



UNLIREC

Stray Bullets II: Media Analysis of Cases of Stray Bullets in Latin America and the Caribbean (2014 – 2015)

16 PEACE, JUSTICE
AND STRONG
INSTITUTIONS



With the support of





UNLIREC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Stray Bullets II: Media Analysis of Cases of Stray Bullets
in Latin America and the Caribbean (2014 – 2015)**

May 2016

This publication was developed by the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNLIREC) based in Lima, Peru. The sole purpose of this paper is to contribute to regional and international debates in the fields of international security and disarmament. The views presented here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of the Federal Republic Germany, the UN Secretariat or the UN system in general.

The full publication will be available at the following website as of 30 June 2016:

www.unlirec.org

UNITED NATIONS PUBLICATION

© United Nations, 2016
All Rights Reserved
Printed at the United Nations, Lima

Executive Summary

In Chimaltenango, Guatemala, a 2-year-old girl was wounded by a stray bullet in her home. The event occurred at 22.15 hours when the girl was sleeping. The bullet passed through the roof and impacted in her chest. (November 24th 2014).¹

In Lima, Peru, two sisters were wounded by stray bullets. The older sister was 42 years old, and mother of two, while the younger sister was 16 years old and 4 months into her pregnancy. The bullets came out of a scramble between two men under the influence of alcohol. The older sister passed away, leaving behind two children in orphanhood (April 12th 2015).²

In Trinidad, a 71 years old grandfather was killed by a stray bullet during the New Year's Eve celebration. The man had come out of his home to watch the fireworks with his grandson when at 00.02 hours a bullet impacted him. The origin of the bullet remains unknown (January 1st of 2015).³

These tragedies, caused by stray bullets, have become daily news in Latin American and Caribbean newspapers throughout the last decades. This situation is a consequence of the proliferation of small arms and ammunition – in combination with a range of institutional, social and economic variables - which has led to unacceptable levels of armed violence across the region. Additionally, armed violence seems to have a bidirectional and negative relation with development processes.⁴ Namely, increasing levels of armed violence could have a negative effect in development processes and decreasing levels of development could increment the levels of armed violence. However, the opposite relation could also be true. That is, decreasing levels of armed violence could have a positive effect in development processes and increasing levels of development could reduce the levels of armed violence.

UNLIREC adopted Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Agenda pertaining to peace, justice and strong institutions as part of its conceptual framework for the implementation of measures to reduce the levels of armed violence, promote disarmament and secure non-proliferation in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁵

¹ Víctor Chamalé, 'Niña de dos años es herida por bala perdida en El Tejar', *Prensa Libre*, November 25, 2014. <<http://www.prensalibre.com/chimaltenango/Nina-dos-anos-herida-bala-perdida-El-Tejar-0-1255074569>>

² 'San Juan de Miraflores: Madre de familia muere por una bala perdida', *RPP Noticias*, April 12, 2015. <<http://rpp.pe/lima/actualidad/san-juan-de-miraflores-madre-de-familia-muere-por-una-bala-perdida-noticia-786852?hootPostID=0ca4e8c74f5b3eaa2d2191c2687f5892>>

³ 'Bloody start to 2015', *Daily Express*, January 1, 2015. <<http://www.trinidadexpress.com/news/bloody-start-to-2015-287308291.html>>

⁴ Global Burden of Armed Violence, 2015, *Every Body Counts*, Geneva: Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence, 2015. <<http://www.genevadeclaration.org/measurability/global-burden-of-armed-violence/gbav-2015/chapter-1.htm>>

Note: Development understood as, "Human development is a process of enlarging people's choices. The most critical of these wide-ranging choices are to live a long and healthy life, to be educated and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living. Additional choices include political freedom, guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect."

Source: United Nations Development Programme, 1990, *Human Development Report 1990*, New York: Oxford University Press.

⁵ United Nations Development Programme, 2015, *Sustainable Development Goals 2030*. New York: UNDP. <<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/es/home/sdgoverview/>>

Latin America and the Caribbean is home to about 9% of the global population, but accounts for 27% of the world's homicides.⁶ Moreover, globally, 46.3% of homicides are committed with firearms. However, 69% of homicides in Central America; 65%, in the Caribbean; and 53.7%, in South America are committed with small arms.⁷ Hence, such elevated levels of armed violence increase the probability that many bullets fired do not reach their intended targets – go stray – and end up injuring and killing innocent bystanders. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as 'stray bullets', but in reality what is lost is not the bullet, but lives.

