

IANSA and IPIS Briefing Paper  
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# Human, Economic and Social Costs of Small Arms and Light Weapons Violence: Selected Global Data



Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations attends a disarmament event in the Central African Republic.  
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**IPIS**

**iansa**  
International Action Network  
on Small Arms

**UNITED AGAINST  
GUN VIOLENCE**

## 1. Introduction

Concerns about the widespread availability and illicit trade of SALW and related ammunition have been raised over decades in various fora, including in numerous United Nations reports.<sup>1</sup> In his *New Agenda for Peace*, which addressed the threats involving all types of weapons, the UN Secretary-General reported that “small arms and light weapons and their ammunition are the leading cause of violent deaths globally, in conflict and non-conflict settings alike.”<sup>2</sup> He has also repeatedly warned members of the Security Council about the scourge of illicit arms flows.<sup>3</sup>

This Briefing Paper provides selected global data and figures to highlight the massive global scale and impacts of violence and destabilization committed with small arms and light weapons (SALW) in both conflict and non-conflict settings, including the enormous economic and social costs arising from the illicit circulation, diversion, frequent misuse and inadequate regulation of such weapons and their ammunition.

The huge global cost in lives and livelihoods can be gleaned by considering various estimates. In July 2023 UN Secretary General reported that: “From 2015 to 2021, an estimated 3.1 million people lost their lives as a result of intentional homicides, a shocking figure which dwarfs that of the estimated 700,000 people who died in armed conflicts during the period.”<sup>4</sup> In December 2023 he added that: “According to the latest figures, 260,000 people were killed by small arms in 2021 alone, amounting to 45 per cent of all violent deaths – more than 700 people daily, or one person dying from small arms every two minutes.”<sup>5</sup> A large proportion of deaths in armed conflict situations were committed or facilitated through the use of SALW. In addition, from 2015 to 2021, organized crime accounted for around 700,000 deaths.<sup>6</sup> Considering that in 2021, 47 per cent of reported homicides committed with a known mechanism world-wide involved the use of firearms,<sup>7</sup> it is reasonable to assume that deaths committed and facilitated with SALW, both directly and indirectly over the past decade, amounted to millions of lives lost.

Moreover, the social and economic costs of SALW-related criminal violence and conflict need to be taken into account. Those costs vary by region and country, but the effects are global and increasing. The UNHCR estimated that there were 110 million forcibly displaced people in mid-2023 mostly from just ten countries.<sup>8</sup> The Global Peace Index 2023 reported that over the last 15 years the world has become less peaceful.<sup>9</sup> The global economic impact of violence has increased by 6.9% or USD 1.1 trillion between 2008 and 2022. The costs associated with conflict deaths increased by 326% (USD 27.5 billion), costs for refugees and IDP’s increased by 177% (USD 295 billion), GDP losses due to conflict increased by 45% (USD 86.6 billion) and cost for military expenditures increased by 12% (USD 835.5 billion).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, *Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament*, 2018, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly, Policy brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace, [A/77/CRP.1/Add.8](#), 2023, para 66.

<sup>3</sup> UN Secretary General, *Small arms and light weapons: report of the Secretary General*, [S/2023/823](#), 2023, para. 13.

<sup>4</sup> UN General Assembly, Policy brief 9: A New Agenda for Peace, [A/77/CRP.1/Add.8](#), 2023, para 16.

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Mrs. Izumi Nakamitsu, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs presenting the Report of the Secretary-General on Small arms and light weapons (S/2023/823) to UN Security Council on 15 Dec 2023.

<sup>6</sup> UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*, Vienna, p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*, Vienna, p. 32 and p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>; UNHCR, *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2022*, 14 June 2023, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Peace Index 2023: Measuring Peace in a Complex World*, 2023, p. 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Peace Index 2023: Measuring Peace in a Complex World*, 2023, p. 35-38.

