

# COSTA RICA

## Analysis of intentional homicide

### January-December 2023

#### Overview

- In 2023, some 906 intentional homicides were recorded. This is equal to a rate of 17.2 intentional homicides per 100,000 population.
- Of the total number of victims, 830 were male (222 more than during the same period in 2022) and 71 were female (24 more compared to the same period in 2022).<sup>i</sup>
- In all, there were 250 more homicide victims compared to 2022.
- On average, three people died in a homicide every day in 2023 in Costa Rica.
- The month with the highest record of homicides was August, with 90 deaths. Records show an average of 76 victims of homicide per month (21 more people per month compared to 2022).
- Six in 10 victims were between 20 and 39 years of age.
- As for victim nationality, eight in 10 were Costa Rican nationals.
- In terms of means or weapon, firearms were used in eight out of 10 intentional homicides, sharp weapons in one out of 10, and other methods in one out of 10.
- Seven in 10 victims were linked to drug-trafficking or to organized crime.<sup>ii</sup>
- San Jose and Limon have the highest rates of occurrence, with half of all incidents happening there.
- Four out of 10 deaths occurred in the cantons of Limon, San Jose, Puntarenas, Matina and Alajuela.

#### Evidence

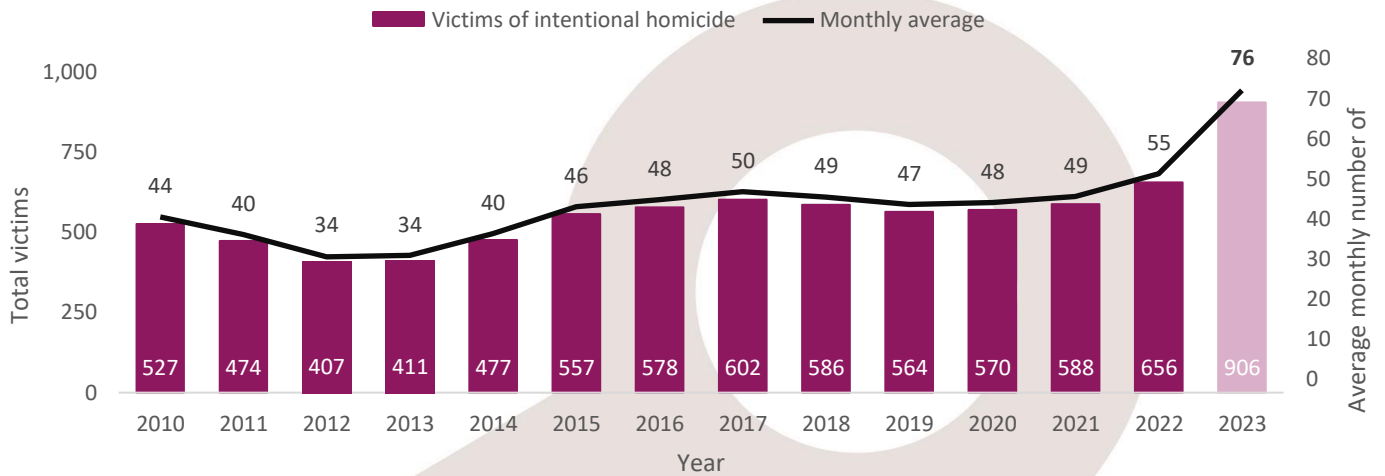
##### I. Introduction

The annual figures for intentional homicide in Costa Rica for the period 2010-2023 start trending upward in 2020. Two important issues stand out. First, intentional homicides doubled in Costa Rica over the last 10 years (2013-2023). Second, 2023 saw the highest number of victims ever recorded in the country.

##### Temporality in intentional homicide in Costa Rica

In 2023, records show 906 intentional homicide victims, that is 250 more fatalities (+38%) than in 2022. Figures in 2023 rose to a record high of 76 deaths per month. That means 21 more people died per month compared to 2022, when the average was 55 deaths per month (graph 1).

