

From Conflict to Consequence: Nearly Half of Ukrainian Men Would Like to Own a Firearm, Or Already Have One

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KEY FINDINGS

- Between 2010 and the end of the 2014–15 phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war, lethal criminal violence in Ukraine increased by nearly 50 per cent. This raises the possibility of an even steeper future increase in violent crime resulting from the current full-scale war.
- In spite of the increasing crime victimization rate of households since the 2022 invasion, incidents involving firearms remain less common compared to the pre-invasion period. Nonetheless, trust in the police—while still high—has declined since January 2023, and approximately 14 per cent of Ukrainian civilians now carry some form of typically non-lethal weapon for self-defence, which is more than a twofold increase from 2019 and more than a threefold increase from 2011.
- The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine initially led to a slight decrease in firearms kept in households as civilians and weapons were mobilized for the war effort. As of September 2023, household ownership levels have gone back up, but the number of firearms held by these households has decreased by approximately 20 per cent since the start of the full-scale war.
- Survey respondents believe that the acquisition of firearms has become more straightforward than in January 2023, although it still presents much greater challenges than in 2019. Acquiring ammunition appears to be more difficult than acquiring firearms.
- Between 43 and 46 per cent of men in every age group indicated that they either already own a firearm (7 per cent overall) or would like to own one. Only 11 per cent of women expressed the desire to own a firearm.
- The survey indicated that more women than men expressed negative views about firearms: they have less desire to own a firearm, they are less likely to think they are necessary, and not many would feel safer if their household had a firearm. Nonetheless, many respondents, among them women, thought women ‘in their area’ expected their husbands to be able to use a firearm.

Context

The Small Arms Survey is undertaking several waves of public opinion surveys to gauge the perceptions of the Ukrainian population regarding the proliferation of arms in the country and its impact on security. This understanding of the scope and mechanisms of civilian small arms and light weapons proliferation will significantly contribute to the long-term objectives of promoting peace and security both in Ukraine and across Europe. Engaging in rigorous quantitative research in a conflict-affected region during a period of active conflict presents a unique window to systematically observe firearms proliferation and public perceptions of these weapons far from the front lines.

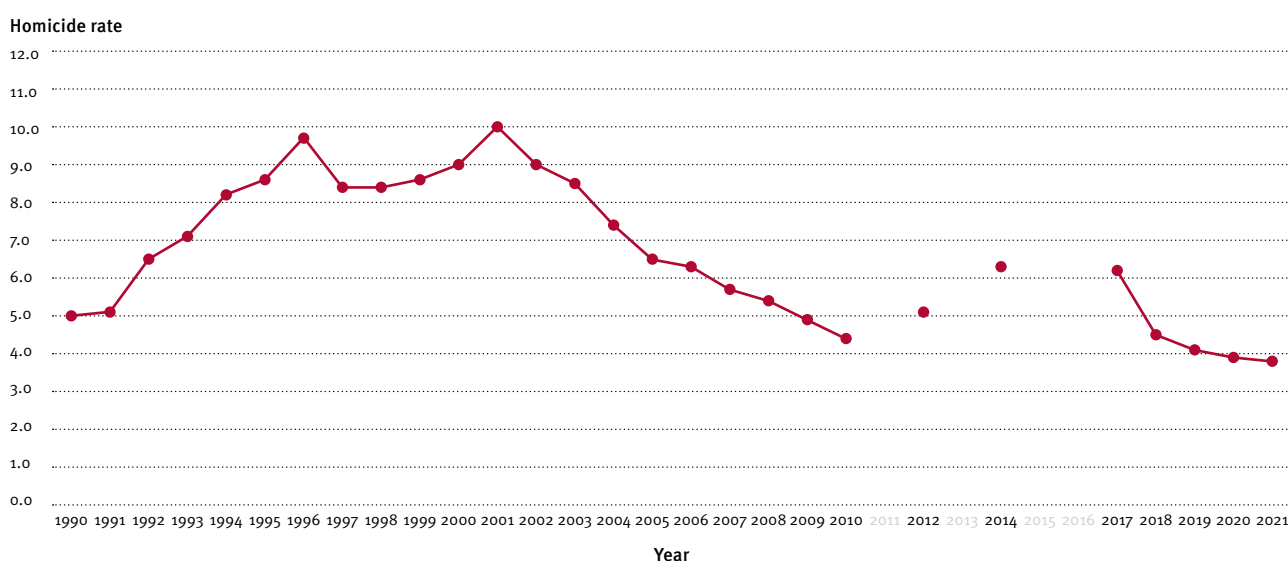
This paper builds on the work of various survey organizations in Ukraine from as far back as 2011 (see ‘Methodology’, below). The Small Arms Survey specifically commissioned much of this work. The Survey then analysed the data collected and published the results in Schroeder et al. (2019) and Hideg and Watson (2023). The present paper brings this analysis up to date, and marks the beginning of the Survey’s Situation Update series on arms proliferation in Ukraine. The project plans to conduct three more survey waves in 2023 and 2024, making it possible to monitor developments over time.

