

# National Report on Violence and Health in Sri Lanka



World Health  
Organization

COUNTRY OFFICE FOR  
Sri Lanka



Ministry of Healthcare  
and Nutrition

prevention

# **National Report on Violence and Health in Sri Lanka**

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## **9. Fatal violence - homicides**

### **9.1 Introduction**

The mortality resulting from violence can be classified as homicides and suicides. Though a reliable database related to other forms of violence is not readily available, the data on fatal violence is usually available and fairly accurate.

Homicides may be categorized under all forms of violence such as youth violence, intimate partner violence, collective violence, child abuse and elderly abuse. As in all other forms of violence, homicides are not restricted to any geographical area, race, age or any educational or income group.

Sri Lanka at present is in the midst of an ethnic problem. The homicide rate under a war situation is obviously higher than at normal times. The police records on homicides are classified into two groups. Those homicides that are classified under routine reportable crimes belong to the first group. The second group is the homicides related to terrorist activities. However, it was observed that the police do not routinely maintain the records of deaths of the members of militant groups due to violence. The police classification is important in the sense that homicides due to terrorist activities cease to exist with the establishment of long-lasting peace in the island. The aetiology of homicides under reportable crimes is different and more concerted efforts are needed to reduce such homicides.

### **9.2 Extent of the problem**

#### Global situation

According to the World Report on Violence and Health (1), death rates due to violence vary according to country income levels. In 2000, the rate of violent deaths in low-to middle-income countries was 32.1 per 100 000 population. The rate for high-income countries was around 14.4 per 100 000 population.

There are also considerable regional differences in the rates of violent deaths. These differences are evident, for example, in the WHO regions. In the African Region and American Regions, homicide rates are nearly three times greater than suicide rates, whereas in the Europe and South-East Asia Regions, suicide rates are only little more than double the homicide rates (19.1 per 100 000 as against 8.4 per 100 000 for the European Region; 12.0 per 100 000 as against 5.8 per 100 000 for the South-East Asia Region), and in the Western Pacific Region, suicide rates are nearly six times greater than homicide rates (20.8 per 100 000 as against 3.4 per 100 000).

Within regions there are also large differences between countries. For example, in 1994 the homicide rate among males in Colombia was reported to be 146.5 per 100 000 while the corresponding rates in Cuba and Mexico were 12.6 and 32.3 per 100 000 respectively. Large differences within countries also exist between urban and rural populations, between rich and poor groups, and between different racial and ethnic groups.

With regard to youth, the World Report on Violence and Health indicates that in 2000, an estimated 199 000 youth homicides (9.2 per 100 000) occurred globally. In other words, an average of 565 children, adolescents and young adults between the ages of 10 and 29 years die each day as a result of interpersonal violence.

Almost everywhere, youth homicide rates are substantially lower among females than among males, suggesting that being a male is a strong demographic risk factor. The ratio of the male youth homicide rate to the female rate tends to be higher in those countries with high homicide rates. For example, the ratio is 13.1:1 in Colombia, 14.6:1 in El Salvador, 16.0:1 in the Philippines and 16.5:1 in Venezuela. Where homicide rates are lower, the ratio is usually lower – such as in Hungary (0.9:1), the Netherlands and the Republic of Korea (1.6:1).

According to the World Report, intimate partner violence accounts for a significant number of deaths by murder among women. Studies from Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the United States of America show that 40-70% of female murder victims were killed by their husbands or boyfriends, frequently in the context of an ongoing abusive relationship. This contrasts starkly with the situation of male murder victims. In the United States, for example, only 4% of men murdered between 1976 and 1996 were killed by their wives, ex-wives or girlfriends.

### Sri Lankan situation

Sri Lanka is a country with high suicide rates (25-30 per 100 000 population). The Health Master Plan (2) published by the Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka with the assistance of the JICA organization in 2003 identified homicide as the second cause for death in Sri Lanka (72-122 per 100 000 population), behind only diseases of the cardiovascular system. However, a recent study (3) indicated that the above finding is inaccurate and the actual figure is around 30 per 100 000 population. This figure includes homicides related to the war situation as well. When one considers only the homicides classified as reportable crimes (Police Department Data), the homicide rate would be around 9 per 100 000 population in 2000. However, there are some disparities between the Registrar General's data (4) and the Police records (5) which have been discussed under data sources and limitations (Chapter 2).

According to the above study (3), the highest homicide rate, based on the routine reportable crimes within the past few years was observed in 1998 (10.7 per 100 000) and the lowest observed in 2003 (6.8 per 100 000). When routine reportable crimes and war casualties are taken together, the highest homicide rate was observed in 1998 (31.2 per 100 000) and the lowest was in the year 2003 after the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement in April 2002 (6.8 per 100 000 population). Even this lower value recorded in 2003 is much higher than the reported homicide rate in the South-East Asia Region (5.8 per 100 000) (Table 9.1).