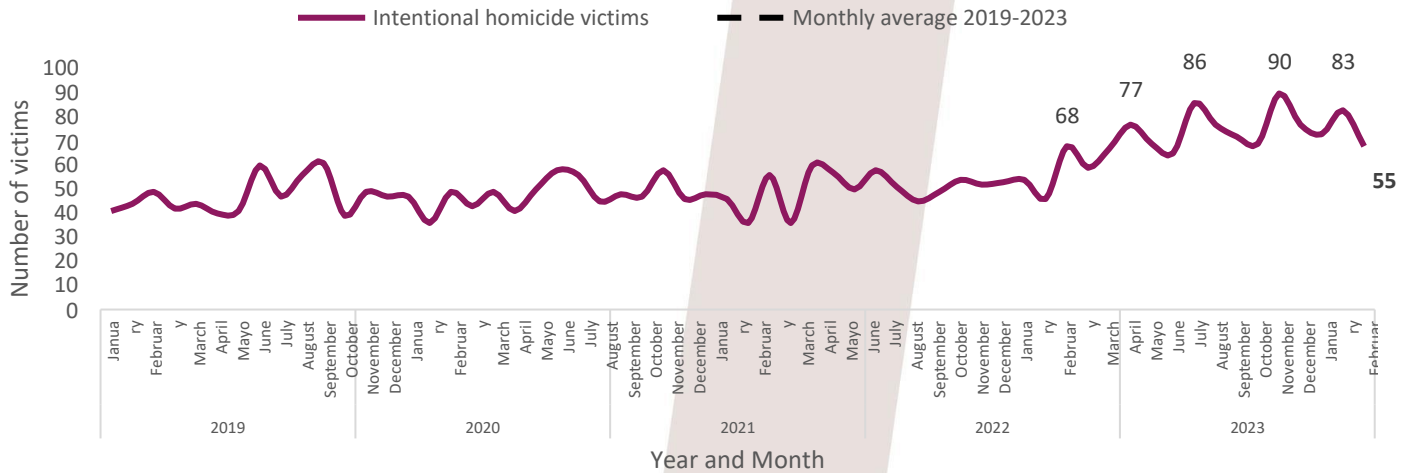
**Figure 1. Number of intentional homicide victims by year of occurrence and monthly average, 2010-2023**



Source: Violence Observatory, with data provided by the Judicial Investigation Department, 2010-2023.

In 2023, the lowest number of deaths (65 victims) were in March, while the highest rates of occurrence were in November (83 victims), April (86 victims) and August (90 victims). This sets a record in Costa Rica, as this is the highest number of deaths per month since the country started keeping records of this crime (Figure 2).

