



Small Arms and Public Health

Small arms contribute to a public health crisis because:

- **Small arms kill hundreds of thousands of people every year and injure many times more**
- **Small arms injuries burden hospitals and other health facilities, and shootings disrupt health service delivery**
- **Small arms fuel conflicts that contribute to forced migration, infectious disease, and psychological trauma**

Small arms pose major public health hazards, causing deaths, injuries, disabilities, mental health problems and the psychological scars that come from experiencing fear and trauma. Firearms are the leading cause of fatal injuries for South Africans over the age of 14. In the United States, 28,000 people a year are killed by small arms, including 16,500 suicides and 11,000 homicides. Sexual violence at gunpoint poses high risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Conflicts exacerbated by small arms increase internal displacement, contributing to the spread of diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, bubonic plague and AIDS, further stretching the limits of medical resources. In many conflict zones, transportation routes used for the distribution of food and medicine are destroyed, and sanitation and water purification systems break down, leading to outbreaks of cholera and other diseases. Armed groups often target health workers, hospitals, ambulances and clinics.

Small arms can interrupt the delivery of health services with life-threatening consequences, including the depletion of local blood supplies. Gunshot wounds require intensive medical treatment and place tremendous pressure on public (and private) health facilities. For every person killed by small arms, three more are seriously wounded; in Brazil, the injury rate is actually ten times the gun death rate.

The economic costs of small arms injuries are also high. In Canada, costs of gun-related injuries are estimated at US\$5 billion per year. In the United States the medical cost per firearm injury is estimated at US\$17,000. Experts estimate the cost of the impact of small arms in Latin America at 14% of GDP, including 10% of GDP in Brazil and 25% of GDP in Colombia. But the actual cost of small arms proliferation extends beyond emergency medical care to rehabilitation programs and psychological support programs for victims and their families. Pressures on the public health system can cripple the capacities of governments in the developing world, where resources are scarce and infrastructures are weak. Small arms proliferation may also force governments to focus a majority of their efforts on defense and security measures, leaving them with few resources to cope with the health effects of gun violence.

** Small arms are weapons that can be carried and used by one or two people, including handguns, assault rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers, anti-tank or anti-aircraft guns and light mortars. Light weapons, ammunition, grenades, landmines, and explosives are also part of this category.*