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Framing gun violence at the United Nations: a missed public health opportunity

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Introduction

The framing of gun violence at the United Nations (UN) is predominantly shaped by discourses on disarmament, security, and human rights protection. While these approaches have been instrumental in addressing the illicit arms trade and armed conflict, they have failed to adequately capture the broader public health consequences of firearms.

This narrow framing has meant that the health-related impacts of gun violence—such as trauma, injury, long-term rehabilitation, and the strain on healthcare systems—are notably absent from key UN resolutions, reports, and policy frameworks. Despite overwhelming evidence of the health-related burden of firearms, particularly in regions not directly affected by armed conflict, the United Nations has largely overlooked gun violence as a public health crisis.

The absence of a health-oriented approach to gun violence is not merely a conceptual oversight. It reflects deeper power dynamics within the UN, most notably the influence of the United States. As a country with deeply entrenched gun rights and powerful firearms lobbies, the U.S. has consistently resisted global attempts to regulate civilian firearm ownership. Its veto power in the UN Security Council (UNSC) and its diplomatic clout in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) have prevented the UN from framing gun violence as a health crisis.

This essay draws on the research of Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) to examine how the UN's framing of gun violence has been shaped by political and institutional factors. AOAV's analysis of UNSC resolutions and its broader work on explosive weapons and firearm-related harm offer critical insights into the nature of this framing.

By analysing the role of the UNSC, UNGA, Human Rights Council (UNHRC), and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), this paper illustrates how global norms on firearm regulation have been constrained. The essay concludes by calling for the integration of a public health lens into UN policies and offers recommendations for civil society and international advocates working to change this narrative.

The Global Burden of Gun Violence

The global impact of gun violence is staggering, affecting not only conflict zones but also communities in peaceful states. According to the Small Arms Survey, there are over one billion firearms in global circulation, with 857 million (85%) in civilian hands, 133 million (13%) held by militaries, and 23 million (2%) controlled by law enforcement agencies^[1]. This sheer scale of firearm circulation underscores the inadequacy of a security-based approach. While much of the UN's discourse on small arms has focused on conflict-affected states, the majority of gun-related deaths occur in non-conflict settings^[2].

Data from the United Nations

Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reveals that of the 458,000 homicides recorded in 2021, nearly half (47%) were caused by firearms^[3]. Research from AOAV has shown that, in 2021 alone, firearms were responsible for the deaths of an estimated 233,260 people. This figure combines fatalities from intentional homicides (183,000) and suicides but does not include accidental firearm discharges and violent firearm deaths in armed conflict^[4]. If these were to be included; around 250,000 annual firearm deaths is a reasonable estimate^[5].

But these figures understate the broader burden of gun violence.

As AOAV's research has consistently highlighted, deaths are just one part of the problem. For every person killed by a gun, there are many more survivors left with life-changing injuries. The International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) estimates that for every firearm-related death, three people suffer serious, long-term injuries.

AOAV's research also emphasises the lasting socio-economic effects of firearm-related injuries. Survivors often require long-term medical care, rehabilitation, and psychological support. Entire families are affected, as the cost of medical treatment can plunge them into financial hardship. Healthcare systems, especially in low- and middle-income countries, are overburdened by the need to treat gunshot victims, diverting resources from other critical areas of health provision.

AOAV's work on the impact of explosive weapons highlights a similar trend, where the strain on emergency trauma centres becomes a significant obstacle to healthcare provision during crises. These health-related consequences of gun violence are severe and far-reaching, yet the United Nations continues to approach firearms as a matter of disarmament rather than health.

The Role of the UN Security Council (UNSC)

The UN Security Council (UNSC) is one of the most influential bodies in shaping global policy on small arms and light weapons (SALW). However, its mandate to maintain international peace and security has meant that it primarily focuses on the role of firearms in conflict. Since 2002, the UNSC has produced biannual reports on SALW, with an emphasis on the "illicit transfer, destabilising accumulation, and misuse" of firearms in conflict zones.

AOAV's analysis of 214 UNSC resolutions referencing small arms reveals that 87% of these resolutions focus on states experiencing or recovering from armed conflict. Resolutions concerning countries like Sudan and South Sudan alone account for over 20% of these references.