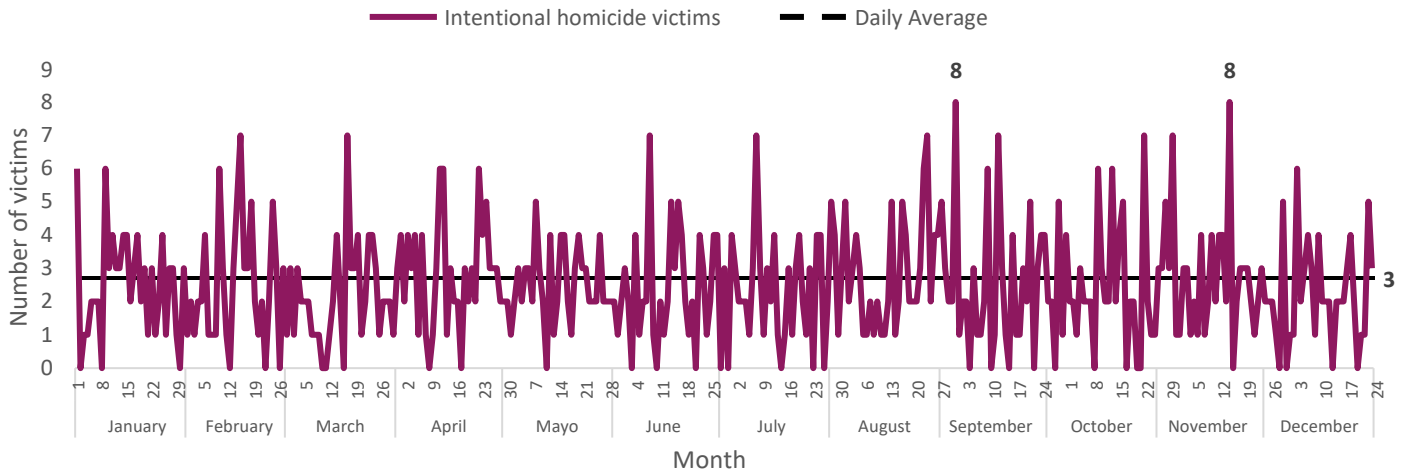
**Figure 2. Number of intentional homicide victims by month and year of occurrence and monthly average, 2019-2023**



Source: Violence Observatory based on data from the Judicial Investigation Department, 2019-2023.

According to the day of the incident, between 0 and 8 deaths were recorded daily in 2023. To be clear, intentional homicides were not recorded on every day in Costa Rica. The days with the highest rates of occurrence were September 5 and November 21. On average, three persons lost their lives every day in 2023 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Number of intentional homicide victims by month and day of occurrence and daily average, 2023



Source: Violence Observatory, with data provided by the Judicial Investigation Department, 2023.

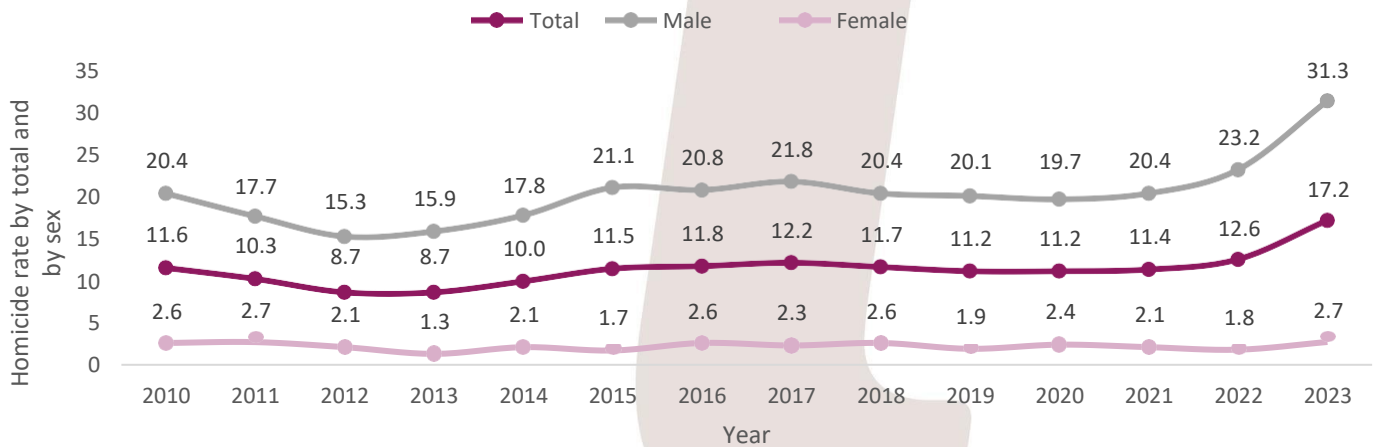
### Intentional homicide rate in Costa Rica

The 906 deaths in 2023 is equal to a rate of 17.2 intentional homicides per 100,000 population. The overall national rate increased from a low of 8.7 intentional homicides per 100,000 population in 2012 and 2013 to 17.2 intentional homicides per 100,000 population in 2023 (+8.5 points), with the 2023 figure being the highest. This was a historic increase in crime levels in the country.

