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**Homicide** Dispatch 2

# Global Trends and Projections of Homicidal Violence: 2000 to 2030



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# Global Trends and Projections of Homicidal Violence: 2000 to 2030

Carlos J. Vilalta<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

There are marked differences in the evolution of intentional homicide in different regions of the world. While global homicide rates are at historic lows, there are regions where homicidal violence is persistent and shows no sign of decreasing. This Homicide Dispatch explores these regional variations, identifying the countries that are driving past and present trends. The Dispatch also offers short-term projections of homicide in the coming years. It finds that while homicide rates are decreasing (Africa, Asia, Europe and North America) or stable (Oceania), they nevertheless continue increasing in Latin America. Specifically, Central America and the Caribbean are the main drivers of upward trends. Future projections show that homicides may become rare events in most parts of the world even as they increase in Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The statistics used in this Dispatch are all retrieved from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

# Introduction

Worldwide, homicidal violence is at the lowest level on record. Leading intellectuals such as Steven Pinker have shown convincingly how homicide reductions are a result of an historic, long-term process (Pinker, 2011). In the case of Europe, the decline began as far back as the Middle Ages. The most plausible causes of the great homicide drop can be summarized as: improvements in the rule of law, which reduced the propensity to take revenge for prior injustices; improvements in governance and social arrangements with more legitimacy; higher levels of protection against natural and human threats, which in turn foster social cohesion; and finally strengthening of self-control and predictable exchanges among individuals which reduce the possibility of violent interpersonal confrontation (Eisner, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding global improvements in personal safety, there are still some parts of the world with exceedingly high risk of intentional homicide. A statistical review shows that not all regions are faring equally well. The decline in the global rate masks critical differences at the regional, national and subnational levels. This Homicide Dispatch highlights regional trends in murder and offers a number of short-term projections. The dynamics of homicide in Latin America are compared to prevalence rates in the rest of the world. The Dispatch urges the region's leaders to devote more attention to the underlying drivers of violence in the region and to set strategic targets to get the problem under control. Unless public and private authorities adopt preventive measures, then homicidal violence is likely to decrease everywhere in the world other than Central America and the Caribbean.

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<sup>3</sup> For deeper insight on the possible causes of homicidal violence reduction, read recent studies by LaFree (1999), Nivette (2011) and Trent & Pridemore (2012).

## Recent Trends

The topic of homicide is still considered taboo on many parts of the planet. In some societies it is an issue confined to the security and justice sectors and kept out of public debate. Until comparatively recently, the United Nations was not even permitted to report national murder rates for fear of damaging the reputation of member states. These restrictions began to change over the past decade<sup>4</sup> and today the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) collects and disseminates homicide rates from 219 countries and territories between 2000 to 2013.<sup>5</sup> Although information is not available for every year and every country, this remarkable compilation of statistics allows for comparative analysis.

It is possible to generate annual regional homicide rates from publicly available data. There is generally positive news for most parts of the world. For instance, the global homicide rate decreased slightly between 2000 and 2012, from 8.6 per 100,000 to 8.3 per 100,000 people.<sup>6</sup> This global reduction was for the most part linear and progressive.

Indeed, 2011 stands out for registering the lowest homicide rate during the reported period, with just 8 homicides per 100,000 people.

In some societies, homicide is an issue confined to the security and justice sectors and kept out of public debate

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4 See, for example, the Global Burden of Armed Violence (2008) which includes the first ever systematic assessment of UNODC homicide data at the national scale. The UNODC has since published homicide reports in 2011, 2013 and 2015.

5 This information is available at <https://data.unodc.org/>. See also [homicide.igarape.org.br](http://homicide.igarape.org.br) for a more complete record of homicide data including at the subnational level.