Post-war security: a slippery slope

In the aftermath of a conflict, societies are likely to experience a surge in criminal violence, which encompasses both interpersonal violence (Bradley, 2018) and organized criminal activities where former combatants and military leaders seek to turn the skills they learned in their former roles into ways of exercising economic or political power, often resorting to illegal and violent methods to do so (Stepanova, 2010). This vulnerability is exacerbated by the increased availability of military-grade weaponry that finds its way into civilian circulation as these weapons ‘leak’ from the battlefield.

The previous intensive phase of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict (2014–15), which involved the Russian Federation’s annexation of Crimea and its support for separatists in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, triggered a short-lived but discernible upswing in violent criminal incidents in Ukraine. While data for several years is missing, the homicide levels between 2014 and 2017 appear to represent a significant setback in the otherwise improving security trend in Ukraine (see Figure 1). Currently, 30 per cent of respondents in the most recent survey agree that life in Ukraine will be less safe after the war because of people with weapons

Figure 1 Ukraine homicide rate, 1990–2021 (victims per 100,000 population)

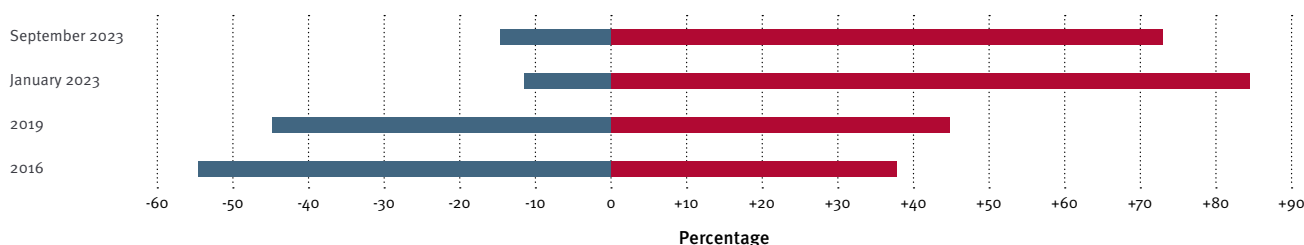


Source: UNODC (n.d.)

Figure 2 Perceived efficacy of Ukraine's law enforcement agencies, 2016–September 2023 (per cent)

Question: In your opinion, law enforcement agencies are coping or failing to protect the personal security of citizens, as well as their property, against crime (not counting enemy actions in the war*)?

● Positive ('They cope fully' and 'They cope partly') ● Negative ('They can't cope' and 'They partly can't cope')



Note: * From 2022 onwards.

Sources: Schroeder et al. (2019); Small Arms Survey (2023a; 2023b)

coming back from the contact lines, and only 16 per cent think this outcome is very unlikely, while the rest fall somewhere between these extremes (Small Arms Survey, 2023b).

This war has already had ripple effects after its initial stage, so it is reasonable to expect a comparable pattern in the coming years. The ongoing phase of conflict starting after the February 2022 full-scale invasion brought the armed conflict to an entirely different level, with many more Ukrainians being directly affected and many more serving on the front lines. The risk that the post-conflict security situation will get much worse once hostilities eventually subside is significant on multiple levels. As seen from previous research,¹ traumas afflicting former combatants correlate with mental problems, including substance abuse, which in turn increases the likelihood and severity of partner violence against women. Similarly, there is a risk—as the post-2014 homicide trends suggest—of increased criminal violence among rival gangs or targeting peaceful citizens.

The rally-round-the-flag effect is clearly noticeable when examining the levels of Ukrainians' confidence in law enforcement—or any other state agency, for that matter. Trust in the police has recently seen a remarkable surge, especially when compared to pre-invasion statistics. In 2016 only 38 per cent of

the population had favourable views of the police (Schroeder et al., 2019), a number that increased to 45 per cent by 2019 and reached 84 per cent in January 2023 (see Figure 2). This surge in confidence may have already passed its peak, however, because it decreased to 73 per cent in the September 2023 survey.

