

Caught in the Crossfire: The Humanitarian Impacts of Small Arms

The human face is often missing from the debate about controlling the proliferation and misuse of small arms. Instead, research and policy focus almost exclusively on supply-side controls linked to production and stockpile management, transparency and oversight around the trade of small arms, technical interventions designed to improve marking and tracing of weapons, and legal or normative regimes designed to reduce their flow.



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Refugees on the move in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

to react because the evidence is limited, and, consequently, awareness of the issue has not taken root. Although there are many challenges associated with the collection of statistics on the humanitarian impacts of small arms, many humanitarian agencies and donors have been reluctant to engage in such research and data collection efforts.

The international community needs to develop a greater awareness of the humanitarian impacts of small arms in areas affected by armed violence. Engagement with the humanitarian dimensions of small arms availability and use should not only be guided by a moral imperative, but also by highly pragmatic concerns. This is because the nature of wars in which small arms are regularly used is changing.

This chapter provides a humanitarian perspective on small arms, and tries to measure the human costs associated with small arms availability and use. It highlights the plight of the hundreds of thousands of people who are fatally and non-fatally wounded by small arms every year, and the millions who are deprived of their homes and assets at gunpoint.

Small arms can contribute to an increase in the scale and pace of killing, the likelihood of illness, and the possibility of violations of international humanitarian law.

Central to the humanitarian perspective is the recognition that intentional violence perpetrated with small arms has both short and long-term consequences for human safety and well-being. Some of these impacts can be measured empirically, such as epidemiological evidence of fatal and non-fatal injuries during, or in the aftermath of, armed conflict. Equally, patterns of forced displacement and the militarization of refugee camps, declining access of civilians to basic needs, and the withdrawal of humanitarian intervention in areas affected by armed violence, are all readily quantifiable. Other effects are less easily recorded—such as the long-term economic and psychosocial burden of disability or the behavioural responses of relief workers who are exposed to small arms use on a daily basis.

Surprisingly, a comprehensive humanitarian response to small arms availability and use has yet to fully emerge. Humanitarian agencies have been slow

Appendix 4.4 Causes of UN civilian death from hostile actions: 1992–2000* (Figure 4.4)

Year	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	Total
Gunshot**	9	19	9	3	8	15	11	10	7	91
Rockets or bombs	1	1	0	3	0	0	7	2	0	14
APM	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Knife	0	0	46 ***	0	0	0	0	1	4	51
Other	1	2	8	6	3	2	1	0	5	28
Total	11	24	63	12	11	17	19	13	16	186

* UNSECOORD estimates that the UN employed an average of 70,000 staff and dependents per year over the last decade.
 ** UNSECOORD reported in 2001 that since 1992, 107 staff members had died as a result of fatal firearm injuries. The figure above (excerpted from an internal UNSECOORD report) is missing 16 unexplained firearm-related deaths.
 *** The majority of these deaths can be attributed to Rwanda.
 Source: Muggah and Berman (2001)

The humanitarian impacts of small arms are escalating in magnitude and severity chiefly because of today's new wars. As a result of the widespread availability and use of small arms in such wars, the laws, norms and principles that previously governed the conduct of combatants are increasingly under threat. For example, civilians are serving as cover for the operations of well-armed insurgency movements, as targets for reprisals, as shields against attacks, as political tools for international assistance and as a principal target of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Nor are humanitarian personnel immune: available evidence shows that the firearm homicide rate for UN civilian staff is between 17 and 25 per 100,000—an alarmingly high rating.

Recognition of the persistence of these new wars has triggered a revitalized rights-based response from a large number of actors in the human rights and humanitarian community. Recognizing a confluence between human rights law and international humanitarian law, there is widespread agreement that people affected by armed violence in war—violence carried out primarily with small arms—are entitled to the same protection as civilians living in peace. As a result of a growing appreciation of the significant human costs associated with small arms availability and use, and the infusion of a rights-based approach to humanitarian action, three overlapping responses have emerged from the humanitarian community.

The first is a supply-side approach that focuses on constraining the transfer of weapons to regimes that violate human rights and international humanitarian law. The second, a new humanitarian approach, aims to mitigate the impacts of small arms on civilians through the rigorous application of international humanitarian law and incentives to reduce the demand for weapons. The final approach is an operational perspective that stresses the consequences of arms availability on relief workers and peacekeepers and reviews the principles, context, and management governing the choice whether to use armed protection.

Over the last decade, almost 70 per cent of UN, Red Cross, and ICRC personnel killed were fatally wounded by intentional violence.

FIGURE 4.3 Security incidents in Kakuma refugee camp, 1996–2000