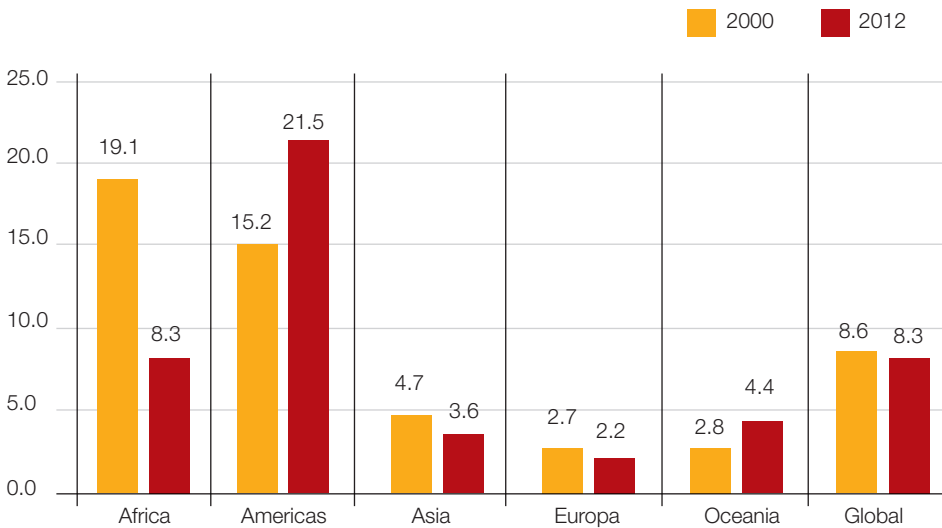
6 Note that in 2013 UNODC only has information from 86 countries, while for previous years there is information on many more. Because the number of countries reporting each year impacts the regional and global averages, data from 2013, despite being available, was not included in this analysis. See tables 3 and 4 in the Appendix.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of average homicide rates per region, from 2000 to 2013

	Africa	Americas	Asia	Europe	Oceania	Global
2000	19.1	15.2	4.7	2.7	2.8	8.6
2001	14.0	15.6	4.1	2.7	4.4	8.7
2002	12.4	17.4	4.0	2.7	3.8	9.2
2003	9.8	16.7	4.1	2.7	4.9	8.6
2004	7.5	17.3	3.8	2.6	3.3	8.2
2005	6.4	18.1	4.8	2.6	4.4	8.5
2006	6.2	18.4	4.7	2.4	4.6	8.7
2007	8.1	18.4	5.2	2.2	3.1	8.7
2008	7.7	19.5	3.5	2.6	3.9	8.5
2009	7.2	21.1	3.2	2.3	4.0	8.6
2010	7.2	22.4	3.4	2.3	4.5	8.5
2011	5.9	22.2	3.2	2.2	4.6	8.0
2012	8.3	21.5	3.6	2.2	4.4	8.3
Average	9.2	18.8	4.0	2.5	4.1	8.5
Median	7.7	18.4	4.0	2.6	4.4	8.6
Standard Deviation	3.7	2.3	0.6	0.2	0.6	0.3
Variation Coefficient	39.8	12.4	15.7	8.3	15.3	3.2

**Source:** Prepared by the author with data retrieved from UNODC. Averages are for every 100,000 people and represent the average of the set of countries in each region. The variation coefficient is the standard deviation divided by the average multiplied by 100.

**Note:** The average homicide rate differs from the global homicide rate reported by the UNODC, which is calculated as the sum of global homicides divided by the world's population, and is 6.2 for 2012.

**Graph 1.** Average homicide rates per region, 2000 and 2012

**Source:** Prepared by the author with data retrieved from UNODC. Average rates are for every 100,000 people and represent the average of the set of countries in each region.

The global decline in homicide is a function of a combination of regional declines. While a number of regions made important progress, the most significant reductions in murder were registered in Africa and Asia. Contrary to popular (mis)perception, Africa experienced the most dramatic reduction in homicidal violence during the past decade.<sup>7</sup> This is due largely to reductions over time in Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe which are shaping positive trends on the continent. To put Africa's homicide drop in perspective, the region went from having a murder rate that was twice the global average in 2000 to one that is parity today. While Africa's homicide rates are still high (second only to the Americas), the improvements are remarkable.

<sup>7</sup> Note also that information on homicidal violence is submitted voluntarily on an annual basis by United Nations member states, and for the most part refer to homicides committed outside of conflicts or civil wars. It is also important to recall that there are also data quality challenges and limitations in many African countries.