Of the total number of deaths in 2023, 830 were men and 71 were women. The male rate shot up from a low of 15.3 in 2012 to 31.3 intentional homicides per 100,000 men in 2023, doubling over the last decade and peaking in 2023.

In the case of women, the rate rose from 1.3 at its 2012 low to 2.72 intentional homicides per 100,000 women in 2023. This means it too doubled over the past decade and also matched the 2011 figure, which had been the highest rate for women at 2.70 in 2022 (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Intentional homicide rate by year of occurrence, by victim sex, 2010-2023 (Rate of 100,000 population/male/female)



Source: Violence Observatory, with data provided by the National Statistics and Census Institute and the Judicial Investigation Department, 2010-2023.

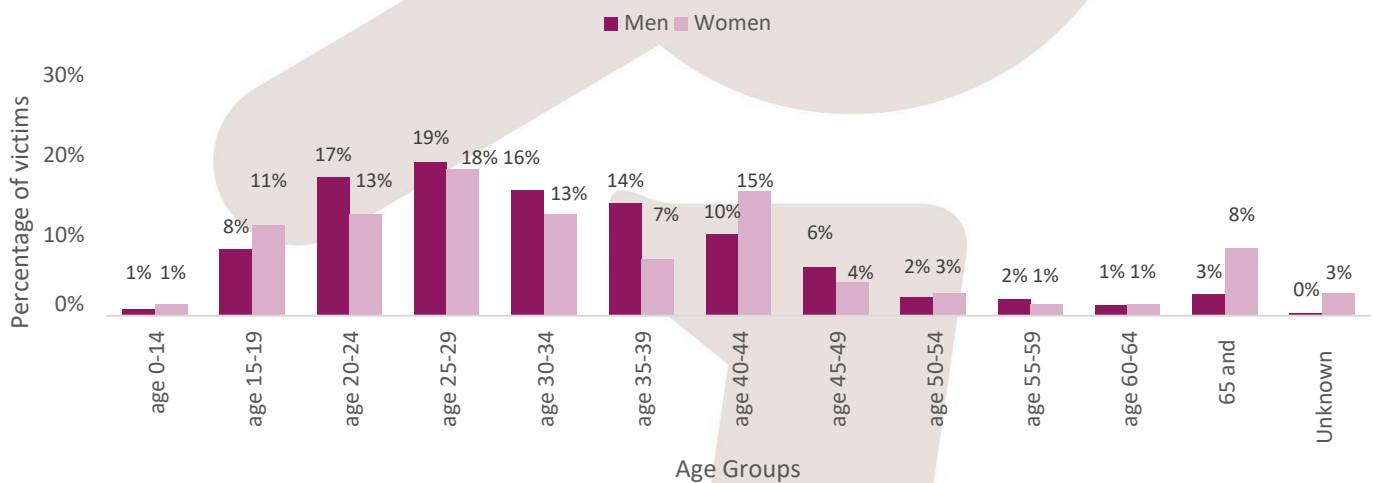
## II. Characterization of victims

A breakdown of the occurrence of homicides shows that 92 per cent (830 victims) were male, eight per cent (71 victims) were female. However, in one per cent (5 victims) no sex was specified. Records by age of victim show that there were victims from age zero to 90 years of age.

A comparison of the proportion of the total amount of victims by sex shows that the percentage distribution of male victims is concentrated in the 20 to 39 age group, with six out of every ten victims in this group. For women, the distribution is more spread out over their lifetime, with more victims age 25-29 (18%) and age 40-44 (15%) (Figure 5).

