

Few Options but the Gun

ANGRY YOUNG MEN



A young gang member shows off his 9 mm in the hallway of a housing project, Brooklyn, New York, December 2003. © Boogie/WPN

Armed young men are perhaps the most feared element of any society, but they also have the most to fear. Regardless of the countries in which they live, young men represent a disproportionately high share of the perpetrators and victims of gun-related, lethal violence.

Boys are two to three times more likely than girls to get involved in fighting. Young men—those aged 15 to 29—also account for half of the world's firearm homicide victims, or 70,000 to 100,000 deaths annually.

While studies of youth violence have long considered the role played by young men, the issue has received little attention in the framework of small arms research. This chapter begins to fill the gap by examining the following questions:

- Why are young men the primary perpetrators of armed violence?
- What role do small arms play in this phenomenon?
- Have interventions designed to prevent or reduce armed violence adequately tackled the complex relationship that exists between young men and small arms?

The chapter finds that traditional biological and demographic arguments do not sufficiently take into account the multiple factors that encourage and prevent young men from resorting to violence. It argues that gender ideologies—particularly those that associate masculinity with power—offer crucial insight into why many marginalized young men see violence as an attractive means of achieving manhood and respect. The functional and symbolic attributes of small arms render them attractive to

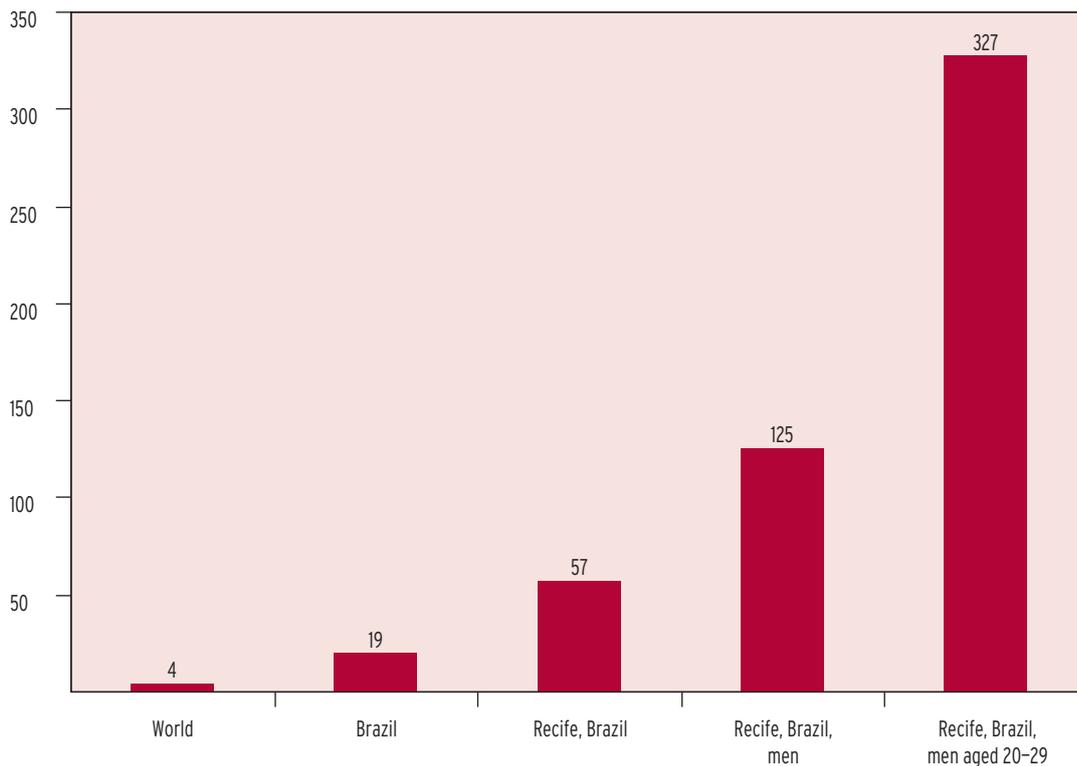
young men wishing to achieve power through association with or participation in violence. The chapter also reviews opportunities to address the problem by controlling young men's access to small arms and countering their espousal of a violent masculine ideology.

The following are among the chapter's main conclusions:

- Young men frequently perceive violence—particularly small arms violence—as a means to reach positions of social or economic status to which they feel entitled.
- By offering empowerment in the face of exclusion from socially defined masculine roles, small arms can be strong symbols of power for marginalized young men.
- Curbing young men's access to firearms has proved an effective component of short-term strategies to reduce the number of deaths arising from youth violence.
- Countering socially constructed associations between guns, violence, power, and masculinity is a key component of any effective, long-term violence prevention strategy.

Figure 12.1 **Age and gender as key determinants of vulnerability to small arms violence, 2000**

FIREARM MORTALITY RATE PER 100,000



Sources: World: Small Arms Survey calculations based on Richmond, Cheney, and Schwab (2005, p. 348, using 229,000 annual non-conflict-related firearm deaths estimate) and UN Population Division (2005). Brazil and Recife: Peres (2004, pp. 129, 130, 132)

A large body of research links young male violence and small arms, though it has not focused specifically on the weapons themselves. By distilling the small arms-specific findings of this research, the chapter draws some initial conclusions about the role of small arms in young male violence.

The fact that the majority of young men do not become involved in armed violence suggests that the problem is social in nature, rather than biological or demographic. Violence and attitudes towards small arms violence are, in other words, learned. Young men take their lessons from the world around them. If unable to fulfill socially defined masculine roles, they may adopt violent alternatives as a means of asserting their place in society.

Functionally or symbolically, small arms resonate with young men who are tempted by violence. They are powerful tools with which young men can assert their masculinity, whether by acquiring the objects and status they are conditioned to seek, or by overturning the societies from which they are excluded. In many parts of the world, small arms hold out the power to change one's lot in life.

Measures to curtail armed violence need to recognize the serious threat some young men pose to society—and to each other. Measures that target at-risk youth—both victims and perpetrators—can successfully decrease violence levels in the short run through a careful mix of carrots and sticks. Targeting illicit gun ownership among young men is often an important component of such strategies as it tends to reduce young men's access to small arms and consequently prevents their misuse. Initiatives that tackle the many reasons that lead young men to become involved in armed violence need, in particular, to counter perceived associations between firearms and social status, ensuring that guns are no longer seen as a viable means of affirming one's masculinity.

In the long run, violence prevention efforts must focus on the various protective factors that seem to prevent the majority of young men from becoming involved in armed violence. Stable home environments, decent economic options, and alternative sources of respect within the community make young men—even those living in high-risk areas—more resistant to becoming involved in armed groups and armed violence. The 'angry young man' of lore is not an inevitable feature of modern life. ■