Crime victimization among the general population is indeed on the rise. The annual household victimization rate has climbed from 6.8 per cent in 2019 and 6.7 per cent in January 2023 to 8.2 per cent by September 2023. Notably, however, victims report that firearms play a decreasing role in the crimes that survey respondents fell victim to. In both 2022 and 2023 firearms were involved in just under 6 per cent of crime incidents that members of the surveyed households suffered, which is a marked decrease from the pre-invasion period, when they were involved in 14 per cent of cases (Schroeder et al., 2019).

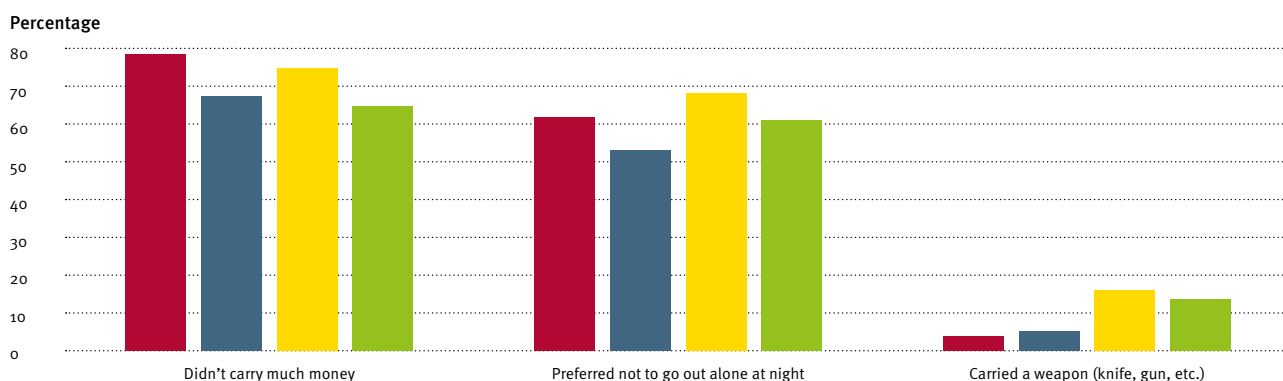
A noteworthy development lies in how Ukrainians are adapting to the surge in criminal activity. While the proportion of those who prefer not to go out alone at night² and those who limit how much cash they carry for security reasons has remained relatively stable, there has been a significant shift in the number of people who now carry some form of self-defence weapon to protect themselves from

1 For example, OSCE (2020, pp. 59–62).

2 Referring to periods when no curfew was in place.

Figure 3 Precautions to prevent crime victimization in Ukraine, 2011–September 2023 (per cent)**Question: Which of the following things have you done for reasons of security?**

● 2011 ● 2019 ● January 2023 ● September 2023



Sources: Inglehart et al. (2014); Schroeder et al. (2019); Small Arms Survey (2023a; 2023b)

potential victimization (see Figure 3). This figure has more than tripled between 2011 (3.9 per cent) and September 2023 (13.5 per cent). Currently, 16.6 per cent of adult males residing in the parts of Ukraine not controlled by Russian forces indicate that they carry some form of weapon for security purposes (Small Arms Survey, 2023b). These typically are not live-firing firearms (3.6 per cent of men carry such weapons, compared to 0.5 per cent of women). Instead, they consist of traumatic weapons³ (total: 2.7 per cent; men: 4.2 per cent; women: 1.5 per cent) or other weapons (such as knives, pepper spray, etc.; total: 11.3 per cent; men: 12.7 per cent; women: 10.1 per cent).

Civilian firearm possession

As the war in Ukraine becomes increasingly protracted with no end in sight, the country faces the risk of increased domestic circulation of small arms, generating considerable challenges for public security and law enforcement forces in the years to come. While weapons are not traditionally part of standard household possessions in Ukraine, there is a substantial risk of firearms proliferating in civilian spaces.