In relation to victim nationalities, 83 per cent (766 victims) were Costa Ricans, 11 per cent (100 victims) Nicaraguans, 1 per cent (13 victims) Colombians, 1 per cent (6 victims) Panamanians, and the remaining 2 per cent belonged to other nationalities. Some two per cent of the victims had no known nationality.

Figure 5. Percentage distribution of intentional homicide victims by age group and sex, 2023



Source: Violence Observatory, with data provided by the Judicial Investigation Department, 2023.

## III. Characterization of the incidents

### Intentional homicide by method or weapon

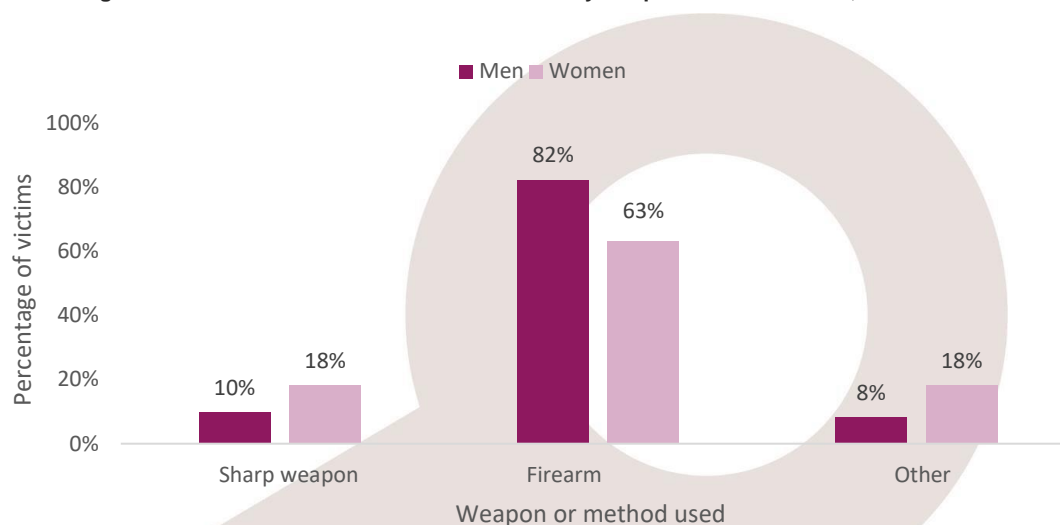
Firearm-related intentional homicides continue to be prevalent in Costa Rica. A firearm was used in eight out of 10 deaths, a knife in one out of 10 deaths, and some other method in one out of 10 deaths.

Specifically in terms of the weapon used and victim's sex, throughout 2023, 82 per cent of men (682 victims) were killed with a firearm, 10 per cent (80 victims) with a sharp weapon, and 8 per cent (68 victims) by other means.

In the case of women, 63 per cent (45 victims) were killed with a firearm, 18 per cent (13 victims) sharp weapon and 18 per cent (13 victims) by other means.

This shows that firearm use continues to predominate in intentional homicides in Costa Rica and most victims are male (Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Percentage distribution of intentional homicide victims by weapon/method and sex, 2023**



Source: Violence Observatory, with data provided by the Judicial Investigation Department, 2023.

### Intentional homicide by motive

In 2023, 70 per cent (633 victims) of all reported intentional homicides involved score settling or revenge, 13 per cent (117 victims) an argument or dispute, nine per cent (81 victims) the commission of another crime, three per cent (25 victims) domestic violence, one per cent (12 victims) combating criminal activity, one per cent (9 victims) was professional,<sup>iv</sup> 0.1 per cent (3 victims) sexual behaviour, and in three per cent of the cases (26 victims) the motive was not specified.

Argument or dispute ceased to be the primary motive for intentional homicides over the last decade. In 2010, it was the motive in 37 per cent of cases to then drop down to 13 per cent in 2023, that is 24 percentage points lower. Likewise, intentional homicide tied to another crime was also trending downward in the 2010-2023 period, dropping from 20 per cent in 2010 to eight per cent in 2023, or 11 percentage points lower (Table 1).

