

Targeting Armed Violence

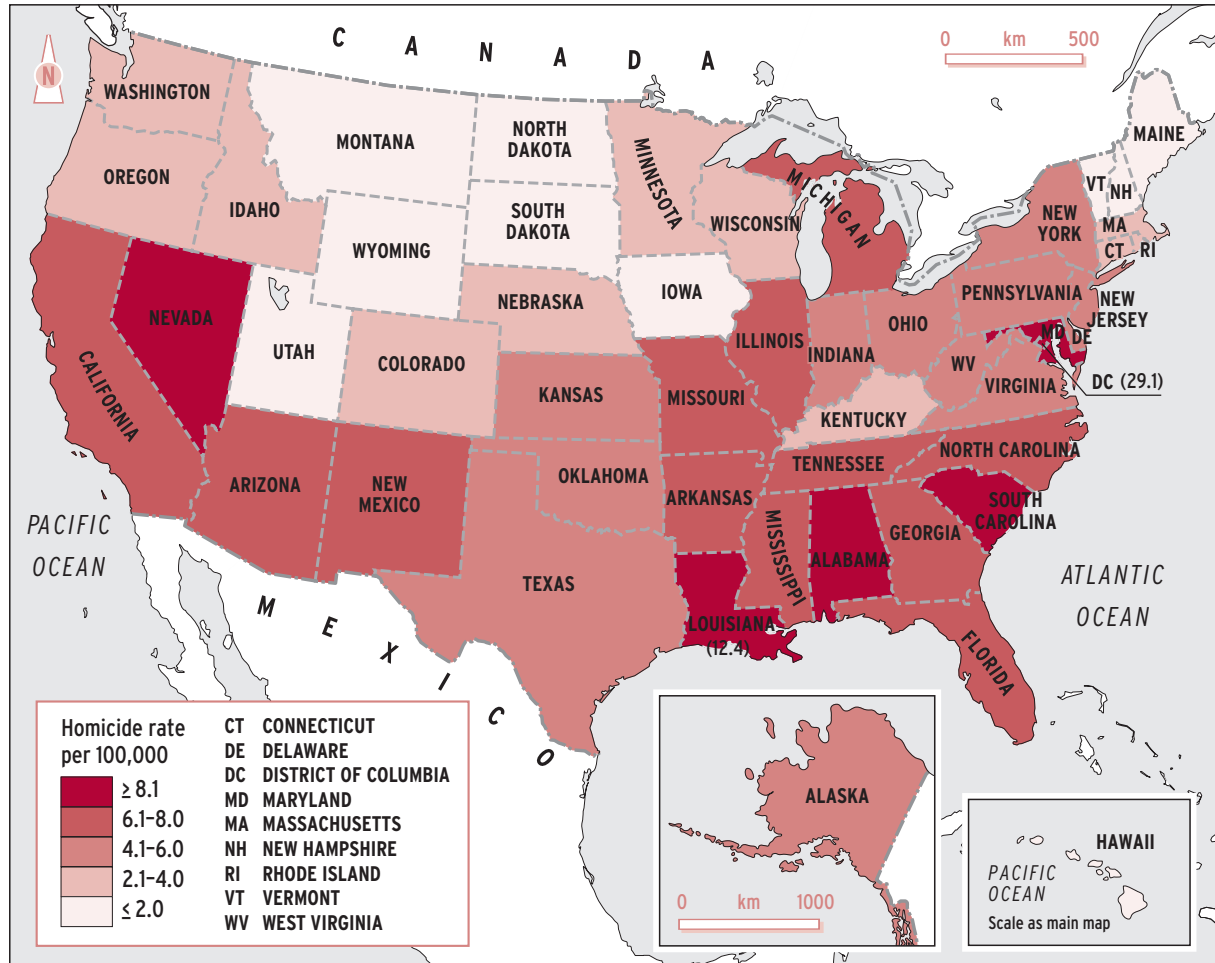
PUBLIC HEALTH INTERVENTIONS

Armed violence is a social problem that affects communities around the globe. Countries have responded with a variety of armed violence reduction strategies. In Colombia, increased police presence in the cities and military presence outside the cities act to deter crime and violence as well as improve law and order. Several countries in Latin America implemented alcohol bans during elections and public holidays, reduced opening hours of bars, or changed drinking laws in order to reduce the high incidence of violence related to alcohol abuse. Jamaica and Burundi established crime observatories to collect information about armed violence in order to better inform and guide prevention strategies. An important question remains: what is an effective intervention to prevent armed violence? No clear answer exists.