UNLIREC has developed an analysis of the cases of stray bullets documented from regional online media. This study, collecting the incidents reported between 2014 and 2015, corresponds to the Centre's second effort to document and analyze the phenomenon of stray bullets in Latin America and the Caribbean. The previous study had a pioneering reach, comprising the 2009-2013 time period, documenting 550 incidents of stray bullets in 27 countries from the region. This update looks to build on the results of this previous study.

UNLIREC has developed this exploratory research project on stray bullet armed violence as part of its mandate to link small arms control measures called for in the *UN 2001 Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in all its aspects*⁸ with other global policy, advocacy and technical assistance frameworks, such as Sustainable Development Goal 16.

A team of UNLIREC researchers documented 741 cases of stray bullet armed violence – resulting in 826 direct victims – reported in online media from 25 Latin American and Caribbean countries during a two-year period (01 January 2014 – 31 December 2015). UNLIREC found more than one incident per day in the region. The incidents were classified in the following categories: (a) injury or death; (b) gender; (c) age; and (d) according to the typology of armed violence set out in the Geneva Declaration's 2011 publication *Global Burden of Armed Violence 2011: Lethal Encounters*.⁹

⁶ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011, *Global Study on Homicide*, Vienna: UNODC. <<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/statistics/crime/global-study-on-homicide-2011.html>>

⁷ Small Arms Survey, 2015, *Small Arms Survey: Every Body Counts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 27. <http://www.genevadeclaration.org/fileadmin/docs/GBAV3/GBAV3_Ch2_pp49-86.pdf>

⁸ United Nations, 2006, *Programme of Action to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects*, New York. <<http://www.un.org/events/smallarms2006/pdf/PoA.pdf>>

⁹ The typology of armed violence used in this study was adapted to the context of Latin America and the Caribbean but derives from the typology established in: *Global Burden of Armed Violence, 2011, Lethal Encounters*, Geneva: Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence, Geneva: 2011. <<http://www.genevadeclaration.org/measurability/global-burden-of-armed-violence/global-burden-of-armed-violence-2011.html>>

Table 1: Media reported stray bullet incidents in Latin America and the Caribbean¹⁰

Country	Reported incidents
Argentina	24
Bahamas	2
Barbados	1
Belize	2
Bolivia	4
Brazil	197
Chile	15
Colombia	101
Costa Rica	15
Ecuador	8
El Salvador	13
Guatemala	28
Guyana	6
Haiti	3
Honduras	28
Jamaica	2
Mexico	116
Nicaragua	5
Panama	15
Paraguay	7
Peru	42
Dominican Republic	16
Trinidad and Tobago	15
Uruguay	6
Venezuela	70
Total:	741

Main findings of the study

Gender

Fifty-five percent (55%) of all victims were men whereas 43% of victims were women and in 2% of documented cases, the sex of the victim was not specified. These results reiterate the findings from the previous study (2009-2013), which had found that 53% of all victims were men whereas 43% of victims were women and in 4% of the cases the sex of the victim was not specified. Thus, suggesting that women represent a much higher percentage of the victims of stray bullets in comparison with armed violence in general considering that, at a global level, women represent only 16% of direct victims of armed violence.¹¹ This means that in cases of intentional use of

¹⁰ The media monitoring did not find any reported stray bullet incidents in Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Cuba, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and St. Kitts and Nevis.

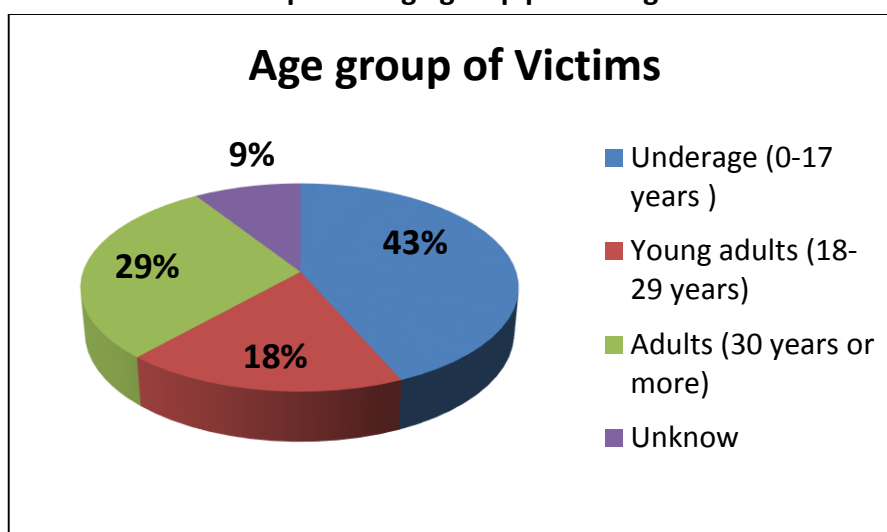
¹¹ Global Burden of Armed Violence, 2015, *Every Body Counts*, Geneva: Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence, 2015. <http://www.genevadeclaration.org/fileadmin/docs/GBAV3/GBAV3_Ch2_pp49-86.pdf>

