



General Assembly

Distr.: General
10 April 2025

Original: English

Human Rights Council

Fifty-ninth session

16 June–11 July 2025

Agenda items 2 and 3

Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development

Impact of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms

Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Summary

In the present report, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights examines the impact of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms and the underlying root causes and risk factors driving firearms-related violence on the right to participate in cultural life and the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, particularly for individuals in vulnerable or marginalized situations.



I. Introduction

1. Globally, civilians have more firearms than law enforcement and the military combined,¹ and firearms used by civilians kill more individuals than armed conflicts and terrorism combined.² Firearms continue to be the most prevalent mechanism in homicides, accounting for approximately half of all homicides globally.³ Some regions remain particularly affected. The Americas continue to account for the largest proportion of homicides globally and the highest proportion of homicides perpetrated by firearms.⁴ Firearms violence continues to have a devastating effect on societies and communities.

2. In its resolution 56/9, the Human Rights Council requested the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare a report on the impact of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms and the underlying root causes and risk factors driving firearms-related violence on the right to participate in cultural life and the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, particularly for individuals in vulnerable or marginalized situations, and to present the report to the Council at its fifty-ninth session.

3. To prepare the report, the High Commissioner for Human Rights sought inputs from States, United Nations entities, national human rights institutions and non-governmental organizations.⁵ The High Commissioner also drew on a diverse range of public sources, including international and regional instruments, the practice of United Nations human rights mechanisms, and reports of regional and humanitarian organizations, civil society, scholars and practitioners. As noted in previous reports, however, there is a dearth of information on the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms in many parts of the world. Information availability has influenced the selection of the contexts examined.

4. The present report builds on the reports submitted pursuant to resolutions 29/10, 38/10, 45/13 and 50/12 of the Human Rights Council and examines the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms and their impact on the rights to participate in cultural life and to take part in the conduct of public affairs. It considers the concerns related to addressing the underlying root causes and risk factors driving firearms-related violence. Lastly, the report presents conclusions and recommendations.

II. Rights to participate in cultural life and to take part in the conduct of public affairs

5. The right to participate in cultural life is enshrined in article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and has also found expression in other treaties. Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognize the right of persons belonging to ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities to enjoy their own culture. Article 13 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women establishes the obligation of States Parties to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the right to participate in recreational activities, sports and all aspects of cultural life. As noted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, culture is a “broad, inclusive concept”.⁶ The expression “cultural life” is an explicit reference to culture as a living process, historical, dynamic and evolving.⁷

¹ A/HRC/53/49, para. 14.

² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide 2023* (New York, 2023), p. 41.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 33 and 130.

⁵ Contributions were received from Algeria, Ecuador, Honduras, Italy, Jordan, Mexico, Morocco and Qatar and from the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, the Association of Reintegration of Crimea, the Knowledge Steez Edu Hub, the Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

⁶ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, general comment No. 21 (2009), para. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, para. 11.

6. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has highlighted the following as falling within the concept of culture: “ways of life, language, oral and written literature, music and song, non-verbal communication, religion or belief systems, rites and ceremonies, sport and games, methods of production or technology, natural and man-made environments, food, clothing and shelter and the arts, customs and traditions through which individuals, groups of individuals and communities express their humanity and the meaning they give to their existence, and build their world view representing their encounter with the external forces affecting their lives”.⁸ The enjoyment of the right to participate in cultural life is connected with the enjoyment of other rights, such as the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, of peaceful assembly and of association.

7. The right to take part in the conduct of public affairs is reflected in article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.⁹ As noted by the Human Rights Committee, the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs is a broad concept that relates to the exercise of political power and covers all aspects of public administration, and the formulation and implementation of policy.¹⁰ Participation in public affairs within the meaning of article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights covers participation in electoral and non-electoral contexts.¹¹ Citizens also take part in the conduct of public affairs by exerting influence through public debate and dialogue with their representatives or through their capacity to organize themselves.¹²

III. Civilian acquisition and possession of firearms

8. The ways in which civilians can acquire and come into possession of firearms, as well as some of the factors driving demand for firearms, have been highlighted in previous reports.¹³ The lawful acquisition and possession of firearms by civilians is governed by the domestic laws of each State. Regulation is therefore an important determinant of whether civilians can lawfully acquire and possess firearms. In addition to the lawful acquisition and possession of firearms, civilians acquire and possess firearms illicitly. Sources of illicit firearms include firearms diverted from national stockpiles and arms transfers. Firearms are also diverted in significant numbers from civilian stockpiles, such as through straw purchases, theft and illegal sales. The contributions of businesses in this respect have been highlighted in previous reports.¹⁴

9. Once a firearm is diverted, it can circulate in the illicit sphere for decades and pose risks within and outside the State in which it was originally diverted. Firearms trafficking occurs by land, sea and air. In several regions, firearms trafficking constitutes an important source of illicit firearms. The so-called ant trade is a method of supply of illicit firearms in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Europe.¹⁵ There are often various trafficking sources for and routes to one and the same destination. An illustrative example is Haiti, where illicit firearms are trafficked to violent gangs in the country from, inter alia, the United States of America to the west, the Dominican Republic to the east, and South America to the south.¹⁶

10. The types of trafficked firearms, ammunition and parts and components vary greatly, depending on supply and demand factors. Examining firearms seizure data, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that pistols, shotguns and

⁸ Ibid., para. 13.

⁹ See also Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, art. 7; and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, art. 29.

¹⁰ Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 25 (1996), para. 5.

¹¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Guidelines for States on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs” (2018).