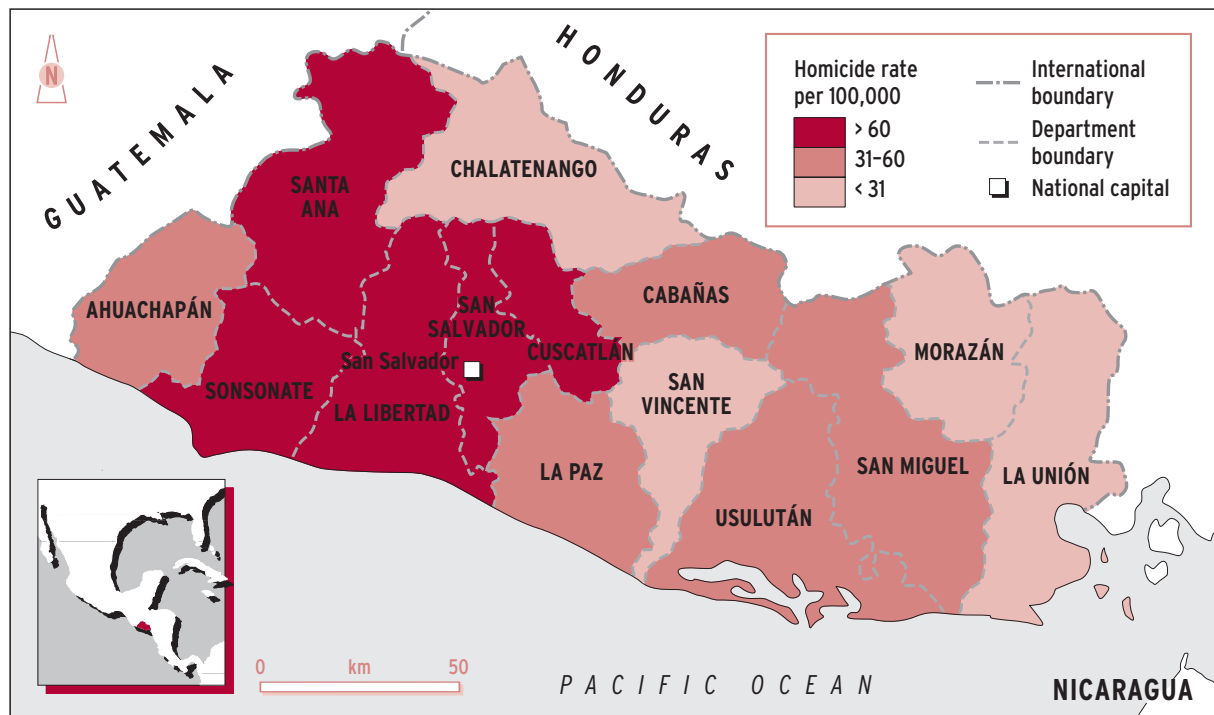
The chapter begins by discussing the range of interventions developed to counter armed violence. Two case studies follow, the first focusing on the United States and the second on El Salvador. Both studies identify ways in which each country has tried to address armed violence. The chapter finishes with a number of lessons learnt since the late 1980s. The main conclusions include:

- No single intervention can address the complex, multi-causal problem of armed violence.
- A criminal justice approach to reducing crime through targeted policing, arrests, and prosecution can be effective, but it is insufficient on its own to address violence.

Map 9.1 Homicide rates by state (per 100,000), United States, 2006



Map 9.2 Homicide rates by department (per 100,000), El Salvador, 2006



- Effective strategies target three important elements: the actor who commits an act of violence, the instrument used in perpetrating an act, and the environment in which violence takes place.
- Characteristics of successful intervention strategies include being evidence-based, credible, cooperative, tailored to the community and its context, aimed at both the supply and the demand of firearms, and publicly, politically, and financially supported at all levels.

What is known about armed violence prevention programming is largely based on programmes implemented in high-income countries, with a great deal of these coming from the United States.

In the United States, the homicide rate hit its highest peak in 1980 at a rate of 10.2 per 100,000. After a decline, the rate rose again to nearly this level in the early 1990s. After 1994 the rate of homicides fell dramatically to just over 5 per 100,000 in 2000, and stabilized for the following five years.

In 2005, the US witnessed the lowest level of violent crime in the country since the early 1970s. A number of factors contributed to this decline: tougher laws, harsher sentencing, a growing economy, better employment opportunities, and the implementation of violence reduction strategies. Innovative initiatives include consent-to-search operations, efforts to reduce criminal access to firearms, targeted policing, and strategic partnerships between the police and communities to collectively address violence.

The current situation in El Salvador has been called an epidemic of violence. By the late 1990s, El Salvador had become one of the most violent countries in the world. In 2006, El Salvador registered 56.2 homicides for every 100,000 inhabitants.

A number of factors contribute to the high level of violence including income inequality, marginalized communities, unemployed youth, US immigration policies, a high national poverty level, the widespread circulation of firearms, organized crime, and narco-trafficking.

In response to the rising threat of armed violence, El Salvador shifted its focus to prevention efforts aimed at reducing the prevalence of armed violence. El Salvador learned from the successful experiences in other countries, such as Colombia, in terms of making public spaces safer, restricting the carrying of weapons, enhancing police enforcement, and imposing curfews on the sale of alcohol.

In 2005, the UN Development Programme and local Salvadoran organizations launched the Arms-free Municipalities Project, which aimed to impose local restrictions on civilians carrying weapons. Despite difficulties, the project demonstrated some positive early results, including the creation of 64 arms-free spaces and a reduction in firearms crimes (29 per cent) and homicides (47 per cent) in one municipality. ■