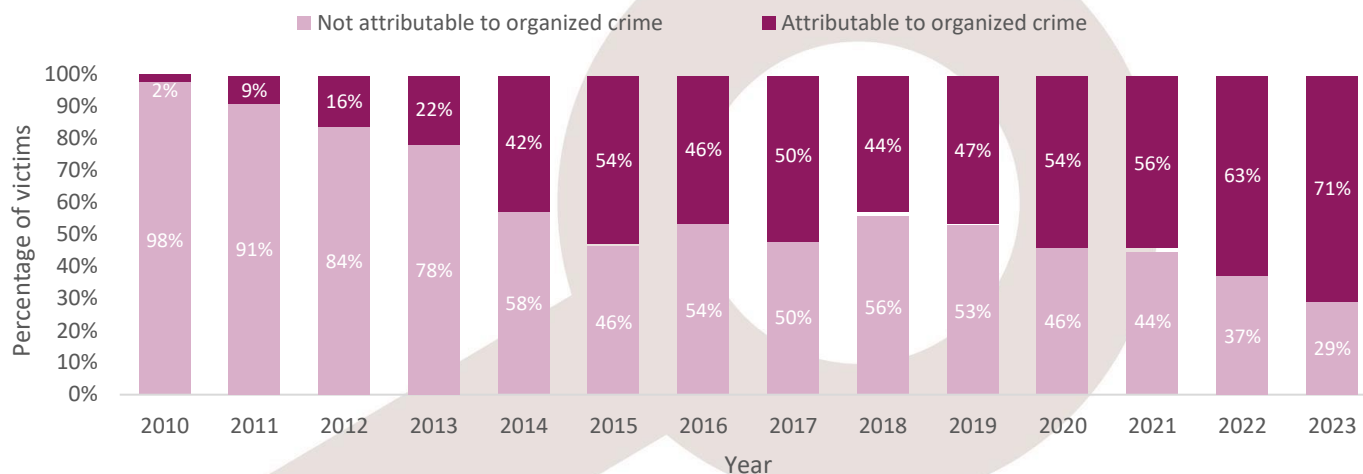
**Table 1. Number of intentional homicide victims by year and motive, 2010-2023**

Motive	Year														Total
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	
Total	527	474	407	411	477	557	578	602	586	564	570	588	656	906	7903
Settle a score, revenge	8	43	63	88	197	297	267	300	257	262	301	322	407	633	3445
Argument/ quarrel	198	118	107	102	111	107	111	99	114	105	90	109	113	117	1601
To commit another crime	109	84	50	68	95	86	98	89	87	103	76	61	55	81	1142
Domestic Violence	14	24	18	11	32	27	35	29	17	29	26	18	22	25	327
Combating crime	18	36	8	15	16	13	11	11	29	18	30	15	19	12	251
Mental disorder	1	1	4	0	6	3	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	18
Professional	5	1	4	2	3	2	1	4	2	3	6	5	6	9	53
Sexual	5	4	1	0	3	7	0	5	0	4	7	0	0	3	39
Other	29	21	9	11	0	3	0	0	46	0	1	2	0	0	122
Unknown	140	142	143	114	14	12	53	64	34	40	33	56	34	26	905

Source: Violence Observatory, with data provided by the Judicial Investigation Department, 2010-2023.

It is also evident that intentional homicides “Attributable to organized crime” jumped from two per cent in 2010 to 71 per cent in 2023. It became the principal cause of intentional homicide in Costa Rica in 2015 and continued so in 2020-2023 (graph 7).

**Graph 7. Percentage of intentional homicide victims by year of occurrence and condition, 2010-2023**



Source: Violence Observatory, with data provided by the Judicial Investigation Department, 2010-2023.

