National vital statistics last reported an analysis of non-natural deaths by manner of death and external cause in 1991, and there are no indications that such reporting will be reinstated in the near future. In 2000, the National Injury Mortality Surveillance System (NIMSS) Annual Report for 1999 was released, which provided the first semi-national profile describing the epidemiology of non-natural deaths since 1991. The NIMSS database provides information about the external causes of fatal injuries (e.g. gunshot, sharp instruments, pedestrian motor vehicle accidents) by victim age, sex, population group, spatial and temporal characteristics of the events, and alcohol involvement. The information is critical for monitoring demographic, seasonal and socio-economically related trends in such major causes of death as homicide, motor vehicle accidents, burns, falls and drowning.

The NIMSS Annual Report for 2000 describes non-natural deaths recorded from fifteen mainly urban mortuaries in five provinces (see Table 1). The NIMSS recorded a total of 18 876 fatal injuries for the period January to 31 December 2001. In the absence of accurate and reliable routinely collected data, current estimates for the national number of deaths that occur due to non-natural causes range from 65 000 to 80 000 per annum. This accounts for between 12% and 15% of the more than half a million deaths that occur annually from all causes of death. Therefore, the data collected by NIMSS in 2000 accounted for between 24% and 29% of all non-natural mortality. NIMSS aims to expand its case coverage until all injury deaths are included in what is intended to be an ongoing system for the epidemiological surveillance of fatal injuries. It is estimated that case coverage will be up to 33% for the year 2001, and will reach 40% by the end of 2002.

In South Africa, injuries due to homicides, traffic collisions and other incidents, such as burns, falls, and drowning, are among the leading causes of death. Despite the magnitude of the problem and constant media coverage, the situation has not improved. One of the reasons is that prevention agencies do not have access to information about the demographic, seasonal and socio-economic causes of injury, disability, psychosocial trauma and death.

The NIMSS produces and disseminates descriptive epidemiological information for deaths due to non-natural causes that, in terms of existing legislation, are subject to medico-legal investigation. The ultimate goal is to establish a permanent system that will record all such deaths that occur annually in South Africa. The NIMSS, will at a local, regional and national level, provide information to:

- describe the incidence, causes and consequences of non-natural deaths;
- prioritise injury and violence prevention action directed at high-risk groups and socio-environmental risk factors;
- identify new injury trends and emerging problem areas;
- monitor seasonal and longitudinal changes in the non-natural fatality profile; and
- evaluate direct and indirect violence and injury prevention and control measures.

The information is collated from existing investigative procedures at mortuaries, state forensic chemistry laboratories and the courts. All deaths due to external causes are included, generating an overview of the manner in which the different categories of external cause contribute to the deaths of men, women and children. The box on the opposite page presents an overview of the 2000 findings, extracted from the Executive Summary of the full report.

The utility of NIMSS lies in the pointers it provides for improving the prevention and control of injuries in South Africa, and in evaluating the impact of direct (e.g. gun law enforcement) and indirect (e.g. socio-economic development) interventions that are expected to reduce some of the major external causes of fatal injury. Whereas the 1999 report provided a baseline profile for future monitoring, the 2000 report shows that homicide continues to be the main cause of non-natural death, and that among homicides, the proportion of deaths due to firearms continues to increase.

Requests for the report, and for customised analyses of the data are welcomed. To track the user profile and improve the targeting of future reports, these requests should be in writing and include a brief motivation indicating how the information will be used.

Please address all requests to the Crime, Violence and Injury Lead Programme, Secretary, Ms Lyndsey Louie at telephone (011) 857 1142 or e-mail lourie@unisa.ac.za.