also indicates that other factors relating to the pandemic, such as drug and alcohol use or restricted access to

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<sup>119</sup> See National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), *Crime Guns Recovered and Traced Within the United States and Its Territories* (2023).

<sup>120</sup> Walsh, J., “U.S. bought almost 20 million guns last year — second-highest year on record”, *Forbes*, 5 January 2022.

<sup>121</sup> “Time-to-crime” is the time from the last known retail sale of a firearm to when it is recovered in a crime.

<sup>122</sup> Publicly available data on homicides perpetrated with firearms go back to 2005.

<sup>123</sup> Goldstick, J. E., Cunningham, R. M. and Carter, P. M. “Current causes of death in children and adolescents in the United States”, *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 386, No. 20 (May 2022).

<sup>124</sup> Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, *A Year in Review: 2020 Gun Deaths in the U.S.* (John Hopkins, 2022); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Center for Health Statistics, “The record increase in homicide during 2020”, podcast, 8 October 2021. The association between firearm availability and homicide is contested in the literature (see, for example, Hepburn, L. M. and Hemenway, D., “Firearm availability and homicide: a review of the literature”, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, vol. 9, No. 4 (July 2004); Schleimer, J. P. et al., “Firearm purchasing and firearm violence during the coronavirus pandemic in the United States: a cross-sectional study”, *Injury Epidemiology*, vol.8, No. 43 (July 2021)). However, there is consensus that firearm accessibility in the home is a risk factor for domestic homicides (see Anglemeyer, A., Horvath, T. and Rutherford, G., “The accessibility of firearms and risk for suicide and homicide victimization among household members: a systematic review and meta-analysis,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 2014 (January 2014), pp. 101–110).

<sup>125</sup> In the study, violence-related firearm injuries include both fatal and non-fatal ones.

<sup>126</sup> Schleimer, J. P. et al., “Firearm purchasing and firearm violence during the coronavirus pandemic in the United States: a cross-sectional study”, *Injury epidemiology*, vol. 8, No. 43 (July 2021).

domestic violence prevention services, could have been contributing factors to the increase in violence in the months with fewer restrictions. Moreover, no association was found between firearms purchases and non-domestic violence.

In Brazil, there is a similar debate regarding the impact of the availability of firearms on crime, including homicide. Some studies<sup>127</sup> have shown that Brazil's last major change in gun legislation in 2003, which restricted the carrying of guns, led to a reduction in gun-related homicides outside the home. In 2019, new legislation loosening certain restrictions on gun ownership led to an increase in gun sales,<sup>128</sup> but also included more supervision and tracing of firearms. After a steady decline in homicides since 2017, there was a slight uptick in 2020 in tandem with an increase in homicides perpetrated with firearms. The increase in firearm homicides may be associated with the increase in gun sales, but the available evidence does not allow for a clear causal attribution at present.

In several countries in Latin America, trends in organized crime-related and other crime-related homicides are strongly linked to trends in firearm homicides. In El Salvador, for example, the use of firearms is strongly associated with killings in the context of gang violence, robbery and organized crime activities, as opposed to intimate partner/ family-related violence.<sup>129</sup> Along with a decrease in organized crime-related homicides in El Salvador in recent years, homicides perpetrated with firearms (and homicides overall) also declined, suggesting a link between trends in crime-related killings and firearm killings. A similar situation was observed in Mexico, where an increase in firearm homicides between 2015 and 2018 occurred during periods of increased organized crime activities.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Schneider, R., "Fewer guns, less crime: evidence from Brazil", *Economic Policy*, vol. 36, No. 106 (2021), pp. 287–323.