### Intentional homicide by place of occurrence by province

Comparing the percentage distribution of intentional homicide victims during 2010-2023 by Province of occurrence, it emerges that highest proportion of occurrence is in San Jose from 2010 to 2020. In 2021-2022, the Province of Limon (26%) outdid San Jose and in 2023 both provinces are neck and neck with 24 per cent of deaths each. This means that one in two recorded homicides happened in either San Jose or Limon in 2023.

In 2023, Puntarenas ranked third in terms of percentage of occurrence (17%) with Alajuela (11%) and Guanacaste (11%) ranking fourth and fifth with the same percentage. The remaining provinces of Cartago and Heredia are lower or equal to 10 per cent (Table 2).

**Table 2. The percentage distribution of intentional homicide victims by year of occurrence and by province, 2010-2023**

Province	Year														Total
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
San Jose	42%	37%	40%	39%	43%	46%	42%	37%	34%	32%	28%	22%	18%	24%	34%
Alajuela	13%	11%	13%	11%	11%	10%	9%	15%	16%	12%	14%	12%	17%	11%	0%
Cartago	5%	4%	5%	6%	5%	7%	7%	8%	10%	9%	6%	7%	7%	8%	0%
Heredia	7%	6%	6%	6%	5%	7%	6%	6%	7%	7%	8%	9%	7%	5%	7%
Puntarenas	13%	14%	11%	8%	11%	8%	9%	7%	10%	14%	15%	18%	17%	17%	13%
Guanacaste	5%	4%	3%	6%	5%	4%	7%	8%	4%	7%	6%	6%	9%	11%	6%
Limon	15%	23%	23%	24%	20%	17%	20%	19%	20%	21%	23%	26%	26%	24%	21%

Source: Violence Observatory, with data provided by the Judicial Investigation Department, 2010-2023.

## By canton

Limon (91 victims), San Jose (83 victims), Puntarenas (68 victims), Matina (50 victims) and Alajuela (44 victims) are the five cantons with the highest occurrence of intentional homicide, accounting for 37 per cent of all victims.

These cantons are densely populated, provincial capitals, located in coastal or border areas, with the following conditions:

### ❖ Location

Limon, San Jose, Puntarenas and Alajuela are the capitals of eponymous provinces. Matina is canton number five in the Province of Limon, bordering Nicaragua on the north and the Caribbean Ocean on the north east.

### ❖ Population<sup>vi</sup>

San Jose is the most populous canton in the country with 354,025 residents, followed by Alajuela with 325,567. The population density in the other canton capitals is high: Puntarenas (145,711 population) and Limon (100,401 population). There are fewer than 100,000 population in Matina (47,894 residents).

### ❖ Human development

The canton Human Development Index (HDI) provides averages for achievements in a specific geographic area based on three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, as measured by life expectancy at birth, knowledge, as measured by mean years of schooling and expected years of schooling; and a decent standard of living measured by the Material Welfare Index based on average household income per capita.

According to the 2020 Human Development Index, the level of human development is high in Alajuela (0.784) and San Jose (0.758), while in Puntarenas (0.692), Limon (0.688) and Matina (0.579) the level of development is medium.

### ❖ Multidimensional Poverty

The canton Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) identifies multiple individual privations in four dimensions, namely education, housing and use of the Internet, health and social protection.

Multidimensional poverty is high in Matina (0.102) according to the 2020 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). However, it is medium in the cantons of San Jose (0.062), Puntarenas (0.083) and Limon (0.098). Multidimensional poverty is low in Alajuela (0.044), though.