In response to the full-scale Russian invasion, an unknown but large number of small arms were

distributed among civilians in February 2022, for the needs of territorial defence. While martial law is in force, civilian possession of firearms has been temporarily legalized, however, these weapons must be returned to a police station within ten days of the end of martial law. Some regions far from the front lines have called for these weapons to be returned prior to the lifting of martial law, but attempts so far to recover them have been largely unsuccessful and, as the war continues, Ukrainians are in no hurry to return their weapons (Maznychenko, 2023). The front lines are another important source of weapons, where hundreds of thousands of small arms and their respective ammunition are used in active combat. Currently, a plurality of Ukrainians (39 per cent) concur that soldiers will keep (at least some of) their firearms instead of returning them to the military after the war ends (Small Arms Survey, 2023b).

This Small Arms Survey monitoring project offers the opportunity to observe both the extent and the way in which firearms are present in Ukrainian households far from the front lines. The authorities' ability to adapt and respond to this new reality will be pivotal in ensuring the security of the country's citizens.

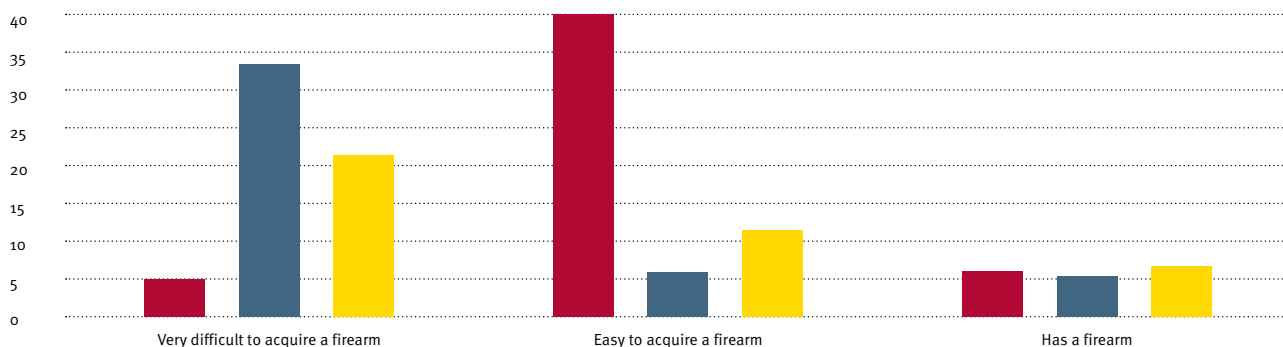
In late June 2023 the Ministry of Internal Affairs embarked on a significant initiative by instituting the Unified Arms Registry (Savin, 2023; LeBrun and Shaban, 2023). This endeavour reflects the ministry's

3 'Traumatic' weapons are non-lethal handguns that fire rubber projectiles.

Figure 4 Firearm possession and accessibility in Ukraine, 2019–September 2023 (per cent)**Question: How easy do you think it is for civilians to acquire a firearm around here? Do you think it is . . .**

● 2019 ● January 2023 ● September 2023

Percentage



Sources: Schroeder et al. (2019); Small Arms Survey (2023a; 2023b)

commitment to enhancing the monitoring of the relatively permissive wartime access to firearms through intensified digital registration procedures, primarily aimed at documenting firearms acquisitions and ensuring effective control over the full life cycle of civilian firearms.⁴ It is worth noting, however, that the regulatory framework for addressing trophy firearms⁵ remains in the developmental stages (Savin, 2023).

The survey results suggest only a small increase in household firearm possession as of September 2023. Compared to January 2023, the self-reported household possession rate has risen from 5.3 per cent to 6.7 per cent, now slightly surpassing the 2019 rate of 6.0 per cent (see Figure 4). Men are predominantly the owners of firearms, with 7 per cent of male respondents and 0.4 per cent of female respondents indicating *personal* firearm ownership (see Table 1). Generally, as seen previously in many other contexts,⁶ men seem to be more inclined to discuss firearm-related issues and are significantly more likely than women to confirm that their household possesses a firearm.

Several households that had guns prior to February 2022 do not have them anymore. In part, they were replaced with new gun-owning households. Still,

households now have fewer weapons than they had before the new phase of the war broke out. The number of weapons households claimed to keep at home decreased: the 1,750 households sampled in September 2023 stated that they collectively have 146 firearms, as opposed to 184 before the full-scale Russian invasion. It is worth noting that not all armed households specified the number of guns they had during the interview—about 13 per cent of gun owners did not provide a figure as to how many guns they had (see Table 1).