**Table 9.1:** Homicide rates based on routine data and rates for war-related homicides, 1991–2004

Year	Total population ('000)	Routine reportable homicides		War-related homicides		Total homicides	
		No.	Rate per 100 000 population	No.	Rate per 100 000 population	No.	Rate per 100 000 population
1991	17,583	1556	8.8	3244	18.4	4800	27.3
1992	17,583	1294	7.4	2521	14.3	3815	21.7
1993	17,583	1286	7.3	1516	8.6	2802	15.9
1994	17,583	1245	7.1	1920	10.9	3165	18.0
1995	17,583	1297	7.4	2190	12.4	3487	19.8
1996	17,615	1775	10.1	3059	17.4	4814	27.4
1997	17,833	1637	9.2	3850	21.6	5495	30.9
1998	18,047	1919	10.7	3601	20.0	5520	31.2
1999	18,262	1797	9.8	2712	14.8	4509	24.6
2000	18,489	1711	9.2	3948	21.3	5659	30.6
2001	18,732	1576	8.4	1541	8.2	3117	16.7
2002	19,007	1347	7.1	64	0.3	1411	7.4
2003	19,252	1310	6.8	-	-	1310	6.8
2004	19,462	1377	7.1	105	0.5	1482	7.6

Source: Based on Police Reports on reported crimes and various newspaper reports

**Age and sex distribution of homicide victims:** The figures for 1992 and 1995 are compared in Table 9.2. In both years, about 20% of victims were in the 20–24 age group. However in the general population, only about 9% of people fall into this age group. This indicates that young adults are more susceptible to homicide. In both years, just over 80% of victims were males.

**Table 9.2:** Distribution of homicide victims by age and sex in 1992 and 1995

Age groups	1992				1995			
	Male	Female	Total	%	Male	Female	Total	%
< 1 yr	8	3	11	0.4	1	2	3	0.1
1-4 yrs	34	33	67	2.7	12	13	25	1.1
5-9 yrs	26	27	53	2.1	21	14	35	1.6
10-14 yrs	75	33	108	4.3	41	28	69	3.1
15-19 yrs	275	52	327	12.9	205	77	282	12.7
20-24 yrs	464	63	527	20.8	377	75	452	20.4
25-29 yrs	335	45	380	15.0	302	45	347	15.7
30-34 yrs	184	33	217	8.6	193	16	209	9.4
35-39 yrs	176	31	207	8.2	181	23	204	9.2
40-44 yrs	135	15	150	5.9	104	25	129	5.8
45-49 yrs	119	27	146	5.8	100	22	122	5.5
50-54 yrs	61	15	76	3.0	74	14	88	4.0
55-59 yrs	67	9	76	3.0	54	15	69	3.1
60-64 yrs	43	16	59	2.3	39	9	48	2.2
65-69 yrs	35	14	49	1.9	41	14	55	2.5
70-74 yrs	21	10	31	1.2	25	12	37	1.7
>75 yrs	40	5	45	1.8	28	12	40	1.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>2098</b>	<b>431</b>	<b>2529</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1798</b>	<b>416</b>	<b>2214</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Registrar General's Department (4)

**Table 9.3:** Distribution of homicide victims by sex, 1992–1995

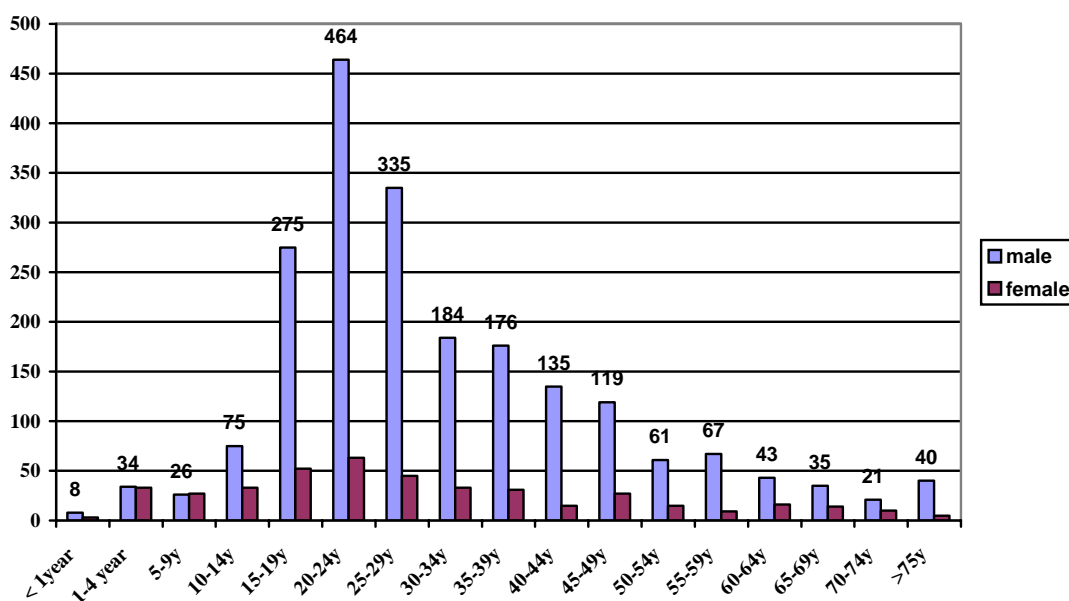
Year	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1992	2098	83.0	431	17.0	2529	100
1993	1681	83.8	324	16.2	2005	100
1994	1449	85.8	240	14.2	1689	100
1995	1798	81.2	416	18.8	2214	100
<b>Total (1992 – 1995)</b>	<b>7026</b>	<b>83.3</b>	<b>1411</b>	<b>16.7</b>	<b>8437</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Registrar General's Department (4)