## 2. Limitations of Available Data

Unfortunately, in many countries reliable, comprehensive and up to date international statistical data on the effects of the proliferation and misuse of SALW is lacking.<sup>11</sup> Data estimates of battle related deaths, firearms homicides and SALW trafficking need to be approached cautiously. Not all States keep comprehensive records and report systematically to the UN. Data on conflict-related deaths are sometimes categorized as “direct” battlefield deaths and “indirect” deaths resulting from the fighting, displacement, and destruction.<sup>12</sup> The totals are characterised by large variability due to uncertainty of estimates. In general, no national data sources exist on conflict-related deaths, as the normal registration systems of governments are heavily affected by war operations. Global estimates rely mostly on two large-scale data-collection projects on conflict-related events which have been developed by non-State research organisations.<sup>13</sup>

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which is a valuable source of data on homicides, has warned that “Data of low quality predominantly come from African and Asian countries where larger discrepancies in homicide counts between criminal justice and public health data were found (sometimes higher than 30 per cent), while lower discrepancies (often below 5 per cent) were found in most countries in the Americas and Europe.”<sup>14</sup> This has resulted in “considerable data gaps” for certain regions.<sup>15</sup> The data collected on different types of gender-based violent deaths is still limited.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, when reporting on the economic cost of SALW reliable data is lacking. A 2020 study warns “(T)here are limited reliable studies on the broader economic costs of firearms injuries and death.”<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, by referencing the most recent estimates provided by the United Nations and by other authoritative research organisations it is possible to see the main global costs.

## 3. Conflict-related SALW violence

The uncontrolled proliferation, illicit trade and misuse SALW and related ammunition, are among the leading indirect and direct causes of conflict-related deaths. In 2022, there were over 100 armed conflicts worldwide and an average conflict duration of more than 30 years.<sup>18</sup>

The number of deaths in global conflict almost doubled in 2022, with almost 240,000 estimated casualties, most of whom were combatants.<sup>19</sup> As the overall number of conflict-related deaths exploded, so did the number of civilians who in the past couple of years lost their lives in armed conflict. In 2022, the UN documented and verified 16,988 killings of civilians directly in armed conflict operations, which was a 53 per cent increase compared to 2021, and the first increase since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015.<sup>20</sup> Four out of ten of these killings in

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<sup>11</sup> See Peter Danssaert (IANSA & IPIS), *Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation and Violence: Estimating its Scale and Forms*, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Erik Alda, et al, *Beyond the Battlefield: Towards a Better Assessment of the Human Cost of Armed Conflict*, Small Arms Survey, 2017

<sup>13</sup> These are the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCPD) and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

<sup>14</sup> UNODC, *Methodological Annex to The Global Study on Homicide 2019*.

<sup>15</sup> UNODC, [Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020](#), 2020, p.19.

<sup>16</sup> G. Hideg, et al. (Small Arms Survey), [Still not there. Global Violent Deaths Scenarios, 2019–30](#), 2021, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> UN High Commissioner for Human Rights *Impact of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms*, A/HRC/53/49, 2023, para. 11.

<sup>18</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), “Humanitarian needs to deepen in dozens of conflict zones as world’s attention wanes”, 29 November 2022

<sup>19</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Peace Index 2023: Measuring Peace in a Complex World*, 2023, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> UN General Assembly, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: towards a rescue plan for people and planet*, [A/78/80-E/2023/64](#), 2023, para. 44.



2022 occurred in Ukraine, and women accounted for 20 per cent of the victims.<sup>21</sup> Between February 2022 and March 2024 OHCHR recorded 10,810 civilians killed in Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> Between 15 April 2023 and 5 April 2024 ACLED reported 15,550 fatalities in Sudan.<sup>23</sup> The UN OCHA reported the deaths of more than 34,904 people killed in Gaza between 7 October 2023 and 9 May 2024 in addition to over 1,200 in Israel.<sup>24</sup>

In 2022 the United Nations recorded at least 16,988 civilian deaths across 12 of the world's deadliest armed conflicts, representing a 53 per cent increase compared with 2021. Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe accounted for 90 per cent of the deaths.<sup>25</sup> In 2022 the proportion of deaths by heavy weapons and explosive munitions increased from 13 per cent in 2021 to 39 per cent in 2022.<sup>26</sup> While overall, the use of heavy weaponry often accounts for the largest numerical proportion of victims and overall economic destruction, SALW and the related ammunition are the most common means of violence and combat used in armed conflicts.<sup>27</sup>