The UNSC's conflict-centred focus overlooks the fact that most firearm-related deaths occur in non-conflict settings. Despite this, the UNSC's framing remains focused on disarmament, arms embargoes, and the role of firearms in facilitating terrorism and insurgency.

This narrow focus on conflict is, in part, a reflection of the political power dynamics within the UNSC. As a permanent member with veto power, the United States is unlikely to support resolutions that address civilian firearm ownership or its public health implications.

While the UNSC's emphasis on disarmament has contributed to landmark agreements such as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), its inability to discuss gun violence in public health terms reflects the broader agenda-setting power of its key members.

The Security Council has the authority to compel states to address health crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—but it has shown no appetite for framing firearms as a health issue. The health-related costs of firearms—such as trauma, rehabilitation, and emergency healthcare—are excluded from the discourse. This is a missed opportunity, as AOAV's research on explosive weapons highlights how civilian harm tracking can lead to more effective humanitarian responses.

The Role of the UN General Assembly (UNGA)

While the Security Council is constrained by the veto power of its permanent members, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) operates on a more democratic basis. The UNGA has played a crucial role in spearheading initiatives on firearms, most notably through the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons (PoA). The PoA provides a non-binding but widely adopted framework for tackling the illicit trade of firearms. It is supported by the International Tracing Instrument (ITI), which helps states track the flow of firearms.

Although the PoA and ITI address the international arms trade, they do not cover issues related to legal civilian ownership of firearms—a glaring omission given the fact that most firearms are owned by civilians. AOAV's research has shown that much of the harm from firearms comes from legally owned guns used in suicides, domestic violence, and accidental discharges. Despite this, the United States played a significant role in blocking any reference to civilian firearm ownership during negotiations on the PoA. AOAV notes that U.S. officials actively resisted the inclusion of health-oriented language in these resolutions, thereby excluding a critical dimension of the debate.

The same pattern is observed in the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), where U.S. objections to discussions on legal firearm transfers were central to shaping the final text. While the ATT recognises the role of firearms in human rights violations, it does not frame firearm-related violence as a health issue. This has limited the UNGA's ability to address the health consequences of gun violence and has created a regulatory gap in global firearms governance.

The Role of the Human Rights Council (UNHRC)

Of all the UN bodies, the Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has been the most vocal in addressing the non-conflict-related impacts of firearms. AOAV has noted the critical role of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Small Arms, Barbara Frey, in laying the groundwork for future discourse on firearms. Frey's reports between 2001 and 2006 focused on how firearms affected civil and political rights. Her work directly highlighted the health burden of firearms, citing injuries, trauma, and the long-term impact of firearm-related disability on families and communities.

The UNHRC has since continued to push for a human rights-based approach to gun violence. In 2019, it released reports on the impact of firearms on the rights of women, children, and other vulnerable groups. AOAV has praised these reports for advancing the argument that firearm violence undermines rights to education, healthcare, and security. However, the UNHRC's framing still stops short of explicitly calling gun violence a "public health crisis," a term that would more firmly align it with the language used by health organisations like the WHO.

Conclusion

Gun violence is a public health crisis, yet the United Nations continues to frame it through the lenses of disarmament, security, and human rights. AOAV's research underscores the profound burden that firearms place on health systems, survivors, and communities. The influence of the United States at the UNSC and UNGA has hindered progress on recognising firearms as a health issue.

AOAV has demonstrated that by focusing on civilian harm, the UN can improve its response to global firearm violence. Incorporating public health principles into the UN's strategy on firearms would not only reduce deaths but also alleviate pressure on health systems, support survivors, and improve human development outcomes. It is now imperative that civil society, public health advocates, and UN member states push for a shift in the discourse. Without it, the world will continue to suffer the devastating health consequences of gun violence.

[1] <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/database/global-firearms-holdings>

[2] <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gun-deaths-by-country>

[3] global-study-on-homicide.html

^[4] The data on Suicides is sourced from World Health Organisation (WHO) <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/number-of-deaths-from-suicide-ghe?tab=chart>

^[5] The estimate corresponds with similar research conducted by the Global Burden of Disease Study for 2016. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2698492>

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