



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on August 16, 2025

Sanctions Kill as Many People as War, Study Says

Far from being humane tools of foreign policy, sanctions take just as many lives as outright war, according to a new [study](#) published in *The Lancet Global Health*.

Co-authored by economists Mark Weisbrot, Francisco Rodríguez, and Silvio Rendón, the study found that sanctions led to the deaths of more than half a million people each year between 1971 and 2021, about the same as the estimated annual death toll from wars.

Such was not always the case. Based on data from the [Global Sanctions Database](#), the authors calculated that just eight percent of countries, representing 5.4 percent of the world economy, were subject to sanctions in the 1960s. Between 2010 and 2022, however, a quarter of all nations, representing the same fraction of the global economy, were under some form of sanctions from either the United States, the European Union (EU), or the United Nations.



Yta23/iStock/Getty Images Plus

In a [press release](#), co-author and Center for Economic and Policy Research co-director Weisbrot said:

It is immoral and indefensible that such a lethal form of collective punishment continues to be used, let alone that it has been steadily expanded over the years. And sanctions are widely misunderstood as being a less lethal, almost nonviolent, policy alternative to military force.

Sanctions take their toll on civilian populations in a variety of ways, the study noted. The government of a country under sanction may end up with less revenue to spend on public-health measures. Fewer imports mean less food, medicine, and other essential goods entering the country. And humanitarian organizations may be unable to make up the difference because of “real or perceived sanctions-induced barriers.”

Sanctioning Starvation

The study broke down sanctions into various categories. First, it separated them into economic sanctions, which target trade and financial transactions, and non-economic sanctions, which target everything else (such as arms or travel). Second, the body imposing sanctions was considered. Was it a unilateral decision by a single nation (such as the United States) or region (such as the EU), or was it a global decision imposed by the UN?



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on August 16, 2025

The economists found that unilateral sanctions caused 564,258 deaths per year, or 3.6 percent of all deaths in sanctioned countries. “This estimate,” they wrote, “is higher than the average annual number of battle-related casualties during this period (106,000 deaths per year) and similar to [some estimates](#) of the total death toll of wars including civilian casualties (around half a million deaths per year).” Economic sanctions as a whole, whether unilateral or not, cost about 629,000 lives per year, and global sanctions killed about 777,000 annually.

As one might expect, the very young and the very old, being the most vulnerable, were hit the hardest by sanctions. Seventy-seven percent of all sanctions-related deaths occurred among those under age 16 or over age 60. “Deaths of children younger than 5 years represented 51% of total deaths caused by sanctions,” said the study. Furthermore, “the effects of sanctions on mortality generally increase over time, with longer-lived sanctions episodes resulting in higher tolls on lives.”

Killing You for Your Own Good

The authors found that UN sanctions probably have little to no effect on mortality, though they aren’t sure why. They suggest the broader scrutiny of UN decisions or the UN’s purported efforts to minimize civilian suffering may have something to do with it. Some countries’ large-scale evasions of UN sanctions — [North Korea’s](#) come to mind — undoubtedly play a part as well.

On the other hand, they wrote,

unilateral sanctions imposed by the USA or the EU might be designed in ways that have a greater negative effect on target populations.... US sanctions ... often aim to create conditions conducive to regime change or shifts in political behavior, with the deterioration of living conditions in target countries in some cases being acknowledged by policy makers as part of the intended mechanism through which objectives are to be attained.

Perhaps the most notorious such acknowledgment occurred in 1996, when then-President Bill Clinton’s UN ambassador, Madeleine Albright, told *60 Minutes* that the deaths of an estimated half-million Iraqi children due to sanctions were [“worth it”](#) to achieve regime change in Baghdad.

Another reason unilateral sanctions are more deadly than UN sanctions is the economic might of those imposing them, penned the economists:

The USA — and, to a lesser extent, Europe — also has important mechanisms at its disposal that serve to amplify the economic and human effects of sanctions, including those linked to the widespread use of the US dollar and the euro in international banking transactions and as global reserve currencies, and the extraterritorial application of sanctions, particularly by the USA.

Getting Syrias About Sanctions

Besides directly killing people, sanctions have other effects that can lead to further deaths, observed the [Libertarian Institute](#). For example, when it comes to sanctions on Russia and Iran, “by cutting off the possibility of economic cooperation and interdependence, war has resulted in both cases in the last three years.” Sanctions imposed on Syria explicitly to effect regime change have, in addition to starving people, [resulted](#) in an al-Qaeda-affiliated government in Damascus and “sectarian violence [that] has



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on August 16, 2025

seen thousands of civilians slaughtered.”

Said study co-author Rodriguez:

Sanctions often fail to achieve their stated objectives and instead only punish the civilian populations of the targeted countries. It is well past time that the US, EU, and other powerful actors in the international community seriously reconsider this cruel and often counterproductive mechanism.



Subscribe to the New American

Get exclusive digital access to the most informative,
non-partisan truthful news source for patriotic Americans!

Discover a refreshing blend of time-honored values, principles and insightful perspectives within the pages of "The New American" magazine. Delve into a world where tradition is the foundation, and exploration knows no bounds.

From politics and finance to foreign affairs, environment, culture, and technology, we bring you an unparalleled array of topics that matter most.



Subscribe

What's Included?

- 24 Issues Per Year
- Optional Print Edition
- Digital Edition Access
- Exclusive Subscriber Content
- Audio provided for all articles
- Unlimited access to past issues
- Coming Soon! Ad FREE
- 60-Day money back guarantee!
- Cancel anytime.