armed violence, men represent an overwhelming majority of direct victims whereas in stray bullets armed violence the vulnerability of women increments substantially.

Age

Minors (under the age of 18) represented 43% of all victims of stray bullets, with young adults (ages 18-29) representing 18% of victims. In other words, 61% of all victims of stray bullets documented were young people under the age of 30. Similarly, the previous study (2009-2013) established that 45% of all victims had been minors and that 21% young adults, representing 66% of all victims of stray bullets.

Graphic 1: Age group percentage



Typology of armed violence

In terms of the type of armed violence generating victims of stray bullets 15% of the documented incidents were associated with gang violence; 14% of the documented cases were related to organized crime; 12% of the documented incidents were related to armed robbery/common crime; 10% of the documented incidents were associated with social/community-based/interpersonal violence; and 9% of the documented incidents were related to celebratory fire. Less than 1% of the documented incidents were related to armed conflict/terrorism. The motives and authorship behind 32% of documented incidents were unknown. Finally, 4% of the documented incidents could not be associated within the pre-established armed violence typology.

In addition, 14% of the documented incidents were associated with legal interventions in which the bullet was fired from the firearm of a law enforcement official and/or from the firearm of a criminal in a shootout with the authorities without precise knowledge of the origin of the bullet.

In the full study, specific breakdowns by sex, age and type of armed violence are included for each of the 25 Latin American and Caribbean countries where incidents of stray bullets were documented.

Table 2: Types of armed violence associated with stray bullets in LAC region (2014-2015)

Country	Organized crime	Armed robbery/ common crime	Gang related	Social/ community/ inter- personal violence	Mental instability	Terrorism/ Armed conflict	Celebratory fire	Unknown	Law enforcement solo	Others	Total	Law enforcement mixed
Argentina	2 8%	8 33%	2 8%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	5 21%	6 25%	0 0%	1 4%	24	4 17%
Bahamas	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	2 100%	0 0%	0 0%	2	0 0%
Barbados	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1 100%	0 0%	0 0%	1	0 0%
Belize	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	2 100%	0 0%	0 0%	2	0 0%
Bolivia	1 25%	1 25%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	2 50%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	4	0 0%
Brazil	48 24%	32 16%	31 16%	6 3%	0 0%	0 0%	5 3%	60 30%	14 7%	1 <1%	197	37 19%
Chile	0 0%	0 0%	3 20%	2 13%	0 0%	0 0%	4 27%	6 40%	0 0%	0 0%	15	0 0%
Colombia	14 14%	13 13%	17 17%	12 12%	0 0%	4 4%	13 13%	27 27%	0 0%	1 <1%	101	5 5%
Costa Rica	1 7%	0 0%	1 7%	3 20%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	6 40%	0 0%	4 27%	15	0 0%
Ecuador	1 13%	0 0%	3 38%	1 13%	0 0%	0 0%	1 13%	2 25%	0 0%	0 0%	8	0 0%
El Salvador	1 8%	1 8%	2 15%	1 8%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	7 54%	1 8%	0 0%	13	1 8%
Guatemala	2 7%	2 7%	2 7%	1 4%	0 0%	0 0%	4 14%	17 61%	0 0%	0 0%	28	0 0%
Guyana	2 33%	2 33%	0 0%	1 17%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1 17%	6	0 0%

Table 2: Types of armed violence associated with stray bullets in LAC region (2014-2015)

