

Small Arms and Public Health

Small arms contribute to a public health epidemic because:

- **Small arms kill at least 500,000 people every year and injure many times more**
- **Small arms injuries overburden medical infrastructures, and shootings disrupt health services**
- **Small arms fuel conflicts that contribute to forced migration, infectious disease, and psychological trauma**

Small arms pose major public health problems, directly resulting in deaths, injuries, and the psychological scars that come from experiencing fear and trauma. Small arms—used in armed conflicts, homicides, suicides and accidents—kill 300,000 people in combat zones and 200,000 non-conflict civilians every year. One person dies from small arms use every minute.

Firearms were the leading cause of fatal accidental injuries for males ages 16 to 64 in South Africa in 1999. An International Committee of the Red Cross study in Afghanistan found that injuries from small arms decreased only by 20 to 40 percent after the end of the conflict. In the United States about 30,000 people a year are killed by small arms, 13,000 of which are murders.

Small arms violence also has indirect effects on public health. Small arms may interrupt the delivery of health services with life-threatening consequences, including the depletion of countries' blood supplies. Armed groups even target civilians, hospitals and health clinics. Small arms injuries also flood hospitals with wounded and place

tremendous pressure on public health resources. Injury rates from small arms are on average three times the death rate; in Brazil, the injury rate is actually ten times the death rate. Conflicts exacerbated by small arms often increase internal displacement, contributing to the outbreaks of disease, such as malaria, tuberculosis, bubonic plague and AIDS, further stretching the limits of medical resources.

Small arms casualties are costly. Experts estimate that the cost of the impact of small arms in Latin America is 14 percent of GDP, including 10 percent of GDP in Brazil, and 25 percent of GDP in Colombia. In Canada, costs of small arms related injuries are estimated at \$6.6 billion per year. 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 small arms violence.