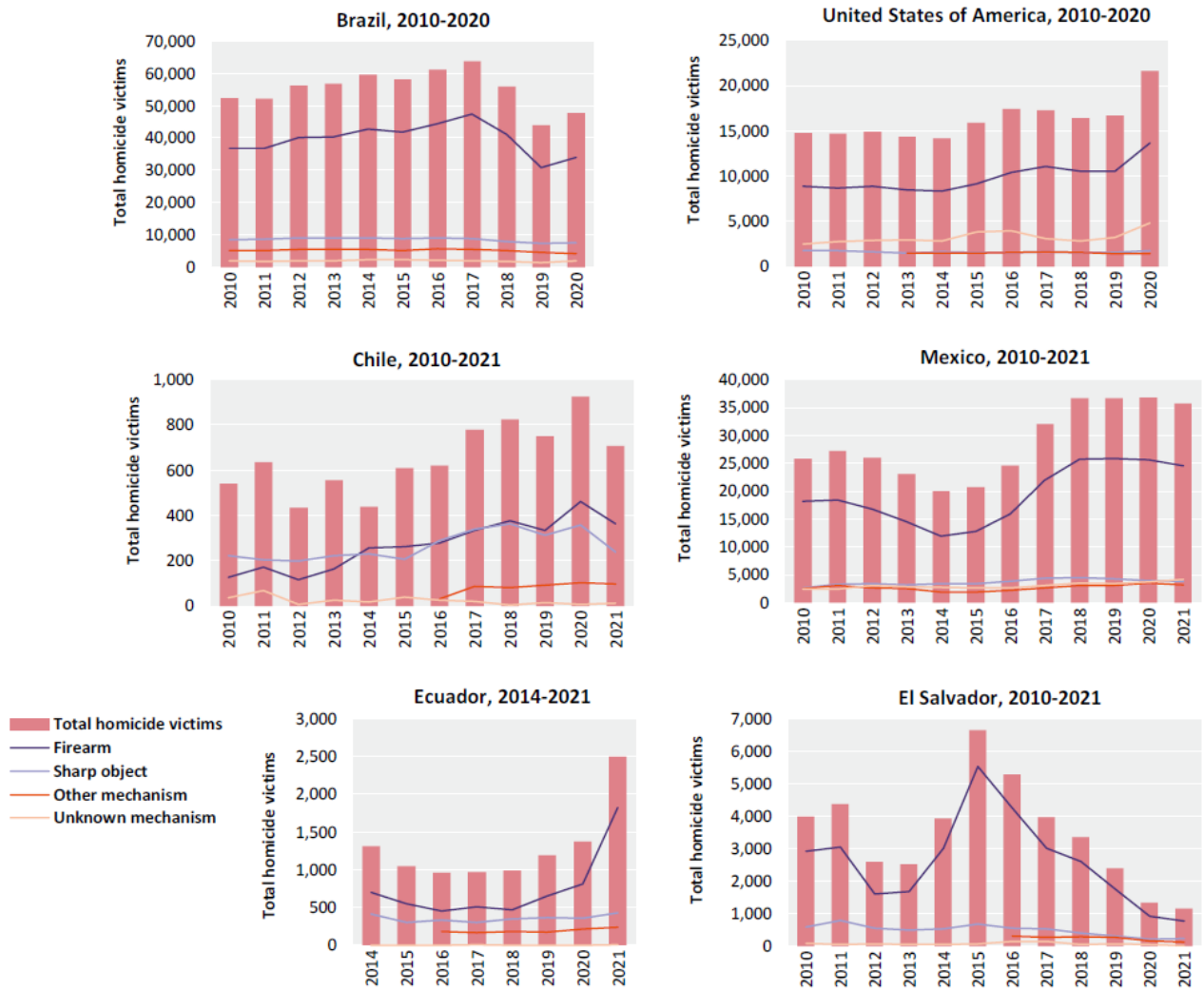
<sup>128</sup> Wilson Center, "Homicides are down in Brazil. But it's not time for a victory lap", *The Brazilian Report*, 14 March 2023.

<sup>129</sup> *Global Study on Homicide 2019*, Booklet 3 (United Nations publication, 2019), p.86.

<sup>130</sup> See chapter 2 of the present study.



**Fig. 13** Number of homicide victims and homicides by mechanism of killing in selected countries in the Americas, 2010 to latest available year



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

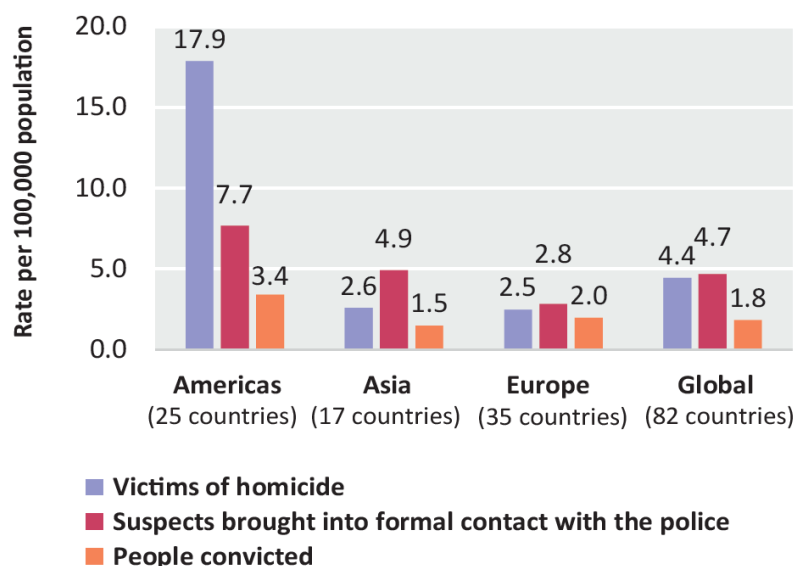
## CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM RESPONSES

Unlike other crimes, which may often go undetected, the vast majority of homicides come to the attention of police forces. Nonetheless, the severity of homicide does not mean that suspects are identified in all cases. Studies have shown that different factors impact the homicide clearance rate, meaning the percentage of homicide offences for which law enforcement successfully identifies a suspect.<sup>131</sup>

### Suspects brought into formal contact with the police

When comparing the homicide rate with the rate of suspects brought into formal contact with the police for homicide, global data show different regional patterns (figure 14). In Asia and Europe, the number of suspects brought into formal contact with the police for intentional homicide exceeded the number of victims, suggesting that in many cases more people were suspected, arrested or cautioned than there were victims. In the Americas, the region with the highest homicide rate worldwide, only slightly more than 4 suspects were brought into formal contact with the police for every 10 homicide victims. However, since some homicide investigations are not successful and do not lead to the identification of a suspect, the number of suspects per successful homicide investigation could be even higher. Comparisons of these ratios should be made with caution, however, since criminal codes do not tend to distinguish between attempted and committed homicides, and it is possible that some of the convictions reported by countries include people convicted for attempted homicide.