Among the households with firearms, a majority possess rifles and shotguns that fire live bullets, aligning with the most commonly cited reason for gun ownership, which is hunting (53 per cent). Only 14 per cent of gun owners mentioned having firearms for protection against potential enemies, while a larger proportion (21 per cent) stated that they kept them for self-defence against criminals. Seventy-one per cent of firearm owners purchased them, while 8 per cent received them from the country's armed forces (Small Arms Survey, 2023b).

Firearm possession appears to be more normalized nowadays in Ukraine, because fewer people declined to respond or said they 'don't know' when asked if they have guns at home. Yet it is probable that some

4 Over the four months between June and September 2023 about 50,000 new military firearms licences were issued and 87 per cent of applications were approved (Savin, 2023).

5 Those captured from the enemy or found on the battlefield and retained by individual soldiers.

6 For example, in Nigeria; see Small Arms Survey and PRESCOM (2021, pp. 45–48).

Table 1 Would you like a firearm for yourself?

	All respondents (per cent)	Men (per cent)				Women (per cent)			
		All	18–29	30–59	60+	All	18–29	30–59	60+
Yes, I have one	3.4	7.0	4.4	7.7	6.9	0.4	0.0	0.8	0.0
Yes, I would like one	22.8	37.3	41.1	36.8	36.2	10.9	14.2	14.0	4.4
No	70.4	51.3	49.4	51.5	53.1	86.1	85.8	82.7	92.0
Don't know + refused to answer	3.4	4.3	5.1	4.0	3.9	2.6	0.0	2.5	3.6

Note: This table is based on the responses of 1,750 Ukrainian adults between August and September 2023.

Source: Small Arms Survey (2023b)

respondents do not truthfully answer questions about firearm possession in their own households. For this reason, this survey used an experimental method called the Network Scale-Up Method, which the Latin America and the Caribbean Crime Victimization Survey Initiative (CoE, 2021) originally proposed to capture data on household ownership using more indirect questions.⁷ These results suggest that as many as 11 per cent of Ukrainian households may be armed. If we consider the range between self-reports and this network-based area estimation of firearm possession, when projecting the survey proportions to the entire population in the non-occupied parts of Ukraine, it suggests that somewhere between 865,000 and 1.42 million of the approximately 13 million resident households⁸ could potentially possess at least one firearm.

As the front lines become increasingly stable and the Russian Armed Forces appear less capable of seizing significant new territory, the perceived need to own firearms seems to be waning, potentially leading to reduced civilian demand for such weapons. Currently, fewer Ukrainians consider it a ‘necessity’ to possess a firearm (30 per cent) in comparison to six months ago (40 per cent) (Small Arms Survey, 2023b). Male respondents, however, are notably more inclined to affirm that ‘having weapons in this area is a necessity’ than their female counterparts (men: 44 per cent; women: 19 per cent).

Somewhat counterintuitively, the full-scale war—at least for a period—complicated Ukrainians’ ability to access firearms. In 2019 only 5 per cent of surveyed

Ukrainians thought that acquiring a firearm was very difficult or even impossible. This jumped to 33 per cent by January 2023, most likely due to surging demand. Currently, 21 per cent of people have this view, with only 11 per cent (13 per cent among men) considering it ‘easy’ to obtain a firearm (see Figure 4). Access to ammunition seems to be even more complicated for our respondents, with 10 per cent finding it easy and 25 per cent perceiving it as very difficult to nearly impossible (Small Arms Survey, 2023b).

A significant majority of women do not think that having a firearm is a necessity for themselves, with 73 per cent expressing this opinion, as opposed to 51 per cent of men. Those men and women who have firearms at home typically feel that having a gun made them safer, with 66 per cent of men and 50 per cent of women living in armed households sharing this sentiment. On the other hand, women in households that do not own a gun tend to have more negative perceptions of firearms than men living in such households. While almost half (46 per cent) of men in unarmed households say that having a weapon would make them feel safer, only one in five women agree (19 per cent) (Small Arms Survey, 2023b).

Women in general had less desire than men to own a firearm (Table 1). Virtually no women said they personally had a firearm (as opposed to 7 per cent of men), and only about one in ten of the female respondents said they would like a weapon. Elderly women were especially opposed to the idea of having a firearm. In contrast, between 43 and 46 per cent

⁷ Not only to measure the possession of firearms reported by the informant, but also to estimate the presence of firearms in the local area through the Network Scale-Up Method.

⁸ Author’s estimate.

of men in every age group either have or wish to have a firearm.