Small arms misuse is often a major factor in precipitating a potential conflict. Armed groups and State forces also frequently continue to use SALW in post-conflict situations, which may then give rise to renewed all-out armed conflict. The conflicts usually involve the government fighting against one or several armed opposition groups, but they can also involve other irregular armed groups such as clans, guerrillas, or warlords. Although such actors frequently use conventional weapons including SALW, in many cases other methods are employed, such as suicide attacks, bombings and sexual violence and even hunger as a weapon of war.<sup>28</sup> The use and the threat of use of SALW enable the perpetrators to commit such atrocities.

### 3.1. Conflict-related violations of children's rights

Children<sup>29</sup> continue to be disproportionately affected by armed conflict, experiencing a persistent high number of violations.<sup>30</sup> SALW contribute significantly to the commission of grave violations against children, such as their recruitment and use, as well as killing, maiming, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and the denial of humanitarian access.<sup>31</sup>

This has also been noted by the UN Secretary-General, who has reported a steady increase in the killing and maiming of children often committed with SALW.<sup>32</sup> In 2022, the United Nations verified over 27,000 grave violations against children.<sup>33</sup> Almost 19,000 children (around 13,500 boys, 4,700 girls, and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> UN Security Council, 'No Region of Ukraine Spared' by Moscow's War on Ukraine, Senior Official Tells Security Council, Reporting of Widespread Destruction, Civilian Deaths, 11 April 2024, [SC/15657](#).

<sup>23</sup> ACLED, [One Year of War in Sudan](#), 14 April 2024.

<sup>24</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA, data updated 10 May 2024 as accessed on <https://www.ochaopt.org/>

<sup>25</sup> UN Secretary General, Small arms and light weapons: report of the Secretary General, [S/2023/823](#), 2023, para 3.

<sup>26</sup> UN General Assembly, Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: towards a rescue plan for people and planet, [A/78/80-E/2023/64](#), 2023, para. 44.

<sup>27</sup> UN Secretary General, Small arms and light weapons: report of the Secretary General, [S/2023/823](#), 2023, paras 3 and 17.

<sup>28</sup> Escola de Cultura de Pau, [Alert 2023! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding](#), 2023, p. 20, fn. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Under the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights to the Child, article 1, "...a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier." All States have become parties to the Convention except the United States of America. The UN defines children to be aged 0-17, adolescents to be aged 10-19, and youth to be aged 15-24 (all numbers are inclusive) – see MOSAIC o6.20 on Children, adolescents, youth and small arms and light weapons, 25 April 2018.

<sup>30</sup> UN General Assembly, Children and armed conflict, [A/77/895-S/2023/363](#), 2023, para 4.

<sup>31</sup> UN Secretary General, Small arms and light weapons: report of the Secretary General, [S/2023/823](#), 2023, para. 23.

<sup>32</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Conflict, [A/HRC/52/60](#), 2023, para 8.

<sup>33</sup> This statistic includes 2,880 cases that had occurred prior to 2021 but were verified only in 2022. (UN General Assembly,

780 cases where the victim's sex is unknown) were subjected to at least one of the four grave violations: recruitment and use; killing and maiming; rape and other forms of sexual violence; and abduction. Killing and maiming as well as the recruitment and use of children, followed by abduction and the denial of humanitarian access, continued to be the highest verified violations in 2022.<sup>34</sup> Given the limitations in present-day data gathering, the real statistics are likely to be significantly higher.