¹² Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 25 (1996), para. 8.

¹³ A/HRC/53/49, paras. 14 ff; and A/HRC/49/41, paras. 5 ff.

¹⁴ See A/HRC/53/49.

¹⁵ UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (New York, 2020), pp. 63 ff; and Small Arms Survey, *Weapons Compass: Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa* (Geneva, 2019), pp. 38 ff.

¹⁶ See S/2024/554.

rifles were the types of firearms most frequently seized.¹⁷ United States firearms seizure data for the period 2016–2023 show that a significant proportion of firearms seized were rifles, with most rifles trafficked to Latin America destined for Mexico, due to demand by criminal groups. Ninety-three per cent of all magazines destined for the Caribbean were high-capacity magazines.¹⁸

11. In several contexts, diversion from private security companies can constitute an important source of illicit firearms. Firearms holdings by private security companies can enter the illicit market through theft, loss, corruption or collusion between members of security companies and criminal groups. It has been reported that private security companies that face bankruptcy have themselves sold off their holdings.¹⁹ It has been alleged that gang leaders in the Western Cape of South Africa have links to security firms that can legally purchase ammunition through registered dealers.²⁰ The Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination has noted recourse to arms trafficking by some private military and security companies as a source of funding.²¹

12. While industrially and lawfully manufactured firearms constitute the largest proportion of total holdings, artisanal and craft weapons and converted firearms exist in significant numbers in some regions. The craft production of several States in West Africa has a long tradition.²² Over the past decade, there has been an increase in the private manufacture of firearms and parts and components for firearms, including conversion devices that can turn semi-automatic firearms into automatic ones, using new technologies such as 3D printing and computer numerical control machining.²³ In the Caribbean, the first reported seizure of 3D-printed firearms occurred in 2023, and several such firearms or parts and components for firearms have been seized since. Between 2017 and 2021, seizures of privately made firearms in the United States reportedly increased by over 1,000 per cent.²⁴ In Ecuador, 3D-printed firearms have been sold and trafficked to other States in Latin America at lower cost than industrially manufactured firearms that are trafficked, serving a different segment of the criminal market.²⁵ The proliferation of privately made firearms can pose several challenges, including in the tracing of recovered firearms and in ballistics investigations.²⁶

¹⁷ UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020*, pp. 25 ff.

¹⁸ Matt Schroeder, “Trends in trafficking: comparing US-based firearms trafficking to the Caribbean and Latin America”, situation update (Small Arms Survey, November 2024).

¹⁹ Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Observatory of Illicit Economies in Eastern and Southern Africa, “Risk bulletin: issue No. 2” (November 2019).

²⁰ Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, “Western Cape gang monitor: issue No. 4” (December 2024).

²¹ [A/HRC/57/45](#), para. 56.

²² Julien Joly and Aline Shaban, “Between tradition and the law: artisanal firearm production in West Africa”, briefing paper (Small Arms Survey, November 2023).

²³ See, e.g., Stefan Schaufelbühl and others, “The emergence of 3D-printed firearms: an analysis of media and law enforcement reports”, *Forensic Science International: Synergy*, vol. 8 (2024).

²⁴ Yulia Yarina and Nicolas Florquin, “Dangerous devices: privately made firearms in the Caribbean”, situation update (Small Arms Survey, June 2024).

²⁵ Matilde Vecchioni, “Unregulated production: examining craft-produced weapons from a global perspective” (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2024), p. 18; and Carla Álvarez, “Paradise Lost? Firearms trafficking and violence in Ecuador” (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, June 2024), p. 18.

²⁶ G. Hays and N.R. Jenzen-Jones, *Beyond State Control: Improvised and Craft-Produced Small Arms and Light Weapons* (Small Arms Survey, 2018), pp. 116–118.

IV. Impact of civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms on the rights to participate in cultural life and to take part in the conduct of public affairs

A. Use of firearms as part of cultural practices

13. Firearms form an integral part of certain cultural practices. As a sport, shooting has been practised in some countries for hundreds of years and was included as a competition in the inaugural, 1896 Olympic Games. Despite the conservation and animal welfare concerns that have arisen from such practices, hunting with firearms for sport or subsistence, too, has been practised in several States for hundreds of years. Antique firearms collection forms part of the activities of museums and private collectors. In some States, firearms form part of religious or ceremonial rituals.²⁷

14. Studies examining the motivations for lawful firearms acquisitions, however, suggest that the recreational and cultural aspects of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms overall are subordinate to self-defence justifications.²⁸ Moreover, several cultural practices involving firearms are intimately linked with stereotypes of masculinity, such as the giving of firearms to boys as a rite of passage into adulthood.²⁹ Some cultural practices involving firearms also pose threats to life and health. An example includes celebratory gunfire, which is commonly practised in several parts of the world, and which has led to multiple cases of death and injury.

B. Use of firearms to carry out targeted attacks

15. Firearms are a mechanism used in targeted attacks against individuals carried out because of or to prevent the exercise of their rights. While such attacks are also carried out using other mechanisms, the use of firearms is characterized by its lethality. Such targeted attacks have an impact on the enjoyment of the rights to life and personal integrity and can produce a chilling effect on the exercise of rights by others, out of fear that the exercise of their rights in a similar situation would lead to victimization.