Despite women not wanting a firearm for themselves and many thinking that it is not necessary to have one, firearm proficiency appears to be regarded as an expected skill for a husband. Nearly six in ten women interviewed believed that ‘some’ (38 per cent) or ‘most’ (19 per cent) wives in their area expect their husbands to be familiar with firearms and know how to use them. Interestingly, men are even more likely to think that such proficiency is an expectation of some or most women living in their area (63 per cent in total). In contrast, only 6 per cent of men believed that most husbands in their area would expect their wives to be proficient in using firearms (Small Arms Survey, 2023b).

Conclusion

While the situation seems relatively stable, with only a slight increase in household ownership of firearms, it is still necessary to monitor household civilian possession. This is important because it can intersect with the anticipated future rise in criminal violence and intensify the severity and lethality of violent incidents, whether on the streets or in homes, including cases of domestic or intimate-partner violence. Ukrainians are already experiencing increased crime victimization and are arming themselves for security.

It is also essential to closely observe the outflow of firearms from the areas of military operations in light of the non-proliferation framework embraced by the Ukrainian authorities; however, in anticipation of a certain level of firearms proliferation despite these efforts, women—who typically display more negative perceptions towards firearms, do not personally own or carry them, and generally do not feel that their households would be safer with firearms—could be considered an ally for risk management. ●

Methodology

Ipsos Ukraine surveyed 1,750 randomly selected Ukrainian adults residing in the unoccupied territory of Ukraine between 2 August and 7 September 2023 over the telephone, using random digit dialling methodology. The survey did not cover territories under Russian occupation at the time of data collection, including Crimea and parts of the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions, thus excluding nearly 20 per cent of the pre-war population. While the estimates based on this sample facilitate our understanding of the war’s effects on the Ukrainian people, we acknowledge the risk of bias, which, apart from the inability to cover Russian-controlled territories where Ukrainian phone numbers do not work, is also due to the temporary absence of a large part of the population who are currently refugees outside of Ukraine. The December 2022–January 2023 (referred to as ‘January 2023’ in this Update) survey was also carried out by Ipsos Ukraine, and used a similar methodology, but included 2,000 respondents.⁹ The 2019 results were obtained through the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology’s nationally representative telephone omnibus survey, with 2,021 respondents (at that time only the Crimea and the occupied parts of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts were not covered) (Small Arms Survey, 2019). The detailed World Values Survey methodology can be seen in Inglehart et al. (2014), but the survey interviewed a representative sample of 1,500 Ukrainians in 2011, covering the whole country within its internationally recognized borders.

It is important to maintain a degree of caution regarding the credibility of survey respondents’ reporting, particularly concerning firearm possession. This is true even in the Ukrainian context, where civilian firearm possession has become fairly normalized and to a large extent implicitly legalized. But despite this, some people might still feel uncomfortable discussing these issues openly, leading to a risk of under-reporting and, consequently, latency.

This Situation Update has been prepared as part of the project Supporting Ukraine in Addressing the Risks of Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation Arising from the Russian War of Aggression. The primary objective of this project is to deliver timely and high-quality research concerning the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Ukraine. This is especially vital in light of the ongoing, extensive hostilities that have engulfed large areas in and around that country.

⁹ See ‘Notes on the study’ in Hideg and Watson (2023).

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About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a global centre of excellence whose mandate is to generate impartial, evidence-based, and policy-relevant knowledge on all aspects of small arms and armed violence. It is the principal international source of expertise, information, and analysis on small arms and armed violence issues, and acts as a resource for governments, policymakers, researchers, and civil society. It is located in Geneva, Switzerland, and is an associated programme of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

The Survey has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, and criminology, and collaborates with a network of researchers, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

The Survey's activities and outputs are made possible through core support as well as project funding. A full list of current donors can be accessed via the Small Arms Survey website.

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About the Ukraine project

The project, 'Supporting Ukraine in addressing small arms proliferation risks', is a joint initiative implemented with the Center for Security Studies (CENSS) and in partnership with other experts working on arms monitoring and control. It seeks to provide policymakers, practitioners, and the public with timely, relevant, and high-quality research on various aspects of small arms and light weapons proliferation in Ukraine. It does so by maintaining a baseline dataset of arms seizures and produces regular publications on illicit arms, public perceptions of arms proliferation and security, and weapons proliferation and control efforts in Ukraine. It also promotes information exchange and learning on small arms proliferation matters among CENSS and a growing and inclusive network of Ukrainian practitioners, academics, and NGOs working on security issues.

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