## By district

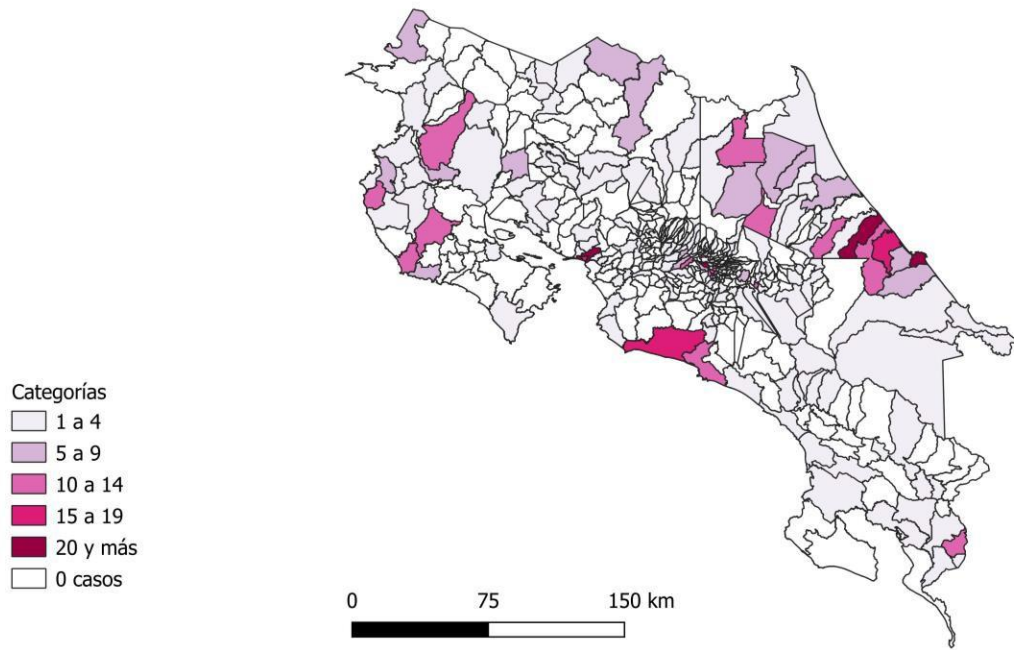
The top five districts with the highest occurrence of violent deaths during 2023 were: Limon (79 victims), Barranca (26 victims), Pavas (24 victims), Batan (22 victims) and Chacarita (20 victims), with two out of every ten deaths taking place in the first five districts (20% of all deaths).

Similarly, the districts of Parrita (17 victims), Carrandi (16 victims), El Roble (16 victims), Purrall (14 victims) and Quepos (14 victims) each representing two per cent of all deaths in 2023. Three in 10 deaths happened in these 10 districts (28% of all deaths).

Limon is the first district and canton capital of the canton of Limon in the Province of Limon. It is worth noting that the district of Limon accounts for nine per cent of deaths tied to territorial disputes between organized criminal groups (Map 1).



Map 1. Number de intentional homicide victims In Costa Rica by district of occurrence, 2023



Source: Violence Observatory, with data provided by the Judicial Investigation Department, 2023.

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**Metadata:** This report was prepared with data provided by the Vice Ministry of Peace Violence Observatory based on the information provided by the Judicial Investigation Department (OIJ) on January 2024.

<sup>i</sup> In 2023, records show no sex for five victims, which is four more than in 2022 when only one victim lacked this information.

<sup>ii</sup> Motives tied to drug-trafficking or organized crime are “Score Settling or Revenge,” corresponding to cases that might involve drugs or organized criminal groups, and the “Professional” category, in which case the perpetrator collects a fee for taking the life of the victim. Both of these have been on the rise in recent years.

<sup>iii</sup> This corresponded to a two-month-old infant.

<sup>iv</sup> These are cases where the perpetrator charges a fee for taking the victim's life. Similar cases have been on the rise in recent years.

<sup>v</sup> Motives tied to drug-trafficking or organized crime are “Score Settling or Revenge,” corresponding to cases that might involve drugs or organized criminal groups, and the “Professional” category, in which case the perpetrator collects a fee for taking the life of the victim. Both of these have been on the rise in recent years.

<sup>vi</sup> Population as of 30 June 2023, according to demographic projections by the National Statistics and Census Institute (INEC).