16. Targeted attacks are, for example, perpetrated against elected officials and individuals running for political office. Violence exercised against politicians, local officials, election officials and voters may dissuade others from running for office, may risk the integrity of the elections and may contribute to eroding trust in public institutions and the electoral process. Instances of such attacks include the assassination of the then President of Haiti in 2021 and of a former prime minister of Japan in 2022, as well as candidates for general elections, such as the assassination of a presidential candidate in Ecuador in 2023 and the attempted assassination of a United States presidential candidate in 2024. Shootings of legislators have also occurred, such as the 2001 shooting in the regional parliament of Zug, Switzerland, which killed 14 individuals and injured 18 others. The latter case is illustrative also of the broader consequences that such attacks can engender, as the security measures implemented in the aftermath led to concerns of endangering the Swiss tradition of transparency and access to public representatives.³⁰

17. Many targeted attacks appear to be directed at local politicians. It has been reported that, in 2022, there were more than 2,100 incidents of violence targeting local government officials and institutions in nearly 100 countries, and direct attacks on unarmed officials, such

²⁷ Joly and Shaban, "Between tradition and the law".

²⁸ Claire Boine and others, "What is gun culture? Cultural variations and trends across the United States", *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, vol. 7 (2020).

²⁹ Joly and Shaban, "Between tradition and the law", p. 8.

³⁰ Steffen Hurka and Kerstin Nebel, "Framing and policy change after shooting rampages: a comparative analysis of discourse networks", *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 20, No. 3 (2013), p. 402.

as stabbings and shootings, accounted for over 50 per cent of reported incidents.³¹ South Africa has seen high numbers of assassinations of local councillors, reportedly as a result of intra-party disputes and disputes between political parties. They have increased in frequency in recent years, spiking in municipal election years.³² In the Kano and River Regions of Nigeria, violent gangs are reportedly hired by political actors or parties to exercise violence, including through the use of firearms, against political opponents, voters and electoral officials.³³ In Mexico, it has been reported that, from 2004 to 2018, 178 mayors, ex-mayors and mayors-elect were murdered, with organized crime responsible in half of cases. From 2018 until the start of 2023, 65 killings of local officials occurred, 20 of them mayors.³⁴ In the Philippines, over 1,100 elected local officials were reportedly targeted in assassination attempts between 2006 and 2021, with vice-mayors and mayors more than 20 to 40 times more likely than average to suffer a violent death. It has been suggested that many of the assassinations were carried out by hired killers, with a large number of bullets fired at the victims.³⁵ In Brazil, 123 killings of local politicians occurred between 2018 and 2022, several with firearms, with information suggesting that several killings were perpetrated by political rivals and organized criminal groups.³⁶

18. In other cases, targeted attacks are perpetrated against individuals, notably journalists, due to their exercise of the right to freedom of expression. A free, uncensored and unhindered press or other media constitutes one of the cornerstones of a democratic society and is therefore intimately linked with the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs.³⁷ Investigative journalists reporting on organized crime and corruption have been victims of targeted killings and threats to life for their reporting, such as in Italy and Mexico.³⁸ With the surge of violence in Ecuador, the security situation of journalists has deteriorated, with killings and threats against journalists. This has reportedly led some journalists to flee the country, and the deteriorating security situation has also given rise to concerns of a dwindling interest among young people in pursuing a career in journalism.³⁹ Attacks against journalists have an impact not only on the rights of those immediately affected, but also on the rights of the wider public to receive information and ideas to inform their participation in public affairs.

19. Attacks targeting members of groups or communities, frequently perpetrated by firearms, can be or can be perceived to be attacks directed at every member of that group or community. They can therefore affect the enjoyment of rights by all members. In this regard, attacks directed at community leaders or individuals advocating for the rights of a community can have detrimental impacts also for the community as a whole. They not only can dissuade others from taking up such roles but can also lead to the silencing of groups that are already in vulnerable situations, maintaining or exacerbating their situation of vulnerability.

³¹ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, “Administering violence: an ACLED special project on violence targeting local officials”, 22 June 2023.

³² Rumbi Matamba and Chwayita Thobela, “The politics of murder: criminal governance and targeted killings in South Africa” (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, May 2024), pp. 7 ff.

³³ Kingsley Madueke and others, “Do not come out to vote: gangs, elections, political violence and criminality in Kano and Rivers, Nigeria” (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, October 2023).

³⁴ International Crisis Group, “Mexico’s forgotten mayors: the role of local government in fighting crime” (June 2023), p. 11.

³⁵ Peter Kreuzer, “Killing politicians in the Philippines: who, where, when, and why” (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2022), pp. 7 and 8.

³⁶ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, “Violence targeting local officials: Brazil”, 22 June 2023.

³⁷ Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 34 (2011), paras. 13 and 20; and Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and others, “Joint declaration on media freedom and democracy” (adopted on 2 May 2023), available at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/2/542676.pdf>.

³⁸ Reporters sans frontières international/Reporters without Borders International, “Journalists: the *bête noire* of organized crime” (2018).

³⁹ Luis Fernando Cascante, “Journalists in Ecuador face mounting insecurity”, International Journalists’ Network, 26 April 2024.

20. A key group targeted for political motives are human rights defenders,⁴⁰ and, according to reporting in recent years, striking numbers of land and environmental defenders have been killed. According to Global Witness, over 2,000 land and environmental defenders were killed globally between 2012 and 2023. In 2023, 196 land and environmental defenders were reportedly murdered, 85 per cent of them in Latin America. In that region, 43 per cent of human rights defenders killed in 2023 belonged to Indigenous communities.⁴¹ A survey from 2019–2022 concerning Brazil, for example, suggested that most human rights defenders killed were land and environmental defenders and that most human rights defenders killed were killed by firearms.⁴² Targeted attacks against leaders of Indigenous and other communities defending their lands exacerbate pre-existing risks to the enjoyment of cultural rights by communities whose culture is intrinsically linked to their access to and use of their ancestral lands.