The deadliest conflicts for children in 2022 were fought in Ukraine, Israel, the State of Palestine, Afghanistan and the Syrian Arab Republic, where a total of 8,700 children (close to 6,000 boys, 2,200 girls, and almost 450 children whose sex was not recorded) have been reported to have lost their lives as a consequence of armed fighting in these areas.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to being direct victims of SALW use, the presence of firearms has multiple secondary implications for children, their lives and their well-being. For instance, according to a Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, over 7,600 children were recruited and used in armed conflict in 2022, and some 4,000 children – at least 2,300 identified as boys and 1,400 as girls) were abducted, with the highest numbers verified in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Burkina Faso and Myanmar. The number of girls abducted increased by over 30 per cent in 2022 compared with the previous year.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR has estimated that in 2022, children accounted for 40 per cent (over 43 million) of the total number of forcibly displaced people, and that between 2018 and 2022, some 1.9 million children were born as refugees.<sup>37</sup>

Mitigating the full impact of conventional arms, including the ways in which SALW are used in conflict- and post-conflict settings, is crucial to “preventing children from continuing to suffer the disproportionate effects of armed conflict.”<sup>38</sup>

### 3.2. Gender-related Violence in Conflict Settings

The easy availability of SALW fuels sexual and gender-based violence, both in conflict and non-conflict settings. Research shows that in countries with available data, approximately 70 to 90 per cent of incidents of conflict-related sexual violence involve SALW.<sup>39</sup> This has been noted also by the UN Secretary-General, who in his report on conflict-related sexual violence underscores the role played by the proliferation and illicit circulation of small arms in facilitating and perpetrating conflict-related sexual violence, including in specific country contexts such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Libya and Mali.<sup>40</sup> Sexual violence continues to be vastly underreported, owing to stigmatization, fear of reprisals, harmful social norms, the absence or lack of access to services, impunity and safety concerns. According to the UN, the highest number of sexual violence incidents in 2022 were verified in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, followed by Somalia, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Nigeria.<sup>41</sup>

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Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, [A/78/247](#), 2023, para 3.)

<sup>34</sup> UN General Assembly, Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, [A/78/247](#), 2023, para 3.

<sup>35</sup> UN General Assembly, Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, [A/78/247](#), 2023 para 4.

<sup>36</sup> UN General Assembly, Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, [A/78/247](#), 2023, para 5.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/> (Accessed 8 May 2024).

<sup>38</sup> UN Secretary General, Small arms and light weapons: report of the Secretary General, [S/2023/823](#), 2023, para. 24.

<sup>39</sup> UN Secretary General, Small arms and light weapons: report of the Secretary General, [S/2023/823](#), 2023, para. 27.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> UN General Assembly, Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, [A/78/247](#), 2023, para 7.

#### 4. Armed Violence in Non-Conflict Contexts

The use and proliferation of SALW are some of the main enablers of homicides, arguably contributing to their overall high rates. Between 2019 and 2021 homicides accounted for approximately five times as many deaths as armed conflict and 20 times as many deaths as terrorism despite an increase of more than 95 per cent in the number of conflict deaths recorded from 2021 to 2022. However, such deaths are often difficult to disentangle and may be undercounted.<sup>42</sup> Of all homicides committed with a known mechanism that were reported by the UNODC in 2021, 47 per cent were committed using firearms and, in the Americas, it was estimated in 2021 that 67 per cent of homicides were committed with firearms.<sup>43</sup>

Most recent global estimates suggest that an average of approximately 215,000 deaths annually involve the use of firearms.<sup>44</sup> In its 2019 study on homicide, UNODC found that the rate of firearms-related homicide was largely determined by three factors: (a) income inequality; (b) the proportion of youth among the general population; and (c) the rate of civilian-held firearms per person.<sup>45</sup>

According to the UNODC, there are large regional and national variations, for example between the Americas, Asia and Europe, in the proportion of homicides carried out with firearms.<sup>46</sup> Some countries with high proportions of firearms-related deaths tend to have high rates of homicide, suggesting that firearms are key enablers of high homicide levels.<sup>47</sup>

There are also significant gender and age variations: 83 per cent of homicide victims are male and 67 per cent of those are boys, while 90 per cent of suspected perpetrators are male.<sup>48</sup> A small arm is used in almost half of all violent deaths globally and in approximately one-third of all killings of women and girls (i.e. femicide).<sup>49</sup> The majority of homicide victims globally are between 15 and 29 years old.<sup>50</sup> The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights found in 2022 that the availability of firearms in society is a precondition for the acquisition and possession of firearms by children and youth.<sup>51</sup>