**Fig. 14** Rates of homicide, suspects brought into formal contact with the police and people convicted of homicide per 100,000 population, selected regions, 2021 or latest year available



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Average of countries with data weighted by population. Global figure is an aggregate of all countries with data, including three countries in Africa and two in Oceania.

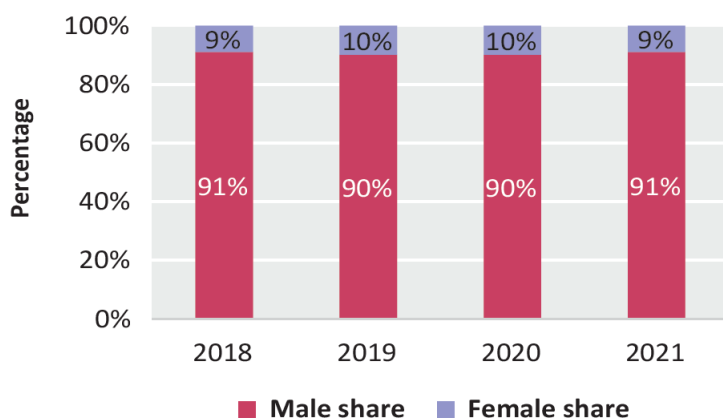
<sup>131</sup> Braga, A. A., Turchan, B. and Barao, L., "The influence of investigative resources on homicide clearances," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, vol. 35, No. 2 (2019), pp. 337–364.

Data from 82 countries for 2021 or the latest year available, show that for every 10 homicide victims globally, four suspects are convicted of homicide, although there are also notable differences between regions. For every 10 homicide victims, 8 suspects are convicted in Europe, around 6 are convicted in Asia, while fewer than 2 are convicted for every 10 homicide victims in the Americas. These regional patterns are not new and have not changed dramatically since 2016,<sup>132</sup> suggesting that impunity for homicide is higher in the Americas overall than in the other two regions. Although this comparison gives an overall picture of the attrition rate in the criminal justice system in different regions, it may hide differences across countries.<sup>133</sup>

### Sex of suspects

Men and boys account for the vast majority of both the victims and perpetrators of intentional homicide world-wide. 81 per cent of the victims of intentional homicide worldwide in 2021 were men and boys. Similarly, roughly 9 out of 10 suspects brought into formal contact with the police for intentional homicides in 2021 were male. This share has remained stable over time, as shown by data from 50 countries on offenders disaggregated by sex for the period 2018–2021 (figure 15).

**Fig. 15** Share of male and female suspects brought into formal contact with the police for intentional homicide in 50 countries, 2018–2021



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

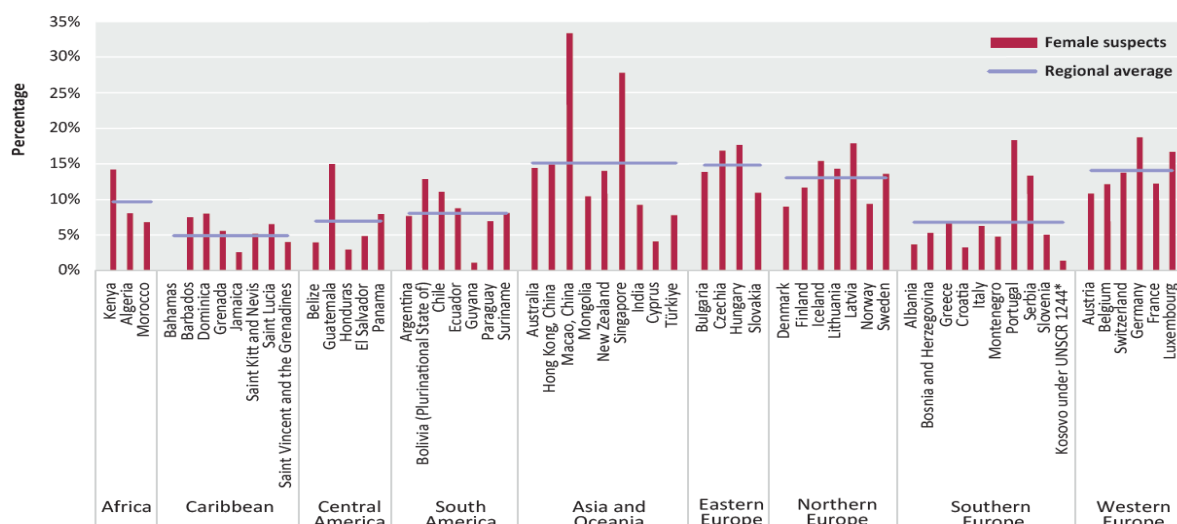
Note: Based on complete time series data from 50 countries for the period 2018–2021, including 26 in Europe, 16 in the Americas, 6 in Asia, 1 in Africa and 1 in Oceania.