21. Targeted attacks against members of communities are also perpetrated as part of ethnic conflicts. Inter-tribal conflicts in the Highlands Region of Papua New Guinea have long resulted in acts of violence. Authorities have noted that the increased levels of lethal violence witnessed in recent years, including the mass killing of dozens of people and the torching of homes in 2024, are the result of a variety of factors, such as the acquisition of illicit firearms and ammunition by tribal groups.⁴³ The escalation of violence in inter-tribal conflicts in the Highlands Region has resulted in the displacement of thousands of individuals.⁴⁴

22. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the settlement policy of Israel has given rise to violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinians,⁴⁵ enabled by the complicity, acquiescence and support or participation of Israeli security forces.⁴⁶ Acts of settler violence have increased since 7 October 2023,⁴⁷ with firearms frequently used in the perpetration of violence, including the killing of unarmed civilian Palestinians with impunity.⁴⁸ Settler violence also contributes to a coercive environment, leading to the displacement of Palestinians.⁴⁹ Settler violence constitutes an element in the violations of several norms of international law, including the right of the Palestinian people freely to determine its political status and to pursue its economic, social and cultural development.⁵⁰

23. Physical spaces are an important element in the exercise of the right to participate in cultural life and take part in the conduct of public affairs.⁵¹ Attacks in spaces where communities congregate can be and often are aimed at ensuring the victimization of as many members of the community as possible. Examples include public mass shootings. While such shootings have taken place elsewhere, they have disproportionately taken place in the United States. Several mass shootings have been motivated by hatred on the grounds of race, ethnicity, religion, political opinion, or sexual orientation and gender identity, such as the 2011 mass shooting targeting the youth wing of the Labour Party in Norway, killing 69 individuals; the 2012 mass shooting at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, United States, killing

⁴⁰ UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*, p. 121.

⁴¹ Global Witness, “Missing voices: the violent erasure of land and environmental defenders” (September 2024).

⁴² Terra de Direitos, “Survey points to 169 homicides against human rights defenders in the last four years, in Brazil”, 14 June 2023.

⁴³ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, “Q&A: the worsening trend of violence in Papua New Guinea”, 27 February 2024. See also <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/07/turk-horrified-killings-papua-new-guinea-urges-accountability>.

⁴⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross, “Tribal violence in Papua New Guinea”, 15 March 2022.

⁴⁵ International Court of Justice, *Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, Advisory Opinion*, 19 July 2024, para. 148.

⁴⁶ [A/79/347](#), para. 52.

⁴⁷ OHCHR, “The human rights situation in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem: 7 October–20 November 2023”, flash report (27 December 2023), para. 37.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., [A/79/347](#), paras. 50 and 56 ff.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 78.

⁵⁰ International Court of Justice, *Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, Advisory Opinion*, para. 242.

⁵¹ See, e.g., [A/74/255](#).

7 individuals; the 2015 Charleston church shooting in South Carolina, United States, killing 9 individuals; the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Florida, United States, targeting LGBTQ+ individuals, killing 49 and injuring 58; the 2019 shootings targeting Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, which killed 51 individuals; and the 2019 El Paso shooting in Texas, United States, targeting Hispanics and killing 23 individuals. Attacks that are perpetrated in such spaces can affect the enjoyment of rights beyond those of the persons directly victimized. They can contribute to producing a severe sense of insecurity among members of the community, affecting their feelings of safety when accessing cultural spaces.⁵²

C. High rates of firearms violence in society

24. The use of firearms also contributes to high rates of violence and insecurity in society, affecting the enjoyment of the rights to participate in cultural life and to take part in the conduct of public affairs. There is, for example, a correlation between high homicide rates and a high percentage of homicides committed with firearms, which may suggest that firearm homicides are a driver of overall homicides on an aggregate level.⁵³ In addition to killings, firearms are instrumental in the perpetration of other crimes.

25. Overall, the Americas have the highest homicide rates worldwide and the highest proportion of homicides perpetrated by firearms. Estimates suggest that, between 2015 and 2021, the numbers of organized crime-related homicides were comparable to the numbers of conflict-related deaths,⁵⁴ and they mostly occurred in Latin America and the Caribbean, perpetrated by drug trafficking cartels, mafia syndicates, violent gangs and militia groups.⁵⁵

26. While homicide rates in certain States in the region have been on a downward trend in recent years, they remain comparatively high, and the homicide rates in other States in the region have increased.⁵⁶ In Mexico, over 31,000 homicides were committed in 2023, representing a threefold increase in two decades, and 70 per cent were committed by firearms.⁵⁷ In Haiti, 5,601 killings were attributed to gang violence in 2024, including the massacre of at least 207 individuals, many of whom were older persons.⁵⁸ Violence exercised by gangs and organized criminals in the region is facilitated largely by access to firearms and fuelled by rivalry and competition for territory and illicit markets.⁵⁹

27. Violent gangs are predominantly concentrated in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in urban areas and in certain rural areas. In some contexts, violent gangs and organized criminal groups exercise a degree of control in parallel to State control,⁶⁰ and they occasionally have the capacity to displace control by law enforcement through violence. As noted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in areas under the control of these groups, a parallel power structure that lays down its own system of rules to keep a tight grip over the territory and the individuals living therein by means of threats and extortion has emerged.⁶¹

28. This informal system of rules reportedly governs important aspects of the lives of the residents and constrains the exercise of their rights, in addition to having an impact on their

⁵² See Christopher B. Stults and others, “Perceptions of safety among LGBTQ people following the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting”, *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, vol. 4, No. 3 (2017).