Country	Organized crime	Armed robbery/ common crime	Gang related	Social/ community/ inter- personal violence	Mental instability	Terrorism/ Armed conflict	Celebratory fire	Unknown	Law enforcement solo	Others	Total	Law enforcement mixed
Haiti	0 0%	1 33%	0 0%	1 33%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1 33%	0 0%	3	1 33%
Honduras	2 7%	5 18%	4 14%	3 11%	0 0%	0 0%	7 25%	6 21%	0 0%	1 4%	28	2 7%
Jamaica	0 0%	0 0%	1 50%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1 50%	0 0%	0 0%	2	0 0%
Mexico	17 15%	11 9%	10 9%	19 16%	0 0%	0 0%	16 14%	33 28%	3 3%	7 6%	116	14 12%
Nicaragua	0 0%	0 0%	2 40%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	2 40%	0 0%	1 20%	5	0 0%
Panama	1 7%	1 7%	5 33%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	5 33%	0 0%	3 20%	15	0 0%
Paraguay	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1 14%	0 0%	0 0%	2 29%	4 57%	0 0%	0 0%	7	0 0%
Peru	6 14%	9 21%	6 14%	9 21%	0 0%	0 0%	1 2%	8 19%	1 2%	2 5%	42	11 26%
Dominican Republic	1 6%	0 0%	2 13%	2 13%	0 0%	0 0%	2 13%	8 50%	0 0%	1 6%	16	2 13%
Trinidad and Tobago	1 7%	1 7%	3 20%	2 13%	0 0%	0 0%	1 7%	5 33%	1 7%	1 7%	15	1 7%
Uruguay	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	2 33%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	4 67%	0 0%	0 0%	6	0 0%
Venezuela	6 9%	5 7%	20 29%	9 13%	0 0%	0 0%	2 3%	18 26%	3 4%	7 10%	70	5 7%
Total	106 14%	92 12%	114 15%	75 10%	0 0%	4 <1%	65 9%	230 31%	24 3%	31 4%	741 100%	83 11%

Abstracts of every case documented can be found in the data annex of the full Spanish version available at <http://www.unlirec.org/Documents/Balas_Perdidas.pdf>

Preventing More Cases of Stray Bullets in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Way Forward

In terms of small arms control these measures include (a) establishing reasonable controls over the legal trade in small arms and ammunition; (b) equipping and training law enforcement to better intervene and investigate cases of illicit arms trafficking and armed violence; (c) securing national and private stockpiles of small arms and ammunition to prevent theft and diversion; and (d) establishing clear and enforceable laws and policies related to small arms possession and use. In terms of armed violence reduction public policies, States and local governments should take into consideration implementing measures to prevent the convergence of multiple risk factors (small arms, drugs, alcohol and youth), voluntary weapons collection programmes, gun free zones and conflict resolution mechanisms at the local level.

Additionally, specific measures could be taken to directly address 23% of the cases of stray bullets. That is, the 14% of incidents related to legal interventions plus the 9% of incidents related with celebratory fire. Based on the data set documented in this study, the specific measures could have saved more than 180 direct victims from death, injury and/or psychological trauma.

The most preventable deaths and injuries are those caused by celebratory fire, which represented 9% of cases documented in this study. Many Latin American and Caribbean countries do not have laws that criminalize this behaviour. **UNLIREC recommends that States that do not have laws in place that criminalize celebratory fire consider, particularly in urban contexts, taking prompt legislative action in this direction. It is also recommended that such legislation be accompanied by public awareness and education campaigns, focusing on holiday seasons and sporting events, to address the cultural aspects of this behaviour.**

Furthermore, 14% of the cases of stray bullets were related to law enforcement operations. While it is not possible, nor would it be appropriate, to second guess the actions of law enforcement officers having to make split minute decisions under difficult circumstances, it is also clear that outdated use of force doctrines, insufficient training and practice and the lack of less lethal weapons options can lead to shootouts that often result in innocent victims due to stray bullet fire. Some of these cases of stray bullets could be potentially prevented by:

- Updating use of force doctrines to better address existing realities and take advantage of lessons learned in this area by police forces worldwide;
- Investing more resources in preparing law enforcement on use of force issues, beyond tactical training, to include training on parameters of legality, necessity and proportionality; and
- Analyzing the legality, feasibility and desirability of incorporating intermediate or less lethal weapons into the law enforcement toolkit to give officers all the options necessary to preserve order, combat crime and protect the population in general.

The authors hope that the results, conclusions and recommendations of this study shed additional light on the issue of stray bullets, the disproportionate impact they have on women and young people and the undermining effect that armed violence might have on development processes. The authors also hope to highlight the potential role that small arms control, armed violence reduction and other targeted measures can play in preventing more stray bullets. Therewith, this paper seeks to contribute to current national, regional and international debates in the fields of arms control and public security. UNLIREC stands ready to work with Member States, UN agencies and civil society to formulate strategies to reduce armed violence, and senseless victimization by stray bullets in Latin America and the Caribbean. Comments and feedback should be sent by e-mail to: <programme@unlirec.org>.