Although women account for a clear minority of homicide suspects across the world, there are some noteworthy differences between regions and subregions. Countries in Central America and the Caribbean, which have a high level of homicidal violence caused by organized criminal groups, gangs or other criminal activities, have small shares of female homicide suspects. For example, in eight countries in the Caribbean with data for 2020 and 2021, an average of 5 per cent of homicide suspects were women, with the smallest share being in the Bahamas, where all 148 suspects brought into formal contact with the police for intentional homicide were male. In Central America, the average female share was even smaller than in the Caribbean, at 7 per cent.

**Fig. 16** Share of female suspects brought into formal contact with the police for intentional homicide in selected regions, 2020–2021

<sup>132</sup> For 2016 figures, see *Global Study on Homicide 2019* (United Nations publication, 2019), Booklet 2, figure 31.

<sup>133</sup> It should also be noted that one perpetrator may kill more than one victim, and one victim may be killed by more than one perpetrator.



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Based on data from 59 countries for the years 2020–2021. Regional average refers to the average of countries with data weighted by the number of suspects.

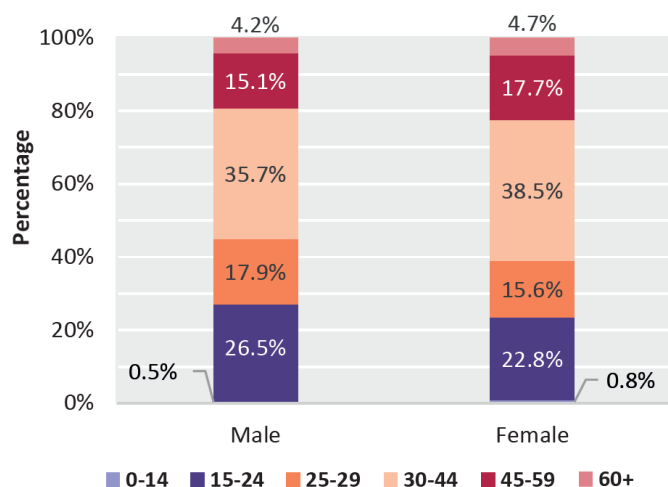
\* All references to Kosovo in the present study should be understood to be in compliance with Security Council resolution 1244.

### Age of suspects

In general, people brought into formal contact with the criminal justice system for intentional homicide are young. In 68 countries with data for 2021 or recent years, roughly 44 per cent of suspects brought into formal contact for homicide were aged 15 to 29 – an age group making up 23 per cent of the global population – while only a very small minority were aged 60 or older. The average age of male and female homicide suspects brought into formal contact with the criminal justice system for intentional homicide was very similar, although female suspects tended to be slightly older than male suspects, with a larger percentage of them aged 30 or older.

A comparison of the Americas and Europe, the two regions with a sufficient number of countries with data, shows notable differences between the age of homicide suspects (figure 18). In 2021, although homicide offenders in Europe were older than in the Americas, in both regions there was a disproportionate share of offenders aged 15–29. This can be partially explained by the different age structure of the two regions, with countries having much younger populations in the Americas than in Europe. In 2021, 23 per cent of the population was aged 15–29 in the Americas compared with 16 per cent in Europe.<sup>134</sup>

**Fig.17** Shares of male and female homicide suspects brought into formal contact with the criminal justice system for intentional homicide in 68 countries, by age, 2021 or latest year since 2017



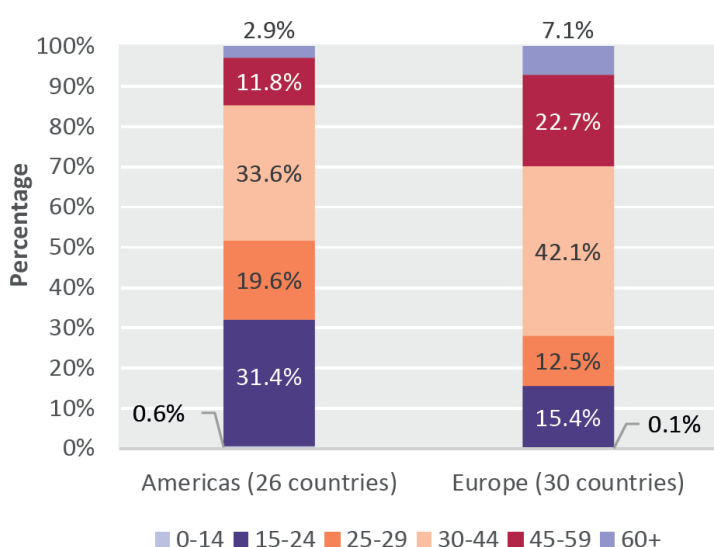
<sup>134</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Population Division, “World population prospects 2022”, 2022.

Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Average of countries with data weighted by the number of suspects by sex. Africa (2 countries), Americas (26 countries), Asia (9 countries), Europe (30 countries), Oceania (1 country).

Furthermore, the large share of organized crime- and gang-related homicides in the Americas may also contribute to lowering the region’s average age of homicide suspects brought into formal contact with the criminal justice system for intentional homicide. This is because, although the leadership of organized criminal organizations may be older, the rank and file of drug trafficking factions, militia groups, street gangs and other criminal entities is typically made up of young men.<sup>135</sup> Indeed, in the 26 countries in the Americas with data, young males aged 15–29 accounted for some 47 per cent of suspects brought into formal contact with the criminal justice system for intentional homicide in 2021, yet for just 12 per cent of the total population of the Americas.<sup>136</sup>

**Fig. 18** Shares of suspects brought into formal contact with the criminal justice system for intentional homicide in the Americas and Europe, by age, 2021 or latest year since 2017



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Average of countries with data weighted by the number of suspects.

### Homicide prosecutions

Following the identification and arrest of a homicide suspect, a case is forwarded to the public prosecutor, who decides whether to press charges. Just as more than one person can be charged for the same offence, one person can be charged for more than one offence. Indeed, in the 91 countries with data on suspects prosecuted in 2021 or a recent year, 4.1 per 100,000 population were prosecuted for intentional homicide for every 3.3 victims. It is possible, however, that data on homicide prosecutions reported by some of those countries included prosecutions for attempted intentional homicide, since this offence may not be distinguishable from intentional homicide in their criminal code.

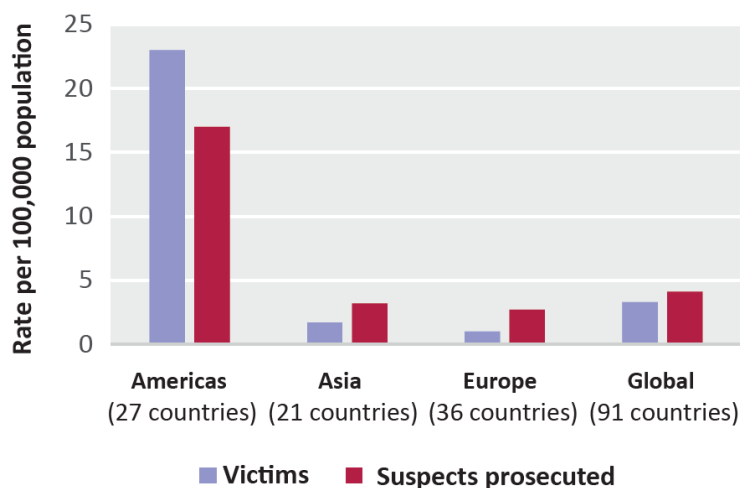
Notable differences can be observed at the regional level. In the 27 countries in the Americas with data, where there is a high level of homicidal violence, for every 4 homicide victims, 3 suspects were prosecuted. The smaller number of suspects prosecuted per victim in the Americas could stem from the fact that the most prominent type of homicide in the region is largely related to organized crime

<sup>135</sup> See Chávez, C., “What we know and what we don’t know about youth gangs in Latin America”, UNICEF, 27 September 2018; Jutersonke, O., Muggah, R. and Rodgers, D., “Gangs, urban violence and security interventions in Central America”, *Security Dialogue*, vol. 40, No. 4/5 (August/October 2009), pp. 373–397.

<sup>136</sup> UNDESA, Population Division, “World population prospects 2022”, 2022.

and other criminal activities and thus difficult to investigate.<sup>137</sup> By contrast, homicides in other regions tend mostly to be interpersonal, for which it is easier to identify a suspect and collect evidence.<sup>138</sup>

**Fig. 19** Rates of homicide and suspects prosecuted for intentional homicide per 100,000 population in selected regions, 2021 or latest year available

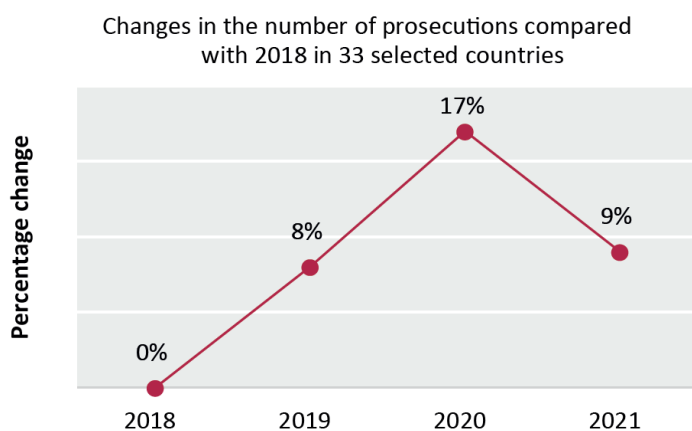


Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Average of countries with data weighted by population. The global figure includes five countries from Africa and two from Oceania. The difference from figure 1 in the rate of victims per 100,000 population is due to the sample of countries included in this figure.