⁵³ UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*, p. 133.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁵⁵ UNODC, “Homicide and organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean” (2023), p. 3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–7.

⁵⁷ Contribution by Mexico.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/01/haiti-over-5600-killed-gang-violence-2024-un-figures-show>.

⁵⁹ UNODC, “Homicide and organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean”.

⁶⁰ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Violence, Children and Organized Crime* (2015), para. 334.

⁶¹ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Northern Central America: Organized Crime and the Rights of Children, Adolescents and Young People. Current Challenges and State Actions* (2023), para. 51.

right to personal integrity, and endangering their safety, should they not abide by the rules imposed by the gangs.⁶² Violent gangs often have loose leadership structures and unstable leadership, which can entail uncertainty for those living in areas under their influence. Disputes between or within factions of violent gangs or organized criminal groups result in increases in violence and risks of individuals being caught in the crossfire or mistaken for members of a rival gang. Crossing the borders between territories controlled by rival violent gangs can also pose risks for individuals, for example where they are suspected of having gang affiliations.⁶³ Such forms of control by violent gangs and organized criminal groups may impact the exercise of the rights to participate in cultural life and to take part in the conduct of public affairs in a variety of ways.

29. Those living in areas under such control may take measures to minimize risks of victimization, including through self-isolation and self-censorship.⁶⁴ They could limit their presence in public places associated with a heightened risk of victimization or refrain or be prevented from crossing into territory controlled by rival violent gangs or organized criminal groups. Children and young people are particularly affected, not only as the age groups most at risk of sustaining firearms injuries, but also because of the risks of recruitment by violent gangs or organized criminal groups or of sexual abuse. They may be secluded in the home, and parents may withhold children and young people from education.⁶⁵

30. High rates of firearms violence can also affect the enjoyment of the right to vote in genuine periodic elections. In the context of Mexico, quantitative studies have shown that higher levels of criminal violence result in lower voter turnout rates.⁶⁶ It has been theorized that, in municipalities with high homicide rates, fear of crime discourages citizens from leaving their homes and attending the polls. Criminal violence in general lowers voter turnout in Mexican municipalities, but especially when drug cartels target politicians during election campaigns, creating a threatening environment during elections.⁶⁷

31. In response to high rates of violent crime, civilians have formed self-defence groups to protect the rights of local communities, such as in several West African States and in Mexico, driving demand for firearms.⁶⁸ In Mexico, some self-defence groups formed to combat drug cartels have become involved in crimes against the population, including extortion and trafficking. Similar concerns have been raised with respect to self-defence groups established in several West African States, including concerns relating to extrajudicial killings and the fuelling of ethnic tensions.⁶⁹

32. There are several cases where attacks against communities have been so severe, or the rates of firearms violence and risks of victimization so high, as to lead to displacement of people. High rates of violent crime in Central America have, for example, led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of individuals,⁷⁰ and the rise in homicide rates in Ecuador in 2023 reportedly led several thousand individuals to migrate.⁷¹ In north-east Kenya, armed banditry and cattle rustling affecting pastoralist communities has contributed to ethnic tensions and a spiral of retaliatory attacks by some members of affected communities, with the displacement of others.⁷² In Nigeria, rates of violence, including by

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Chris van der Borgh, “Everyday security practices in gang-controlled neighborhoods in San Salvador”, *Conflict and Society: Advances in Research*, vol. 9, No. 1 (2023).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Alejandro Trelles and Miguel Carreras, “Bullets and votes: violence and electoral participation in Mexico”, *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, vol. 4, No. 2 (2012).

⁶⁷ Sandra Ley, “To vote or not to vote: how criminal violence shapes electoral participation”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 62, No. 9 (2017).

⁶⁸ Romain Le Cour Grandmaison and others, “Self-defence groups as a response to crime and conflict in West Africa: learning from international experiences” (Commission of the Economic Community of West African States, November 2023), pp. 2 ff.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 11–13.

⁷⁰ United Nations Children’s Fund, “Death threats and gang violence forcing more families to flee northern Central America – UNHCR and UNICEF survey”, press release, 17 December 2020.

⁷¹ Norwegian Refugee Council, “Ecuador: ongoing violence displacing thousands”, 9 January 2025.

⁷² Institute for Security Studies, “Northern Kenya’s disarmament dilemma”, 30 January 2024.

armed bandits, have contributed to the displacement of thousands of individuals.⁷³ Displacement exposes those affected to multiple vulnerabilities and can entail practical and legal impediments under domestic law to the enjoyment of the rights to vote and stand for election.⁷⁴ It can also impair the effective enjoyment of cultural life, as is the case with the displacement of Indigenous and other communities whose cultural life is closely tied to their lands.