Research shows a correlation between the availability of firearms, and firearms violence, suicide rates and accidental firearms injuries.<sup>52</sup> The Small Arms Survey has estimated that there were 1 billion firearms in global circulation as of 2017, of which 857 million were in civilian hands.<sup>53</sup> The global stockpile had increased over the previous decade, largely due to civilian holdings, which grew from 650 million in 2006 to 857 million in 2017.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> UNODC Global Study on Homicide 2023, pp.8 and 36-37

<sup>43</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, 2023, p. 32 and p. 130.

<sup>44</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, 2023, p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2019, 2019, booklet 3 p. 83; United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Impact of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms, A/HRC/53/49, 2023, para. 13.

<sup>46</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, 2023, p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Firearms Trafficking, 2020, p. 81.

<sup>48</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, 2023, p. 23 & p. 150.

<sup>49</sup> United Nations Modular Small Arms Control Implementation Compendium - MOSAIC 06.10, 2017, V1.0, 2018

<sup>50</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, 2023, pp.69, 73.

<sup>51</sup> UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Impact of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms by children and youth, [A/HRC/49/41](#), 2022, para 50.

<sup>52</sup> UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Impact of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms by children and youth, [A/HRC/49/41](#), 2022, para. 50.

<sup>53</sup> Small Arms Survey, 2018. Global Firearms Holdings Database: Law Enforcement. Geneva: 2018

<sup>54</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Impact of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms, A/HRC/53/49, 2023, para. 14.

An increase in the rate of possession of firearms broadly corresponds to an increase in the homicide rate. This can best be observed when comparisons are made within relatively homogeneous country groupings, for example in terms of geography or socio-economic characteristics. Statistical models suggest that a one per cent increase in the rate of firearm civil possession can bring a 1.13 per cent increase in the homicide rate in the case of developing countries and 0.74 per cent in the case of developed countries.<sup>55</sup>

However, the key determinant is not merely the availability of the firearms, but whether the oversight and control of firearms is weak and whether impunity for criminal uses of firearms is high.<sup>56</sup> Nearly 40% of reported global homicides are connected to crime and gang-related violence.<sup>57</sup>

#### 4.1. SALW and Transnational Organized Crime

The misuse of small arms – and sometimes also of light weapons – is an important element in transnational organized crime and other serious crime. According to UNODC, in several countries, the use of firearms is particularly pronounced in organized crime and gang-related homicides.<sup>58</sup> UNODC estimated that from 2015 to 2021, organized crime accounted for around 700,000 homicides.<sup>59</sup> The criminal context of seized firearms extends well beyond firearms-related offences. SALW trafficking is often a contributing element in the commission of other serious crimes, with various forms of other illicit activities, in particular drug trafficking and gang criminality but also human trafficking and illegal mining.<sup>60</sup>

Regional variations can be observed in the different kinds of criminal context seen in these data. As a context for arms seizures, violent crime is most pronounced in Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean. This is in line with the relatively high levels of violent deaths (conflict-related or otherwise) in these regions, including intentional homicide and specifically firearm-related homicides.<sup>61</sup>

Drug trafficking is also prominent in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the links between this phenomenon and violence are also well-documented.<sup>62</sup> Relative to other kinds of criminal context, drug trafficking is also prominent in Europe, closely followed by violent crime, while terrorism has been most pronounced in Africa.

#### Examples of countries especially affected by gun violence linked to drug and other trafficking<sup>63</sup>

##### *North Macedonia:*

“North Macedonia reported a significant seizure of 13 weapons, including 3 rifles as well as a hand grenade and two chemical bombs, which was linked to an organized crime group connected to migrant smuggling and drug trafficking.”

##### *Brazil:*

“Brazil reported on the parallel trafficking of drugs and firearms ... In the case of Rio de Janeiro, one of the main drivers of demand for firearms was their use in maintaining control of areas for drug dealing.”