The evolution of trends between 2018 and 2021 shows that the number of people prosecuted for intentional homicide remains relatively stable over time. Based on limited data from 33 countries, five of them in the Americas, the number of suspects prosecuted for intentional homicide did not seem to decrease during the COVID-19 pandemic. On average, the number of such prosecutions in this limited sample of countries actually increased by 17 per cent from 2018 to 2020, before decreasing slightly in 2021 (figure 20). Although large changes from one year to the next are mostly visible in countries with few intentional homicides, one notable exception is El Salvador, which recorded a decrease of 57 per cent in prosecutions for intentional homicide from 2018 to 2021, possibly stemming from the decrease in the number of homicide victims over the same period.<sup>139</sup> The state of emergency introduced by the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly in March 2022 to fight the gangs MS-13 and Barrio 18 may further impact prosecutions for homicide in the country.<sup>140</sup>

**Fig. 20** Average change in the number of prosecutions in 33 selected countries, 2018–2021



<sup>137</sup> For more details, see chapter 4 of the present study.

<sup>138</sup> For more details, see introduction to this chapter.

<sup>139</sup> For more information on recent trends in El Salvador, see chapter 4 of the present study.

<sup>140</sup> El Salvador, Legislative Assembly of the Republic of El Salvador, Decree 333, El Salvador, 2022.

Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Based on data from 33 countries for the period 2018-2021. Africa (1 country), Americas (4 countries), Asia (5 countries), Europe (22 countries), Oceania (1 country). Simple average of countries with data.

### Homicide convictions

If the public prosecutor decides to press charges, suspects are brought before a court where a judge or jury will decide whether they are guilty or not guilty. As shown above, when comparing the homicide rate, suspects brought into formal contact with the police for homicide and those convicted in different regions in 2021 or the latest year available (figure 14), the number of suspects convicted of intentional homicide is not necessarily proportional to the number of victims, highlighting the varying levels of impunity across regions. Indeed, in 17 Asian countries with data, 3 out of 10 suspects brought into formal contact with the police for intentional homicide were convicted in 2021, in 35 European countries with data, the figure was 7 out of 10, and in 25 American countries with data it was slightly more than 4 out of 10.<sup>141</sup>

### Prisoners held for intentional homicide

If convicted, intentional homicide offenders serve their sentence in prison. Roughly 11 per cent of the prison population of 91 countries with data were being held for intentional homicide in 2021. Given that there were more than 11 million people in prison worldwide in 2021,<sup>142</sup> this means that more than 1 million prisoners could have been serving time for intentional homicide in 2021, a number larger than the population of 37 different United Nations Member States. Even if slightly lower, this still represents a significant number of people requiring long-term prison facilities and, depending on their sentence, reintegration into society.

The number of prisoners held for homicide per 100,000 population is related to the number of homicide convictions per 100,000 population (figure 14), with countries in the Americas with a high conviction rate also having a large number of detainees in prison for homicide.

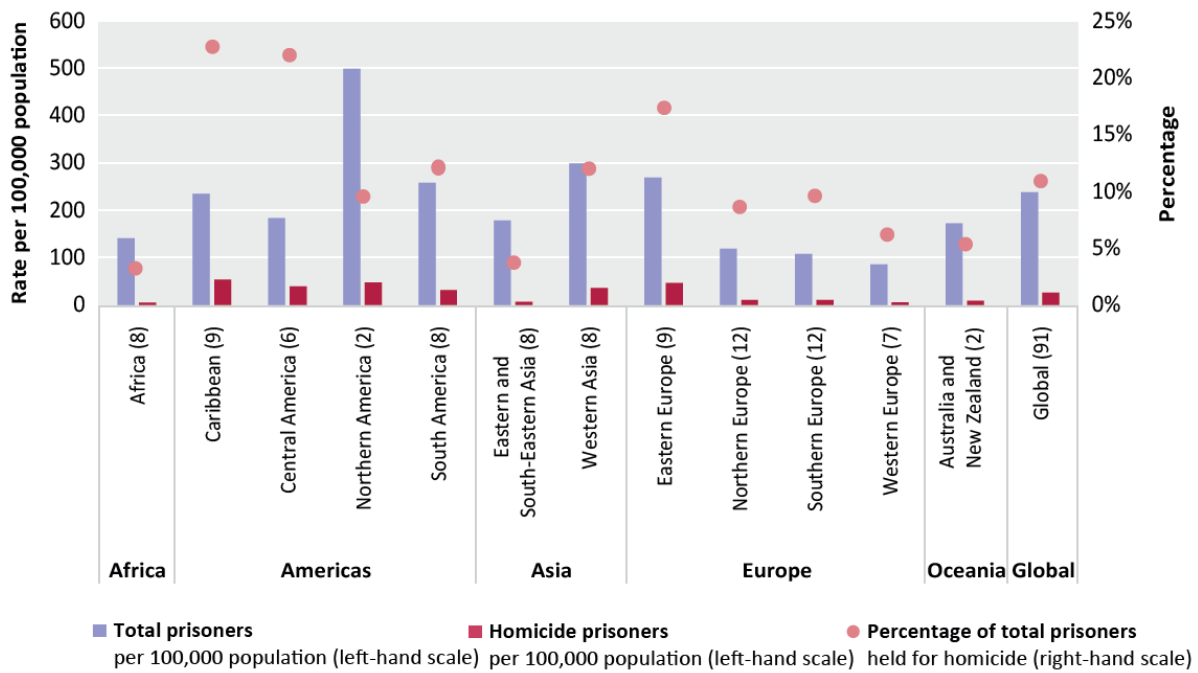
In the Americas in 2021, in the nine countries in the Caribbean with data, 53 people per 100,000 population were in prison for intentional homicide, more than twice the global rate, while in Central America the rate was 39 per 100,000 population; in both regions, more than 20 per cent of detainees were in prison for intentional homicide. In Northern America, 47 people per 100,000 population were in prison for homicide, surpassing the global average, but since Northern America also had the highest total number of prisoners per 100,000 population, at almost 500, prisoners held for intentional homicide represented less than 10 per cent of the total prison population.

