

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON GUN CONTROL

THE GLOBAL GUN EPIDEMIC

Small arms in the hands of civilians pose serious challenges for security in numerous settings, including war and violent conflict, states in transition, and 'peaceful' nations. From a human security perspective, it is clear that as many if not more civilians are killed with small arms in the context of crime than "conflict" and in many contexts – for example, Colombia or Haiti – criminal violence is inseparable from political violence. While there is not complete data on deaths in conflict zones, estimates range from 20,000 to 100,000 direct deaths from small arms per year. In countries not considered at war, there are approximately 200,000 deaths per year. Of a survey of 112 countries reporting small arms deaths, the highest rates are recorded in the countries listed in Table 1. In Brazil, for example, more than 30,000 are murdered with small arms each year. In Colombia more than 20,000 are murdered and in the USA and South Africa, more than 10,000 are killed in gun homicides.¹ In many nations, mortality from armed violence exceeds the death rates from official war zones. For example, it is estimated that in 1998-99, the number of deaths from small arms (mis)use in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala exceeded those that had occurred in the respective civil wars.² Women and children are particularly at risk from civilian owned small arms.

The Small Arms Survey has estimated that 60% of the world's small arms and light weapons are in the hands of civilians. This includes a range of users, such as sporting shooters, gun collectors, hunters as well as criminals, terrorists, and drug dealers. Most countries restrict the private ownership and use of small arms to some extent through national arms control policies. In 1998 the UN released an international survey on firearm regulation highlighted the variation in laws across the world.³ Arms tend to flow from unregulated areas to regulated areas. A country like Canada, for example, may have strong gun laws but is vulnerable because of guns flowing from the United States. In the US there are almost as many guns as people – over 220 million – approximately one third of all the guns in the world. Not only do US guns present a problem for Canada, accounting for approximately half of the handguns recovered in crime, but US guns account for 80% of the crime guns in Mexico and have fuelled violence worldwide.

Countries with highest rates of reported firearms death rates (per 100,000) in the world

Ranking*	Country	Year	Total Firearm Deaths (Minimum)	Total Firearm Death Rate (Minimum)	Gun Homicide Rate	Gun Suicide Rate	Accidental Firearm Death Rate	Undetermined Death Rate	% Homicides with Firearms	% Firearm Deaths that are homicides
1	Colombia	2002	22827	55.7	51.8				86%	93%
2	Venezuela	2000	5689	34.3	22.15	1.16	0.42	10.57	67%	95%
3	South Africa	2002	11709	26.8	26.1				54%	97%
4	El Salvador	2001	1641	25.8	25.3				71%	98%

5	Brazil	200 2	38088	21.72	19.54	0.78	0.18	1.22	64%	97%
6	Puerto Rico	200 1	734	19.12	17.36	1.17	0.49	0.1	91%	91%
7	Jamaica	199 7	450	18.6	18.2	0.37			58%	98%
8	Guatemala	200 0	2109	18.5						
9	Honduras	199 9	1677	16.2	16.2					
10	Uruguay	200 0	104	13.91	3.11	7.18	3.53	0.09	63%	22%
11	Ecuador	200 0	1321	13.39	10.73	0.77	0.25	1.63	68%	80%
12	Argentina	200 1	4371	11.49	4.34	2.88	0.64	3.63	70%	38%
13	USA	200 1	29735	10.27	3.98	5.92	0.28	0.08	64%	38%

*Firearm death rate among 112 countries

Source: W. Cukier and V. Sidel, *The Global Gun Epidemic: From Saturday Night Specials to AK-47s*, New York: Praeger, 2006.

There is also growing recognition at the regional level that the cross-border movement of arms is affected by how states regulate their internal stockpiles, which implies managing who can own guns and under what circumstances. Regional agreements have also started to include provisions regulating weapons in the hands of civilians. The most relevant agreements include: the Joint Action of the European Communities Council (1998), the Bamako Declaration (2000), the Nadi Framework (2000), Southern African Development Community Protocol (2001) and the Andean Plan (2003), the Nairobi Protocol (2004).

There has been some debate regarding the language – ie referring to national legislation – which warrants further discussion but for the purposes of this report we will reference civilian possession.