Protest against violence in Zimbabwe where homicide rates have considerably declined.  
Photo: Joshua Hayes.

Meanwhile Asia, which already registered exceedingly low homicide rates, also recorded significant decreases from 2000 onwards. It is important to note that homicide reductions (and increases) are empirically smaller in countries with low rates than in those with high rates. Among the Asian countries making most progress in reducing homicidal violence are China, Indonesia, Japan and Mongolia. Indeed, Japan has registered the lowest homicide rates in the world for several years.<sup>8</sup> The Eastern most former Soviet republics also witnessed sizeable decrease in violence: Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan and Tajikistan reduced national homicide rates by between 70% and 100%.

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<sup>8</sup> While in 2003 Japan had a rate of 0.6 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, in 2013 the rate fell to 0.3. This represents a 50% reduction in ten years, i.e., from 697 registered homicides to only 370 in a country with more than 126 million residents.



The European region features among the lowest rates of homicidal violence in the world. Within Europe, however, it is the Eastern countries that exhibit the most significant declines in homicide from 2000 to 2012. Specifically, Belarus, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldavia, and Poland stand out for their sharp declines in murder. Meanwhile, certain Southeastern European countries such as Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia also reported important improvements. At the same time, Spain registered homicide rates below 1 per 100,000 people, placing the country in the same sub-grouping as Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, long considered among the most peaceful states on earth.

## The Americas are the only region in the world witnessing a surge in homicidal violence between 2000 and 2012

The news from Oceania is less positive. On the one hand, homicide rates in Australia and New Zealand registered gradually decreases from 2000 to 2010. However, over the past few years the regional rate increased and then stabilized at a higher rate. Latterly, murder rates remained more or less constant at between 4.0 and 4.6 homicides per 100,000 people. These sharp rises earlier in the 2000s are likely due to increases in lethal violence in countries such as Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste, all of which suffered painful internal conflicts. In spite of these challenges, the regional average is still far below the global average.

Meanwhile, the situation in many parts of the Americas is disastrous. Indeed, it is the only region in the world that witnessed a surge in homicidal violence between 2000 and 2012. The regional average shot up from 15 to more than 20 homicides per 100,000 people. Yet, as in the case of the global average, the regional average conceals important differences between and within subregions and countries.

Specifically, UNODC divides the Americas into four sub-regions: North America, Central America, South America and the Caribbean (see table 2). The differences across these sub-regions are profound. While homicidal violence slowed in North and South America, in Central America and the Caribbean it reached epidemic levels. Today the subregional average in Central America is approximately 29 homicides per 100,000 people and over 17 in the Caribbean. Central America is the region with the highest average homicide rate on the planet.



Japan has the world's lowest homicide rate. Photo: Karolina Lubryczynska

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of average homicide rates per subregion of the Americas: 2000 to 2013

	North America	Central America	South America	Caribbean	The Americas
2000	7.6	21.1	20.5	11.8	15.2
2001	10.8	22.8	21.2	11.2	15.6
2002	7.5	24.6	23.6	14.1	17.4
2003	4.8	24.7	20.7	14.1	16.7
2004	7.0	25.3	20.7	14.9	17.3
2005	7.0	27.7	16.9	17.1	18.1
2006	5.9	28.5	17.1	18.3	18.4
2007	3.1	28.2	16.5	19.4	18.4
2008	8.3	31.1	17.7	18.8	19.5
2009	10.3	35.7	16.8	20.5	21.1
2010	6.8	37.1	16.6	23.1	22.4
2011	4.9	38.2	16.6	22.3	22.2
2012	4.5	33.8	16.6	22.4	21.5
Average	6.8	29.1	18.6	17.5	18.8
Median	7.0	28.2	17.1	18.3	18.4
Standard Deviation	2.1	5.4	2.3	3.9	2.3
Variation Coefficient	31.3	18.5	12.5	22.1	12.4

**Source:** Prepared by the author with data retrieved from UNODC. Average rates are for every 100,000 people and represent the average of the set of countries in each region.

