

REDUCING ALL VIOLENT DEATHS, EVERYWHERE: WHY THE DATA MUST IMPROVE

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The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include a target to “Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related deaths everywhere.” Given the vast decline in violence since the Middle Ages, particularly since the end of the Cold War, this ambitious target is achievable. But policymakers know the least about the countries receiving the most aid. To ensure that aid and policy are effective, current data gaps and deficiencies must be fully understood and improved. Equally important, the target must include indicators that capture all the main types of violence, not just homicide.

The Data Problem

- **Current statistics are marred by problems that make them incomparable across countries.** Policymaking that ignores flawed data may focus on less effective goals or assume programs are working when, in fact, violence is being hidden through statistical manipulation.
 - **Policymakers know the least about the countries receiving the most aid.** Among the top ten British aid recipients, four have reported no homicide statistics or have had only one data point in twenty-seven years.
 - **Failure to accurately count different types of violence obscures possible relationships among them.** For instance, these include connections between the end of civil war and rising homicide, between state brutality and increased insurgency, and possible connections between state repression and homicide.
- Eight of the top ten U.S. aid recipients have no reported homicide statistics for the past four years. Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan have no reported homicide statistics since the Arab Awakening.

The Way Forward

- A global violence dataset that accounts for “all violent deaths everywhere” should include four disaggregated types of data: homicides, deaths among armed groups in conflict, deaths of unarmed civilians perpetrated by state or nonstate actors, and deaths caused by on-duty government security forces.
- The international community needs accurate data across these categories to know which programs and policies actually reduce violence, rather than simply alter the form violence takes.
- If the international community does not explicitly include state repression and terrorist killings in the SDG 16.1 target, it opens a loophole to politicizing numbers through reclassification and the use of state violence to try to reduce homicide and rebellion.
- International actors should press for a comprehensive set of indicators for SDG 16.1, which currently only include homicides.
- Data reporting and collection could be improved by investing in independent observatories, standardization of definitions and methodologies, and other crucial steps.
- These decisions are not technical, but political. Statistical manipulation is inevitable and occurs in countries from the United States to Russia. Impartial, trained, and internationally funded violence observatories can assist in gaining accurate statistics so resources can target the most effective places and programs.

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