**Table 9.4:** Distribution of youth (10–29 years) homicide victims by sex

Year	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1992	1149	85.6	193	14.4	1342	100
1993	884	84.2	166	15.8	1050	100
1994	725	86.3	115	13.7	840	100
1995	925	80.4	225	19.6	1150	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>3683</b>	<b>84.0</b>	<b>699</b>	<b>16.0</b>	<b>4382</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Registrar General's Department (4)

**Figure 9.1:** Distribution of homicide victims by age and sex in 1992

This report uses the World Health Report definition of youth as persons between the ages of 10 and 29 for the purpose of analyzing the youth victims of homicide. 84% of youth homicide victims are males. The youth homicides comprised of 51.9% of the total reported homicides by the Registrar General's Department. This is much higher than the expected share of youth homicides. It is only 37.4% of the total population belonging to the age group 10-29 years. Using these figures, the youth homicide rate for 2000 could be calculated as 42.6 per 100 000 population.

The calculated youth homicide rate for males is 70.5 per 100 000 population and for females is 13.4 per 100 000 population. If one considers only the homicides reported

routinely under the reportable crimes (i.e. excluding war deaths), the estimated youth homicide rate is 12.9 per 100 000 population. The youth homicide rate for males is calculated as 21.3 per 100 000 population and for females 4.1 per 100 000 population (excluding war deaths).

**Table 9.5:** Distribution of homicides classified under reportable crimes by place of occurrence 2000–2002

Place of occurrence (Province)	2000		2001		2002	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Western Province	394	23.0	370	23.5	443	32.9
Southern Province	243	14.2	194	12.3	234	17.4
Central Province	101	5.9	114	7.2	111	8.2
North Western Province	174	10.2	168	10.7	149	11.1
North Central Province	129	7.5	143	9.1	77	5.7
Sabaragamuwa Province	144	8.4	122	7.7	119	8.8
Uva Province	98	5.7	79	5.0	77	5.7
Northern Province	138	8.1	135	8.6	59	4.4
Eastern Province	290	16.9	251	15.9	78	5.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>1711</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1576</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1347</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Police Department

About one fourth of the homicides classified as reportable crimes occurred in the Western Province, where the capital city of Colombo is situated (Table 9.5).

**Table 9.6:** Homicide rates (excluding war-related homicides) by provinces, 2001

Province	No. of homicides under reportable crimes	Total population	Homicide rate per 100 000 population
Western Province	370	5,361,000	6.9
Southern Province	194	2,277,000	8.5
Central Province	114	2,415,000	4.7
North Western Province	168	2,157,000	7.8
North Central Province	143	1,106,000	12.9
Sabaragamuwa Province	122	1,788,000	6.9
Uva Province	79	1,171,000	6.8
Northern Province	135	1,042,000	13.0
Eastern Province	251	1,415,000	17.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>1576</b>	<b>18,732,000</b>	<b>8.4</b>

Source: Police Department

In 2001, a homicide rate of 17.7 per 100 000 population was observed in the Eastern Province. The second highest homicide rate was registered in the Northern Province and the third was in the North Central Province. The lowest death rate 4.7 per 100 000 population was observed in the Central Province. Though the majority of homicidal deaths have taken place in the Western Province, the province's homicide rate is less than the national rate.

**Weapons used for homicides:** The Police records classify the weapons used for homicides in a different way than what is described in the ICD classification. However, since this is the only data available related to weapons it has been included in this report. Pointed knives and other cutting weapons are most commonly used for homicides. Use of automatic weapons such as the T-56 was also commonly seen to a certain extent from 1998 to 2000. It is likely that the present or ex-cadres of militant groups or army deserters have been involved with such killings.