**Fig. 21** Rate of prisoners detained per 100,000 population, rate of prisoners detained for homicide per 100,000 population and percentage of prisoners convicted of homicide, as a percentage of total prisoners, in selected regions, 2021 or latest year available

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<sup>141</sup> For factors influencing these differences, see the introduction to chapter 5 of the present study.

<sup>142</sup> UNODC, "Data matters snapshot: global prison population and trends", 2023.



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Regional and global figures are averages of countries with data weighted by population. Number of countries in brackets.

### Criminal justice personnel

A well-funded criminal justice system is crucial for combating crime and violence, and its most valuable asset is its personnel. The exact roles of criminal justice personnel depend on the legal system and the cultural norms and practices of each country. The structure and functions of criminal justice systems can differ from country to country, as can the roles of police officers, prosecutors, judges and prison officers. Disparities between countries in the per capita count of such personnel may be explained by the different scope of their work within their national criminal justice system.

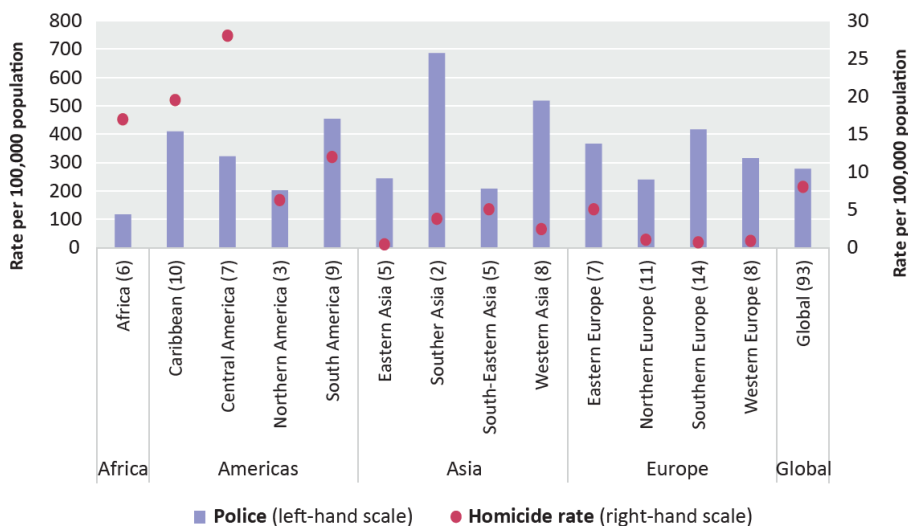
When looking at criminal justice systems in the different regions, identifying any clear relationship between the number of criminal justice personnel and the homicide rate is difficult. Although the rate of police personnel per 100,000 population in countries in the Caribbean, Central America and South America is similar to that in countries in other regions, the homicide rate is significantly higher than in countries in other regions.

Intentional homicide is the most violent of crimes and is much more likely to be reported to the police than other crimes. As such, intentional homicide serves as a useful indicator of the overall level of violence in a country. Countries in the Caribbean, Central America and South America with a high level of homicidal violence primarily driven by the presence of organized crime and gangs do not have a much higher rate of police personnel than elsewhere.<sup>143</sup> Consequently, the number of homicide cases per police officer is larger in those regions than in the rest of the world. Since homicides can be used as a proxy for the overall level of violence in a region, this may indicate that law enforcement has a heavier workload in the Caribbean, Central America and South America than in other parts of the world.

**Fig. 22** Rates of police personnel and homicide per 100,000 population selected regions, 2021 or latest available year

<sup>143</sup> For more details, see chapter 4 of the present study.