<sup>55</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Firearms Trafficking, 2020, p. 77.

<sup>56</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, pp. 32-33.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid*, p. 31.

<sup>58</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Firearms Trafficking, 2020, pp. 77-78.

<sup>59</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2023, Vienna, p. 31

<sup>60</sup> UN Secretary General, Small arms and light weapons: report of the Secretary General, [S/2023/823](#), 2023, para. 40.

<sup>61</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Homicide 2019.

<sup>62</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Homicide, 2019; and UNODC, World Drug Report, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> UNODC, Global Study on Firearms Trafficking, 2020, p. 78 and p. 81.

*Libya:*

"Libya reported a certain overlap in the routes used for firearms trafficking and migrant smuggling."<sup>64</sup>

*Kenya:*

"Kenyan authorities, in reporting on the context of significant cases of firearms seizures, referred to armed robberies, carjacking, cattle raids, terrorism and inter-community clashes."

*Japan:*

"Japan reported a total of 8 significant cases of firearms seizures, all of which were made from members of various Japanese organized crime groups ("*Boryokudan*")."

*Haiti:*

"... in Haiti, in a report into human rights abuses committed by gangs, OHCHR concluded that abuses were largely facilitated by access to firearms."

#### 4.2 SALW used in terrorist attacks

According to available data, SALW were the second most prevalent weapons used in terrorist attacks in 2022, just after the use of explosive devices. However, the UNODC has noted that insurgent groups are sometimes classed as combatants, terrorists, or simply civilians, depending on the political context of the conflict.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, terrorism and transnational organized crime can cross-fertilize each other, while small arms and light weapons can serve as an enabling and aggravating factor for both.<sup>66</sup> The methods and tactics vary by region. In the Sahel region alone, firearms were used in 70 per cent of attacks, while the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and North America also saw significant firearm use in this context.<sup>67</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa and North America were the two regions where firearms were the most common tactic used, accounting for 52 per cent and 30 per cent of attacks respectively.

#### Examples of links between firearms and terrorist attacks<sup>68</sup>

*Mali:*

"Armed assaults involving firearms were the favoured tactic of IS in Mali in 2022, with this accounting for almost 90 per cent of IS attacks in the country."

*Syria:*

"Despite the majority of IS attacks being committed using firearms, IS' explosive attacks were far more lethal, killing on average 3.6 people per attack."

*Myanmar:*

"There was a small decrease in the use of explosive weapons, which declined four per cent, whilst firearms use increased 33 per cent."

*Sahel:*

"In the Sahel, as Figure 4.6 shows, firearms are the primary weapon used in 70 per cent of attacks compared to explosives."

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, p. 79.

<sup>65</sup> UNODC Global Study on Homicide 2023, p.37.

<sup>66</sup> UN Secretary General, Small arms and light weapons: report of the Secretary General, [S/2023/823](#), 2023, para 16.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, para 33.

<sup>68</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2023: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, p. 24-25; 29; 64.



Out of the 50 worst terrorist attacks worldwide in 2022, measured by the number of fatalities, 34 attacks (68 per cent) were committed with firearms. This accounted for over half of the roughly 2,000 fatalities. Thus, looking only at the 50 worst terrorist attacks, firearms were the most prevalent weapon used.<sup>69</sup>

## 5. Economic costs of SALW violence

Current data and the body of research on the broader economic costs of firearms injuries and death remains limited. However, some studies have estimated the loss in gross-domestic product (GDP) from firearms-related deaths in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries at around USD240 billion between 2018 and 2030.<sup>70</sup>

It has also been estimated that the economic costs related to violence<sup>71</sup> in general constitute around one eighth of the world's gross productivity. In relation to conflicts, more than \$1.7 trillion was spent on militaries and their equipment. Altogether, the costs of the escalation of tensions, armed conflict and the resulting insecurity are enormous.<sup>72</sup> Recent studies conducted in the United States estimate that firearms injury and death entail an annual loss of almost USD560 billion and 2.6 per cent of GDP.<sup>73</sup>