**Table 9.7:** Weapons used for homicides, 1998–2002

Weapon	1998		1999		2000		2001		2002	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Pointed knife	389	20.3	330	19.1	308	18	222	14.0	310	23.0
Other cutting weapons	391	20.4	375	21.8	337	19	236	14.9	275	20.4
Club	215	11.2	177	10.2	211	12.3	125	7.9	170	12.6
Other blunt instruments	124	6.5	110	6.3	113	6.6	91	5.7	115	8.5
Shot gun	65	3.9	71	4.1	69	4.0	87	5.5	73	5.4
Rifle	14	0.7	21	1.2	8	0.5	112	7.1	16	1.1
Pistol	67	3.4	82	4.7	78	4.5	93	5.9	58	4.3
Trap gun	8	0.4	6	0.3	10	0.6	87	5.5	-	-
Automatic weapons	368	19.1	265	15.4	307	17.9	114	7.2	76	5.7
Explosives	107	5.5	77	4.4	96	5.6	118	7.2	35	2.5
Personal weapons	67	3.4	172	9.9	68	3.9	112	7.1	107	7.9
Corrosive substance	34	1.7	25	1.4	30	1.7	95	6.0	35	2.6
Others	70	3.6	90	5.2	76	4.4	84	5.3	77	5.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>1919</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1724</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1711</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1576</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1347</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Administrative Reports, Inspector General of Police (5)

**Relationship between victims and perpetrators:** According to the study described earlier (3), in most instances there was no relationship between the victim and the suspect. The spouse had been the perpetrator in between 5% and 12.9% of homicides which occurred during the period analyzed.

**Motive for killing:** The commonest motive for killing is previous enmity. Other common ones include sudden provocation, land disputes and other disputes in the family. Killings due to communal reasons have come down since 2000 (3).

**Occupation of victims and perpetrators:** Almost all categories of employees including professionals are found among the victims as well as among the perpetrators of homicides. The proportion of unemployed is higher among the perpetrators than homicide victims (3).

**Child homicides:** According to the unpublished data available at the Statistics Division of the Police Department, out of the child homicides (i.e. victims aged below 18 years) more than half the victims were aged below 6 years (6). This is a very unfortunate situation as these children are helpless in such actions of the adults. Unlike in adult homicides, 70% of perpetrators of child homicides are blood / other relations (3).



**Table 9.8:** Distribution of child victims of homicides by age in 2004

Age group	Number	Percentage
0–5	25	53.19
6–11	5	10.63
12–17	17	36.17
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Police Statistics Division (6)

More than 75% of child homicides were committed during the daytime. Nearly 60% of killings occurred in isolated places. However, about 25% of homicides took place in the home of the perpetrator (3).

More than 60% of perpetrators of child homicides are males. But the percentage of females involved with killing of children is also unexpectedly high. Nearly 75% of perpetrators of child homicides were below the age of 40 years (3).

**Table 9.9:** Distribution of child victims of homicides by sex in 2004

Sex	Number	Percentage
Males	28	59.57
Females	19	40.43
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Police Statistics Division (6)

### 9.3 Factors associated with homicide

#### Individual factors

1. Sex: Males are more susceptible for homicides than females.
2. Age: Youth are more susceptible than the other age groups. People of 20–24 years have a particularly high mortality due to homicides.
3. Certain personalities such as those who habitually involve themselves with arguments with others are more prone. Previous enmity and sudden provocation have been identified as common motives for killing.
4. Family disputes and land disputes are major causes. Those who face such disputes are more vulnerable.
5. Inadequate financial resources for individual survival/unemployment can encourage a person to engage in illegal activities.

#### Community factors

1. The very competitive nature of society and the rat-race people are involved in has pushed them into a money-motivated social order, subjugating the positive values. Erosion of the values of life has created a murderous mindset among some sections of the people.
2. High incidence of poverty.
3. High rate of youth unemployment.
4. War situation in North and East of Sri Lanka and communal clashes.
5. Deserters of the militant groups and state armed forces. Large numbers have left the army without following proper procedures and they are in hiding. Some of them have even kept their firearms, grenades and other hi-tech weaponry important for the armed forces.
6. Presence of underworld operatives and gangsterism.

7. The drug menace plagues society, and drug users also involve themselves in violence including killing people in search of money. In addition, drug traffickers resort to violence in establishing their business and creating a monopoly.
8. Easy access to sophisticated firearms and weaponry.
9. Absence of stringent penalties for offenders.

#### **9.4 Interventions**

Homicides could be prevented by taking action to reduce domestic violence, youth violence, child abuse and elder abuse in the society. These have been discussed in the relevant chapters.

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