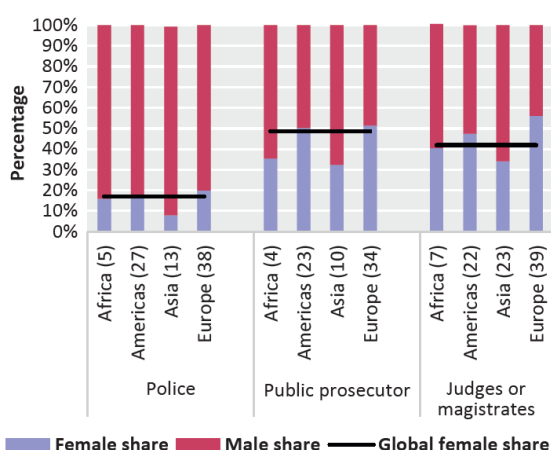


Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Regional and global figures are averages of countries with data weighted by population. Number of countries in brackets.

The rate of prosecution personnel per capita was higher in the 23 countries in the Americas with data in 2021 than in the other countries with data (figure 24). As noted earlier, the number of people prosecuted for intentional homicide is significantly higher in countries with data in the Americas than in the countries with data in other regions, partially reflecting the higher level of homicidal violence in the Americas. This could also mean that prosecution personnel have a heavier workload in the Americas than in other regions, and thus less time to build a case and bring suspects to court, although the scope of the remit of prosecution personnel depends on countries<sup>144</sup> and this may explain some of the differences between regions. Women make up roughly half of prosecution personnel in both the Americas and Europe, but account for a smaller share in countries with data in other regions, where they make up around one third of prosecution personnel stands (see figure 23). In the 23 countries in the Americas with data, the number of judges or magistrates per 100,000 population was just 3.5, despite the higher crime rates in those countries. Available data highlight that there is a smaller number of criminal justice personnel in the Americas than in other regions relative to the level of homicidal violence.

Fig. 23 Average share of women in the criminal justice system in selected regions, 2021 or latest year since 2015

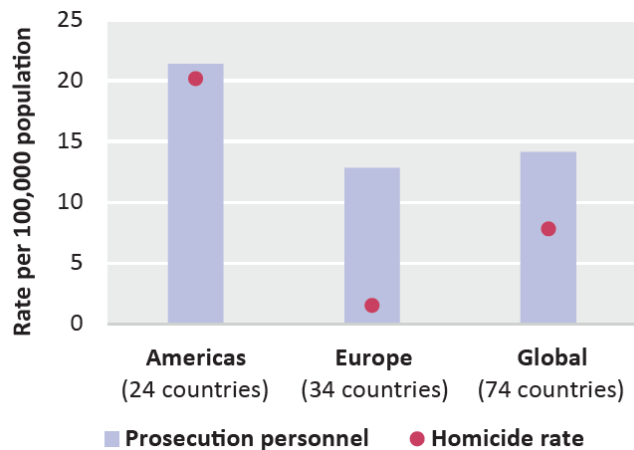


<sup>144</sup> Apart from their responsibility to dispose criminal cases for prosecution, prosecutors in every country play an important role in criminal investigations despite the differences in basic legal principles. In some countries, prosecutors have overall responsibility over an investigation, while in others they play a limited role in carrying out investigation. Asia and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, "Cooperation between the police and the prosecutors", in *Annual Report for 2001 and Resource Material Series No. 60*, part two ("Work product of the 120th International Senior Seminar: 'Effective administration of the police and the prosecution in criminal justice'"), p. 195.

Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Regional and global shares are based on unweighted average shares in countries with data. The global female shares of police and judges or magistrates include one country from Oceania. Number of countries in brackets.

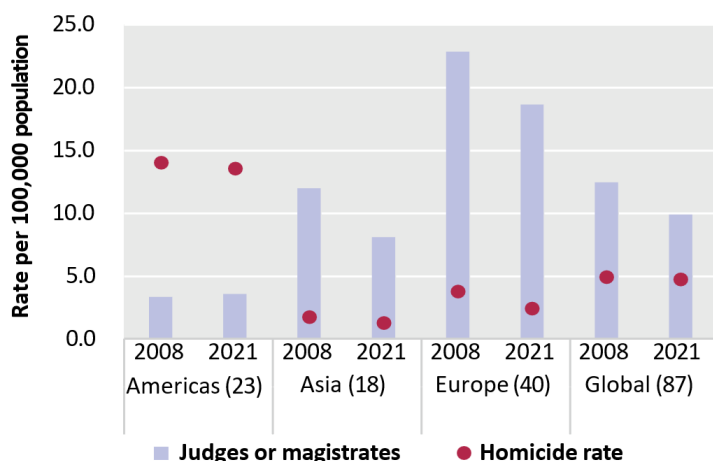
**Fig. 24** Rates of prosecution personnel and homicide per 100,000 population in selected regions, 2021 or latest year since 2015



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Regional and global figures are aggregates of countries with data. Global figure includes 5 countries in Africa and 11 in Asia. Homicide rates are different from other figures due to the different sample of countries.

**Fig. 25** Judges or magistrates per 100,000 population in selected regions in 2008 and 2021



Source: UNODC homicide statistics.

Note: Regional and global figures are averages of countries with data weighted by population. Global figure includes five countries in Africa and two in Oceania. The column 2008 refers to 2008 or the earliest year between 2009 and 2014, and the column 2021 refers to 2021 or the latest year between 2015 and 2020. Number of countries included in brackets.