In 2022, the global economic impact of violence was estimated at USD17.5 trillion, equivalent to 12.9 per cent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or USD2,200 per person. For the ten countries most affected by violence, it meant an average loss of 34 per cent of GDP, compared to just under three per cent for the ten least affected countries.<sup>74</sup>

The largest component of the overall economic impact of violence relates to all spending which aims to prevent and contain the spread of violence. This is referred to as "*violence containment*", the largest component of which is military expenditure, accounting for 54 per cent, followed by security expenditure (police and the judicial systems) at 37 per cent. Private security accounts for eight per cent of the economic impact of *violence containment*, while peacebuilding and peacekeeping combined account for less than one per cent.<sup>75</sup>

The unregulated availability and misuse of SALW are also key contributors to food insecurity. Research indicates that armed conflicts directly cause food insecurity and starvation by disruption and destruction of food systems, reduce farming populations, destroying infrastructure, reducing resilience, and increasing vulnerabilities, disruptions in access to market, increasing food price or making goods and services unavailable altogether.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, pp. 84 and 85.

<sup>70</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Impact of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms, A/HRC/53/49, 2023, para. 11.

<sup>71</sup> "The global economic impact of violence is defined as the expenditure and economic effects related to *containing, preventing and dealing with the consequences of violence*. The estimate includes the direct and indirect costs of violence, as well as an economic multiplier. The multiplier effect calculates the additional economic activity that would have accrued if the direct costs of violence had been avoided." Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Peace Index 2023: Measuring Peace in a Complex World, 2023, p. 42.

<sup>72</sup> UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament, 2018, p. ix and p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Impact of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms, A/HRC/53/49, 2023, para. 11.

<sup>74</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Peace Index 2023: Measuring Peace in a Complex World, 2023, p. 3.

<sup>75</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Peace Index 2023: Measuring Peace in a Complex World, 2023, p. 38.

<sup>76</sup> A.W. Weldegiargis, et al. "[Armed conflict and household food insecurity: evidence from war-torn Tigray, Ethiopia](#)", in: Conflict and Health, 2023, p. 1.

## 6. Conclusion

The available data shows that the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons continues to devastate communities and destabilize governments in many countries, contributing to incalculable human suffering. The illicit trade in SALW in all its aspects is not the only cause of the enormous toll in human lives and ruined livelihoods but is a major driver.

Corrective action by States is urgent. The Fourth Review Conference on the PoA-ITI due to be held in New York from 18 to 28 June 2024 is an opportunity for all States to agree concerted measures. They can exchange ideas, reach agreement on common understandings, and craft effective ways to cooperate with each other to tackle the acute problems arising from inadequately regulated trade and use of SALW. However, solutions are made difficult because too many States still provide incomplete reports on SALW-related killings and injuries, as well as on the import and export of SALW and ammunition.

Recommendations to improve the collection and availability of relevant data should include the following:

**On SALW-related Violence:** in 2013 the UN Statistical Commission and the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice initiated a new protocol known as the International Classification of Crime for Statistical Purposes (ICCS) to improve and standardize the collection and reporting of statistics on violence. The ICCS takes into consideration terrorist murders, killings by police officers using excessive armed force, and extrajudicial killings. Data disaggregated by sex and age is a prerequisite for understanding the gender-specific impacts of small arms misuse and for designing evidence-based, gender-responsive initiatives to address them. UN Member States should ensure that sufficient resources and institutional capacity are made available to collect and publish accurate data on SALW-related violence in all its forms.

**On SALW trade:** States should provide detailed and timely reports on their imports and exports of SALW, ammunition and accessories to meet their obligations and commitments under the PoA and International Tracing Instrument, as well as the UN Register of Conventional Arms, the UN Statistics Division for inclusion in the Comtrade database, and the Arms Trade Treaty. The reports should be coordinated and sufficiently transparent to enable democratic and public scrutiny. National authorities responsible for planning, implementation, collecting data and reporting on illicit trade, illicit manufacturing, and illicit holdings in SALW should strive to exchange information with a view to improving policies and programmes that prevent such illicit activities.

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