D. Presence and use of firearms during protests

33. Civilian-held firearms in public places can also have a chilling effect on the exercise of rights. In the United States, laws permitting the so-called open carry of firearms, in some states without a licence, have an impact on the right to take indirect part in the conduct of public affairs. Protests in states that permit the open carry of firearms are reportedly more than five times as likely as those in states that do not permit the open carry of firearms to have an armed presence. From January 2020 to June 2021, militia groups and militant social movements were reportedly active in over 54 per cent of all armed demonstrations. A fatality was reported at approximately 1 in every 2,963 demonstrations where no firearm was identified, compared with about 1 in every 62 demonstrations where there was a firearm identified.⁷⁵ According to one study, participants were far less likely to attend a protest, carry a sign, vocalize their views or bring children to protests if they knew that firearms would be present.⁷⁶

V. Measures to address root causes and risk factors driving firearms-related violence

A. Root causes and risk factors driving firearms violence

34. Human rights law imposes obligations on States to protect people from the negative impacts of civilian use of firearms and to take measures to prevent the use of firearms in ways that negatively affect human rights. The root causes and risk factors driving the use of firearms that have a negative impact on the rights to participate in cultural life and to take part in the conduct of public affairs are diverse and context-dependent. At a general level, risk factors can be grouped according to a variety of characteristics, including individual, relational, community context and sociocultural characteristics. To understand the scope of these impacts on human rights and enhance the effectiveness of responses, it has been recommended in previous reports that States collect data and promote research to understand better the factors driving the availability of firearms and the dynamics of firearms-related violence and to inform evidence-based policies to address the human rights impacts of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms.⁷⁷

B. Protection

35. The obligation of States to protect individuals from harm by non-State actors means that States must undertake reasonable positive measures, which do not impose disproportionate burdens on them, in response to reasonably foreseeable threats to life originating from private persons and entities.⁷⁸ Special situations of vulnerability may entail additional obligations on States. The duty to protect the right to life requires States Parties to

⁷³ Kingsley L. Madueke and others, *Armed Bandits in Nigeria* (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime and Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, July 2024).

⁷⁴ A/HRC/50/24, paras. 25 ff.

⁷⁵ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project and Everytown for Gun Safety, “Armed assembly: guns, demonstrations, and political violence in America” (August 2021).

⁷⁶ Diana Palmer and Timothy Zick, “The Second Amendment has become a threat to the First”, *Atlantic*, 27 October 2021.

⁷⁷ A/HRC/53/49, para. 55 (a).

⁷⁸ Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 36 (2018), para. 21.

the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to take special measures of protection towards persons in situations of vulnerability whose lives have been placed at particular risk because of specific threats or pre-existing patterns of violence.⁷⁹

36. An important component of protection is ensuring effective law enforcement and security measures in response to high levels of firearms violence. Certain types of crime have a disproportionate impact on specific communities and populations and require States to take decisive steps to protect them. Nonetheless, concern has been expressed in several situations that such protection is lacking. For example, there have been reports of a lack of sufficient police forces in the Highlands Region of Papua New Guinea to effectively protect populations from tribal violence.⁸⁰ In several States, civilian self-defence groups have emerged in response to a lack of law enforcement to address high rates of violent crime, and they can, in turn, be responsible for human rights abuses.⁸¹ Enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies and ensuring their presence in areas that are particularly affected is therefore critical.

37. Individual protection measures can mitigate the risks faced by those who are particularly affected by threats to life. Examples include the adoption of protection measures for journalists facing threats from organized crime. However, in some contexts where politicians or human rights defenders are at risk of targeted killings, concerns have been raised about inadequate or ineffective implementation of protection measures. Thus, in Colombia, despite measures adopted to protect human rights defenders at risk, concerns remain with respect to their effectiveness.⁸²

38. Law enforcement and criminal justice measures must in all cases comply with international human rights law, including as regards the use of force, the prohibition against torture and ill-treatment, deprivation of liberty, and fair trial guarantees. For several years, El Salvador was one of the States globally with the highest homicide rates, largely due to violent gangs. Homicide rates in the country have since been reduced to their lowest since the beginning of the century.⁸³ However, concerns of serious violations of international human rights law persist with respect to the measures adopted to combat violence. These include mass arrests of over 70,000 individuals, including on the basis of discriminatory criteria, such as the socioeconomic status of the individual,⁸⁴ and legislative measures eroding legal guarantees against the arbitrary deprivation of liberty and relating to the right to a fair trial and juvenile justice.⁸⁵ In addition to reports of arbitrary detentions, concerns have been expressed with respect to extrajudicial executions, including of minors, allegedly committed by police officers and members of the armed forces, involving excessive use of force, lethal force, acts of torture and ill-treatment, and deaths in custody.⁸⁶

39. Some States have enacted states of emergency, suspending the enjoyment of human rights to combat high levels violence, in particular violence perpetrated by organized criminal groups and violent gangs. In Ecuador, violence perpetrated by organized criminal groups led to the declaration of a state of emergency on the basis of the existence of a non-international armed conflict, a measure that was later struck down by the Constitutional Court.⁸⁷ In its latest concluding observations concerning Ecuador, the Human Rights Committee expressed regret at recurrent recourse, since January 2024, to citing “internal armed conflict” as grounds for such declarations and the absence of measures to ensure compliance with Constitutional

⁷⁹ Ibid., para. 23.

⁸⁰ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, “Q&A: the worsening trend of violence in Papua New Guinea”.

⁸¹ Le Cour Grandmaison and others, “Self-defense groups as a response to crime and conflict in West Africa”, pp. 8 ff.

⁸² A/HRC/58/24, para. 34.

⁸³ UNODC, “Homicide and organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean”, p. 6.

⁸⁴ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *El Salvador: State of Emergency and Human Rights* (2024), paras. 14 and 147. See also CAT/C/SLV/CO/3 and CAT/C/SLV/CO/3/Corr.1, para. 10.

⁸⁵ See, e.g., Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *El Salvador*, paras. 120, 124 and 127.

⁸⁶ CAT/C/SLV/CO/3 and CAT/C/SLV/CO/3/Corr.1, para. 14.

