

## An international agenda on organized armed violence?

A central argument of this volume is that the scale of organized armed violence in large urban areas frequently exceeds that of all but the most devastating of current wars. Research on contemporary armed conflicts frequently uses the threshold of 1,000, 100 or even 25 "battle-deaths" annually to define a civil war<sup>158</sup> — a comparatively low number compared with the scale of urban armed violence in numerous cities discussed in previous chapters of this volume. Evidence from Colombia, a country experiencing an intense civil war, suggests that more people are dying from armed violence in urban areas than from the conflict between rebel groups and government forces.

Much has been done, particularly in the past 15 years, to adapt the international laws and institutions originally designed to respond to the challenges of wars *between* states to address the challenges posed by a different kind of conflict — civil wars *within* states. The evidence is mounting, however, to suggest that the changing nature of organized armed violence may be more radical than many had imagined. Traditional definitions of war and armed conflict may be obscuring a crisis of armed violence within contemporary cities.

Take, for example, a central theme that has run through this volume — the violent threats facing children in urban environments — and compare the international responses to this set of challenges with those devoted to the challenges facing child soldiers in armed conflicts.

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In 1996, Graça Machel's groundbreaking report on the impact of armed conflict on children was released, noting that there were approximately 300,000 child soldiers worldwide. Since that time, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict has been negotiated, raising

the minimum age of soldiers; the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court has defined the conscription, enlistment, or use in hostilities of children under the age of 15 as a war crime; the UN Secretary-General has created a Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict; 180 countries endorsed a global action plan entitled *A World Fit for Children* at the UN Special Session on Children; and the UN Security Council has adopted seven thematic resolutions devoted to children and armed conflict. Agencies and NGOs in the field have responded by ensuring child protection is included in peacekeeping mandates, targeting DDR programs to children (including specific emphasis on girls), and monitoring and reporting on persistent violators as listed by the Secretary-General in his annual list of armed groups who recruit and/or use children.

Children fighting in urban gangs experience violence comparable to that faced by child soldiers. This is particularly true when children in urban gangs are given military-grade weapons and put on the frontlines of armed combat against enemy gangs or state security forces. Beyond the direct violence they face, there are other important similarities: aggressive recruitment strategies, the widespread use of drugs, the prevalence of sexual violence, social