The regional variations in intentional homicide in the Americas are startling. North American rates declined dramatically. Indeed, over the last two decades, Canada and the US experienced a 40% drop in homicidal violence with some cities registering the lowest rates since records began. Meanwhile, in South

America, homicidal violence reportedly increased in Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay and Venezuela. On the other hand, Colombia experienced a sharp reduction in homicidal violence during the 2000-2012 period.<sup>9</sup> Overall, however, violence in these two sub-regions decreased.



Young children in vulnerable area in Brazil. The country increased homicidal violence between 2000 and 2012. Photo: Yosef Hadar / World Bank.

More worryingly, homicide rates skyrocketed in Central America and the Caribbean. In the case of Central America homicidal violence literally exploded in every country in the region.<sup>10</sup> Between 2000 and 2012, the homicide rate more than doubled in Belize and Mexico, and spiked around 75% in Honduras and Panama.<sup>11</sup> The homicide rate increased by 54% in Guatemala, 34% in Costa Rica, 22% in Nicaragua and 5% in El Salvador. The country reporting the

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9 Colombia's levels of lethal violence are nevertheless still high, with intentional homicide hovering at 30.8 per 100,000 inhabitants.

10 Note that, for statistical purposes, UNODC considers Mexico as part of Central America. See table 3 in the Appendix.

11 However, in Central America there are two regions with very different violence dynamics and homicide rates. The countries in the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras) reported homicide rates among the highest in the world. That is not the case of the Southern Triangle (Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama).

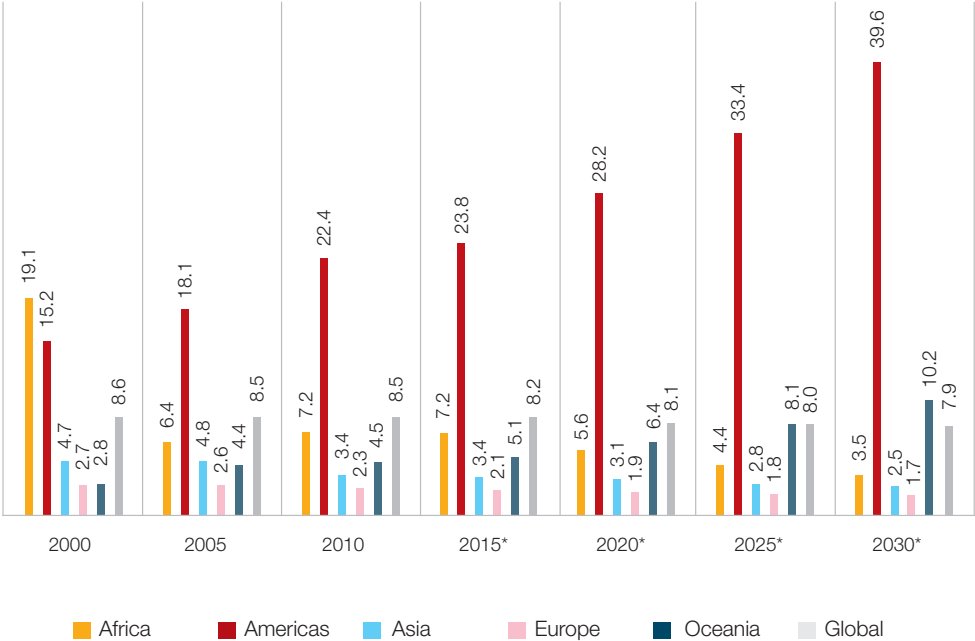
highest murder rate in 2012 was Honduras, with 90 homicides per 100,000 people (more than 10 times the global average), while the country with the lowest rate was Costa Rica, with 8.5 per 100,000 (close to the global average). Mexico progressively reduced its homicide rate in recent years, but in 2012 still maintained an exceptionally high rate of 22 murders per 100,000 people.

Notwithstanding information gaps, murder rates in the Caribbean have increased further still. Particularly badly affected are Jamaica (39 homicides per 100,000), Trinidad and Tobago (28 homicides per 100,000) and the Dominican Republic (22 homicides per 100,000). Worth noting is that rates rendered in countries with low populations cannot easily be compared with those of other countries. For instance, the Virgin Islands has roughly 100,000 inhabitants: just a small number of homicides can yield dramatic effects on its national rate. Even so, several countries doubled their homicide rates suggesting that it is very unlikely that overall trends in lethal violence levels in these two sub-regions of the world will be soon reversed. The homicide rates are high and the incremental growth is very significant.