⁸⁷ Executive Decree No. 111 of 9 January 2024. See Constitutional Court judgments 1-24-EE/24 of 29 February 2024, 2-24-EE/24 of 21 March 2024, 5-24-EE/24 of 9 May 2024, 6-24-EE/24 of 13 June 2024 and 7-24-EE/24 of 1 August 2024.

Court rulings on the matter. The Committee also expressed concern about reports indicating that some rights, including the rights to freedom of movement, freedom of association and freedom of assembly, had been significantly and disproportionately restricted, particularly affecting Indigenous persons, persons living in poverty, and migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.⁸⁸

40. As part of the duty to protect individuals, States must investigate, prosecute and punish certain acts of harm committed by non-State actors, including harm affecting the enjoyment of the right to life.⁸⁹ Impunity for those perpetrating or facilitating the perpetration of firearms violence has a negative impact on the rights of victims to effective remedies and exacerbates risks for future violence, affecting the enjoyment of human rights. UNODC has noted that, across Latin America and the Caribbean, homicidal violence correlates with structural risks, such as high levels of impunity.⁹⁰ Concerns have been raised that a culture of impunity can emerge whereby States refrain from ensuring accountability, for example for self-defence groups.⁹¹ With respect to addressing targeted killings of local politicians in South Africa, it has been recommended that enhanced resources be devoted to ensuring and that prosecutorial strategies be adopted to ensure accountability, not only for those perpetrating attacks, but also for those ordering them.⁹²

41. The obligation to adopt special measures of protection can apply also to government officials at risk, such as judges, prosecutors and other legal professionals responsible for investigating firearms violence, including organized crime and corruption.⁹³ In a 2022 judgment, for example, the High Court of South Africa noted evidence that public prosecutors who guide the investigation of organized crime and institute criminal proceedings against members of violent gangs and organized criminal groups were under a constant and permanent threat to their lives and that of their close family members. It further noted evidence that such actors were interfering with the decorum of the courts and the independence of judicial officers.⁹⁴

C. Prevention

42. States should adopt measures to prevent negative human rights impacts, including on the enjoyment of the rights to participate in cultural life and to take part in the conduct of public affairs. Preventive measures should be tailored to specific contexts and developed in consultation with affected communities, including victims and civil society.⁹⁵ The underlying factors driving firearm violence should be taken into account in the context of preventive measures.

43. It has been recommended in previous reports that the availability of firearms for civilians should be reduced.⁹⁶ This entails reducing the supply side of firearms availability, including through the regulation of the manufacture, distribution, marketing, sale and purchase of firearms.⁹⁷ States also have responsibilities to take measures to combat firearms diversion and trafficking, including through customs and criminal justice measures.⁹⁸ Given the transnational nature of firearms trafficking, international cooperation is essential, including through intelligence-sharing, tracing, border control, and judicial cooperation to

⁸⁸ [CCPR/C/ECU/CO/7](#), para. 9.

⁸⁹ Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 36 (2018), para. 27.

⁹⁰ UNODC, “Homicide and organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean”, p. 4.

⁹¹ Le Cour Grandmaison and others, “Self-defense groups as a response to crime and conflict in West Africa”, pp. 11–13.

⁹² Matamba and Thobela, “The politics of murder”, p. 23.

⁹³ [A/HRC/40/60/Add.2](#), para. 55; and [A/HRC/44/47/Add.2](#), para. 67.

⁹⁴ *Elcardo Adams and Alfonso Cloete v. the State*, Cases No. A135/2022 and No. CC47/2021, Judgment, 17 October 2022, para. 70.

⁹⁵ See OHCHR, “Guidelines for States on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs”; [A/HRC/49/41](#), para. 51; UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2019* (Vienna, 2019), p. 30; and [A/HRC/53/49](#), para. 55 (h).

⁹⁶ [A/HRC/49/41](#), para. 50; and [A/HRC/53/49](#), para. 55 (d).

⁹⁷ [A/HRC/53/49](#), para. 55.

⁹⁸ For examples of relevant instruments, see [A/HRC/58/41](#), footnote 25.

dismantle trafficking networks. The obligation to ensure accountability for human rights harms perpetrated by corporate actors has been highlighted in previous reports. In this regard, States should remove barriers to accountability, including for corporate actors facilitating firearms trafficking.⁹⁹

44. Importantly, prevention measures need to address the issues of poverty and marginalization. Those who are living in poverty and are marginalized are more likely to be victims of violent crime. At the same time, poverty, exclusion and limited opportunities for upward social mobility are significant factors motivating recruitment to violent gangs and organized criminal groups. According to research on recruitment to drug cartels in Mexico and on violent gangs in South Africa, poverty is a motivating factor for joining gangs.¹⁰⁰ Members of gangs in Sweden also often come from disadvantaged communities.¹⁰¹ With respect to one country situation, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has noted that poverty results in insecurity, and a lack of job opportunities makes young people an easy target for criminal gangs, as crime becomes a viable economic option.¹⁰²

45. Children and young people should be considered specifically in the context of prevention strategies.¹⁰³ Children and young people are disproportionately represented among the victims of firearms violence,¹⁰⁴ and, in many contexts, are at particular risk of recruitment to violent gangs or organized criminal groups.¹⁰⁵ With respect to northern Central America, concerns have been raised about the stigmatization of children and young people, in particular those in situations of socioeconomic deprivation, high rates of incarceration and a lack of adequate reintegration programmes.¹⁰⁶ UNODC has, for example, noted that preventive programmes aimed at promoting the social inclusion and desistance from gang involvement of vulnerable young people and adults can reduce gang violence in the long term.¹⁰⁷

46. Gender should also be considered in prevention measures. As highlighted in previous reports, male gender stereotypes serve as a contributing risk factor for firearms-related violence.¹⁰⁸ Men and boys are disproportionately represented both as perpetrators and as victims of firearms violence. Stereotyped notions of masculinity contribute to driving civilian firearms acquisition and can serve as a contributing motivating factor in involvement in crime. Under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, States Parties must take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices based on stereotyped roles for men and women.

