

# Small Arms and Public Health

## **Small arms contribute to public health crises because:**

- **Small arms kill hundreds of thousands of people every year and injure many more**
- **Small arms injuries burden hospitals and other health facilities, and small arms misuse disrupts the delivery of vital health services**
- **Small arms fuel conflicts that contribute to forced migration, the spread of infectious disease, and psychological trauma**

The proliferation and misuse of small arms pose major public health hazards, causing deaths, injuries, disabilities, and mental health problems. Small arms are directly responsible for an estimated 60-90 percent of deaths during armed conflicts, and upwards of 200,000 non-conflict deaths each year. One person dies from small arms use every minute, and the rate of firearm injury is even higher. In the United States, three people are injured by firearms for every person killed; in Brazil, the injury rate is ten times the gun death rate.

The economic cost of treating firearms injuries is enormous. In the United States, medical treatment for firearms injuries in 2000 alone consumed over \$1.4 billion. Experts estimate the cost of small arms violence in Brazil at 10 percent of annual GDP; in Colombia, the costs rise to 25 percent of annual GDP. The price of small arms proliferation extends beyond emergency medical care, however, to rehabilitation and psychological support programs for victims and their families.

Small arms violence can cripple health care systems in the developing world, where resources are scarce and infrastructures are weak. Small arms misuse can interrupt the delivery of health services with life-threatening consequences. Local blood supplies may be depleted and individuals may succumb to treatable diseases because resources are diverted from basic health care services to care for gun violence victims. Further, armed groups often target health workers, hospitals, ambulances, and clinics.

Conflicts exacerbated by small arms cause internal displacement, which contributes 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 insecure due to the proliferation or threat of small arms, and sanitation and water purification systems break down, leading to outbreaks of diseases such as cholera. Sexual violence at gunpoint creates a high risk for widespread transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.