## Projections

The prognosis for homicidal violence in the next fifteen years is generally positive when examined from a global perspective. The story becomes more complex when considering regional tendencies. The final section of this Dispatch highlights future trajectories up until 2030. The 2015–2030 projection for each region of the world is estimated assuming a stable annual homicide rate identical to that of the 2000–2012 period. On the basis of this assumption, the graph below summarizes what can be reasonably expected.

**Graph 2.** Regional and global dynamics in average homicide rates: 2000 to 2030



**Note:** With data retrieved from UNODC (2015). Average rates are for every 100,000 people and represent the average of the set of countries in each region.

\*The asterisk denotes a projected figure.

**Source:** Vilalta, C (2015)

When considering the global picture, the projection of future homicide is generally positive. By 2030, almost all regions in the world, with the notable exceptions of the Americas and Oceania, should have average homicide rates below 5 per 100,000 people. This on its own is unprecedented and could prove to be a remarkable historic achievement. The European average could reach approximately 1.7 homicides per 100,000 people, and Asian countries may register a regional average very close to 2.5 homicides per 100,000 people. If violence on the two continents continues its current trend, homicide will become a rare event in these places.

And yet when considering trends in Latin America and the Caribbean, the story is a very different one. Assuming underlying conditions are not changed, then the average homicide rate could soar above 39 homicides per 100,000 people. What is more, the already high variation between sub-regions and countries on the American continent will become even more significant. Unless the issue of homicide prevention and reduction is not immediately made a regional priority, murder might become anything but a rare event on this side of the planet, especially in Central America and the Caribbean.

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# Statistical Appendix

**Table 3.** Number of countries on which there is information about homicides per region, 2000 to 2013

	Africa	Americas	Asia	Europe	Oceania	Global
2000	4	38	18	32	5	97
2001	9	39	21	33	5	107
2002	10	40	22	33	5	110
2003	12	41	30	32	5	120
2004	18	43	33	38	6	138
2005	18	43	34	37	6	138
2006	21	45	34	35	8	143
2007	23	45	37	37	9	151
2008	27	47	41	40	10	165
2009	28	45	41	41	10	165
2010	27	39	42	42	9	159
2011	18	34	38	40	6	136
2012	42	35	38	38	12	165
2013*	7	16	22	38	3	86

**Source:** Prepared by the author with data retrieved from UNODC.

\*Due to the small number of countries compared to preceding years, data from 2013 were not included in the analysis.

**Table 4.** Countries in each sub-region of the Americas (N = 49)

North America (N = 5)	Central America (N = 8)	South America (N = 13)	Caribbean (N = 23)
Bermuda	Belize	Argentina	Anguilla
Canada	Costa Rica	Bolivia	Antigua and Barbuda
Greenland	El Salvador	Brazil	Aruba
Saint Pierre and Miquelon	Guatemala	Chile	Bahamas
United States of America	Honduras	Colombia	Barbados
	Mexico	Ecuador	British Virgin Islands
	Nicaragua	French Guiana	Cayman Islands
	Panama	Guyana	Cuba
		Paraguay	Dominica
		Peru	Dominican Republic
		Suriname	Grenada
		Uruguay	Guadeloupe
		Venezuela	Haiti
			Jamaica
			Martinique
			Montserrat
			Puerto Rico
			Saint Kitts and Nevis
			Saint Lucia
			Saint Vincent and the G.
			Trinidad and Tobago
			Turks and Caicos Islands
			Virgin Islands

**Source:** Prepared by the author with data retrieved from UNODC.

The **Homicide dispatches** are a series of short analytical articles highlighting the underlying causes and far-reaching consequences of murder, ways that governments count homicide, and innovative strategies to prevent and reduce lethal violence. The homicide dispatches are part of the Homicide Monitor, a data visualization tool developed by the Igarapé Institute in partnership with the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), with contributions from the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC).



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ISSN 2359-0998



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