47. Furthermore, unaddressed grievances, such as unaddressed land claims, need to be considered in the context of prevention measures. Many situations of violence may result from a lack of measures to give effective legal recognition to land and land use rights and sustainably address land disputes. In addition, the lack of legal recognition of land rights may exacerbate the risks faced by communities, such as Indigenous communities.

48. Lastly, prevention measures should seek to strengthen rule of law and governance institutions, in particular by taking measures to combat corruption, as corruption can sustain organized crime and facilitate firearms trafficking. For example, corruption in the military, law enforcement agencies and customs authorities may facilitate the diversion of firearms

⁹⁹ A/HRC/53/49, para. 55 (f).

¹⁰⁰ Piotr A. Chomczyński, Roger Guy and Elena Azaola, “Beyond money, power, and masculinity: toward an analytical perspective on recruitment to Mexican drug trafficking organizations”, *International Sociology*, vol. 38, No. 3.

¹⁰¹ Markus Kaakinen and others, “Street gang involvement among Nordic youth: a comparative study on prevalence and risk factors in Nordic countries” (Nordic Research Council for Criminology, 2024).

¹⁰² A/HRC/56/61/Add.2, para. 7.

¹⁰³ A/HRC/49/41, para. 51.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., para. 21; and UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁵ A/HRC/49/41, para. 15; contribution by Mexico; and A/HRC/56/56/Add.1, para. 46.

¹⁰⁶ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Northern Central America: Organized Crime and the Rights of Children, Adolescents and Young People*, paras. 177–186, 217 and 265.

¹⁰⁷ UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2019*, p. 66.

¹⁰⁸ A/HRC/49/41, para. 47; and A/HRC/53/49, paras. 19, 28 and 43.

and firearms trafficking.¹⁰⁹ Corruption may sustain organized criminal groups and contribute to impunity for violence committed by them. With respect to certain organized criminal groups exercising territorial control and influence, with their money and community standing, such groups can affect voting outcomes and wield considerable political clout.¹¹⁰

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

49. The human rights consequences of the civilian acquisition, possession and use of firearms are devastating, with the enjoyment of all human rights affected. The impacts on the enjoyment of the rights to participate in cultural life and to take part in public affairs are often severe. As a mechanism of violence, firearms enhance the lethal effects of targeted attacks and fuel high rates of societal violence, creating an environment of fear that discourages political participation and cultural expression. The effects of violence are disparate. High rates of firearms violence in society tend to affect those who are already most disadvantaged, and groups are targeted on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation or gender identity, affecting their enjoyment of the right to participate in cultural life, among other rights. Such attacks undermine social cohesion and can exacerbate discrimination and exclusion.

50. The High Commissioner for Human Rights reiterates the recommendations made in previous reports and, in addition, recommends that States take measures:

(a) To collect and record comprehensive disaggregated data on firearms violence to facilitate evidence-based and tailored measures to protect against and prevent firearms violence, including its impact on the rights to participate in cultural life and to take part in public affairs;

(b) To take measures to protect individuals from threats arising from firearms violence, in particular threats to the exercise of their rights to participate in cultural life and to take part in public affairs and threats that may have a wider chilling effect, including by:

(i) Adopting measures to effectively protect individuals and groups of individuals who face specific threats or pre-existing patterns of violence, such as human rights defenders, journalists and politicians, as well as public officials involved in combating violence and organized crime;

(ii) Allocating sufficient resources to law enforcement and taking measures to effectively investigate, prosecute and punish acts of violence perpetrated by firearms, including by ensuring accountability for direct perpetrators, as well as those ordering and facilitating acts of violence;

(iii) Ensuring compliance with international human rights law when combating firearms violence, including the limits placed on permissible derogations from human rights treaties, as well as standards applicable to the use of force, deprivation of liberty, conditions of detention and fair trial guarantees;

(c) To prevent firearms violence, in particular where there is a risk of an adverse impact on the rights to participate in cultural life and to take part in public affairs, including by:

(i) Developing and implementing firearms violence policy responses, and ensuring that such responses are tailored to each particular context, benefiting from the participation of affected stakeholders, such as victims, civil society and local communities;

¹⁰⁹ Transparency International, “Dangerously diluted: corruption’s role in fueling arms diversion” (25 June 2024).

¹¹⁰ UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment* (2012), p. 22.

- (ii) Taking measures to address inequality and discrimination, including social protection and educational measures, as appropriate, and addressing risk factors for violence, in particular grievances, such as disputes over land and land use rights, as well as unresolved historical injustices;
 - (iii) Developing and implementing community-based interventions, such as violence interruption programmes, and local peace or mediation initiatives aimed at reducing firearms-related violence;
 - (iv) Taking measures to address cultural conceptions of masculinity contributing to firearms violence, including through the promotion of educational and other programmes;
 - (v) Strengthening the rule of law, particularly by redoubling measures to combat corruption in the law enforcement, justice and local government sectors.
-