

Completing the Count

CIVILIAN FIREARMS

The emergence of small arms proliferation as a major international issue in the 1990s was accompanied by widespread frustration at ignorance over how many small arms existed and where they mattered most. Subsequent research has made it possible to speak about the dimensions of the problem much more concretely.

The relationship between society and small arms is changing the world over. Small arms are proliferating virtually everywhere. And it is civilian ownership, the focus of this chapter, which appears to be changing most rapidly. Among the major findings of this chapter are the following:

- Civilians own about 650 million firearms worldwide, roughly 75 per cent of the known total. US citizens alone own some 270 million of these.
- There are at least 875 million combined civilian, law enforcement, and military firearms in the world today.
- There is roughly one firearm for every seven people worldwide. Without the United States, though, this drops to about one firearm per ten people.
- Organized destruction projects have eliminated at least 8.3 million small arms since 1991, three-quarters of which come from armed services. In addition, an unknown number are lost through accidental wastage.

The total of some 650 million civilian firearms—and thus at least 875 million firearms in all—is a significant increase over previous Small Arms Survey estimates, which looked only at law enforcement and official military firearms. The new estimate does not represent a real increase, but rather results from better global reporting, additional research, and more effective research methods.



A police chief holds a confiscated semi-automatic weapon at a police station in Montgomery, Alabama, in June 2004. The rifle is believed to have been used in the fatal shootings of three Birmingham police officers. © Haraz Ghanbari/AP Photo

Table 2.1 The division of global firearms (millions)

Category	Low total	Average	High total	Proportion
Law enforcement	26	26	26	2.5–3.5%
Military	150	200	250	20–25%
Civilian	570	650	730	73–77%
Global total	745	875	1,000	

Notes:

Law enforcement totals cover only known law enforcement agencies (see Small Arms Survey, 2006, ch. 2). Military totals do not include older, non-automatic weapons. Civilian totals do not include craft production.

Global totals do not equal the totals of the three categories, due to rounding. Percentages do not equal 100, due to rounding.

Sources: Annexe 3; Small Arms Survey (2006, pp. 37, 56)

Civilians are acquiring greater numbers of increasingly powerful guns. The connection between per capita wealth and gun ownership is strong enough to suggest that as long as gun ownership laws are not changed, greater national wealth leads to greater gun ownership. The proliferation of civilian gun arsenals is not likely to slow anytime in the foreseeable future.

Almost everywhere, civilian inventories are significantly larger than law enforcement or military stockpiles.

With fewer than five per cent of the world's population, the United States is home to roughly 35–50 per cent of the world's civilian-owned guns. Other leading gun-owning societies tend to be large, such as China and India; wealthy, such as Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and England and Wales; or have a recent history of intense violent conflict, such as Angola and Colombia, whose civilian firearms holdings are among the largest in the world.

In most of the world, the state is not the primary holder of guns; civilians are. In many cases, state-owned weapons are not the most likely to be used. Although research on the relative dangers of civilian and military small arms still requires systematic investigation, civilian-owned weapons appear increasingly prominent in global small arms phenomena.

To be sure, state-controlled arsenals are more coherent than the civilian inventories. Only military and some law enforcement small arms tend to be stockpiled. As a result, state arsenals are much more amenable to policy, for better or worse. State-owned small arms tend to be more powerful, weapon-per-weapon, than civilian-owned firearms. But this too is changing.

Official gun registration statistics represent the most reliable data, but they tell an incomplete story.

Markets for handguns have expanded in many wealthy urban markets. In the Czech Republic—an extreme example—the proportion of handguns rose from three per cent of all registered guns in 1991 to 37 per cent by 2000, due partially to legal reforms facilitating legal handgun ownership. In poorer regions it is automatic rifles that have attracted most interest in recent years. In Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia the bolt-action rifles that predominated among civilians are being supplanted with far more lethal semi- and fully automatic alternatives, in particular AK-47s. The result is a poorly acknowledged revolution in civilian firepower.

The data reported here points to the need for new ways of thinking about small arms pathologies, and the need for a paradigm emphasizing civilian firearm possession as much, and maybe more, than that of the state.

There is no single scientific technique that can ascertain the total number of firearms in civilian hands. Small Arms Survey country data has been assembled using numerous sources and methods. Whenever possible, it relies on official registration data, with independent estimates used to provide greater comprehensiveness. Official gun registration statistics represent the most reliable data, but they tell an incomplete story. When neither registration data nor independent assessments are available, estimates are based on correlative statistical analysis. Greatest use is made of the strongest data sources; less reliable methods are introduced when necessary to ensure completeness. ■