
Small Arms and Light Weapons: A Public Health Approach

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The World Health Organization has identified violence as pandemic.¹ “Weapons are bad for people’s health ... Yet health professionals have been slow to recognize that the effects of weapons are, by design, a health issue, and moreover constitute a global epidemic mostly affecting civilians.”² While the specific effects of small arms in the context of conflict and violence are still being investigated, there is no doubt that their global impact is considerable.

Fact-Based Policy: The Public Health Approach

The public health approach to the problem of small arms provides a useful conceptual framework for developing “fact-based” and effective solutions. It begins with a careful analysis of the problem and an examination of the causal factors that contribute to it. It thus measures the effects of small arms not by counting weapons but by exploring their effect on population health. Approaching the small arms problem in this manner also forces the erosion of some of the barriers that have been artificially constructed by disciplines and by politics to ensure that appropriate solutions are crafted and evaluated. Primary prevention includes social development approaches to crime prevention and strategies aimed at changing the “culture of violence.” In addition, scholars maintain that until there are fundamental structural changes in weapons industries and cultural

values, measures to reduce the misuse of (and illicit trade in) small arms will be limited.³ However, while addressing root causes is undeniably important, public health also focuses on the vector/vehicle of injury. In this case, it focuses on the instrument—the weapon itself.⁴

Small arms do not in themselves cause violence, but regardless of the context—conflict, crime, “terrorism,” domestic assault, suicide—access to small arms increases the severity of violence, the number of victims, and the potential for children to become killers. Reducing the inappropriate access to small arms is thus part of the public health approach.⁵ This approach maintains:

To prevent an illness or injury, public health experts consider preventative action to control the agent and the vehicle to protect the host. In the case of injury due to gunshot wounds the agent is the force deployed by firing a gun, the vehicle is the gun or ammunition and the human host is the victim ... access constitutes the universal link—the one against which we can take action—in the chain of events leading to an injury with a small arm.⁶

Crime prevention approaches identify firearms as a “facilitator” of crime and violence. Situational crime prevention suggests that by limiting access to “facilitators” one can reduce the occurrence and lethality of certain types of violence.⁷

Definitions

Until recently, much of the work on small arms and firearms has proceeded on separate tracks, with extensive discussion concerning the distinction between “firearms” and “small arms” and the definition of “illicit trafficking.” For example, the UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms defined small arms as “revolvers and self-loading pistols; rifles and carbines; submachine-guns; assault rifles; light machine guns.”⁸ The group focused on preventing the weapons made to military specification and measures aimed at reducing illicit state-to-state transfers in violation of international treaties and codes of conduct. In contrast, the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice⁹ is focused on reducing the availability of firearms in the context of crime, particularly transnational organized crime. These firearms include military and non-military weapons. Similarly, researchers examining conflict, public health issues, and crime have tended to operate on parallel tracks even though, conceptually, there is much overlap.¹⁰

Recent discussions in small arms-affected regions have led to a rejection of the notions that small arms and firearms are distinct problems or that measures aimed at reducing the proliferation of small arms in “conflict” zones can be separated from those aimed at reducing crime. Citing the fact that the number

of small arms in civilian hands accounts for more than 80 percent of small arms stocks worldwide and that weapons designed for military purposes rapidly move into civilian markets, most governments, NGOs, and researchers have continued to insist that a comprehensive approach must address regulation of civilian possession and use of small arms.¹¹ A strategy to address illicit trafficking of “small arms” must therefore address “firearms” because of the interactions between state and civilian markets, particularly where pistols and revolvers are concerned. Despite the domestic concerns of the United States and of many Americans writing on the issue, small arms-affected regions have insisted that eroding artificial boundaries between small arms and firearms are critical. For example, the Organization of African Unity (OAU)¹² maintains that the OAU should focus on a single accepted definition of small arms that meets the real needs of Africa. It proposed a synthesis of the definition used by the UN Panel of Experts on Small Arms and that used in the draft UN Firearm Protocol, suggesting that “firearm” be used instead to encompass the full range of weapons.¹³

The Problem of Small Arms

Mortality and morbidity

The global toll of small arms is substantial, probably in excess of 500,000 per year.¹⁴ Calculating the deaths from small arms in conflict zones is difficult because of the lack of data, but it has been estimated at 300,000 per year. Typically, the deaths in armed conflicts are not differentiated according to the instrument of death as they are in other contexts. A recent study claimed that in most conflicts then underway, light weapons (handguns, rifles, shotguns, mortars, and other small arms) were a significant cause of both civilian and combatant deaths. Often the data regarding these deaths is less detailed in terms of the profiles of the victims. Nevertheless, a large percentage is civilians, conservatively estimated by the International Committee of the Red Cross at more than 35 percent.¹⁵

While precise data is not available, murders, suicides, and “accidents” involving small arms in areas not at war are probably in excess of 200,000. A recent survey by the World Health Organization (WHO) of 52 countries documented a total of 104,492 deaths in high and medium income countries;¹⁶ in 1998, there were almost 100,000 deaths (98,052) in the United States, Brazil, and Colombia combined. But the WHO estimate excluded some of the lower income countries with the highest mortality rates, such as South Africa, which had more than 11,000 small arms murders in 2000 alone.¹⁷ While data collection on small arms death and injury is incomplete, data regarding armed conflicts is even more fragmented.¹⁸

In some contexts, for every death there are additional injuries requiring hospitalization. Studies in Brazil and South Africa, for example, find almost 10 times as many small arm injuries as fatalities, while in countries such as Finland and Canada, the reported mortality and injury rates are roughly equivalent.¹⁹ This may be related to the context in which the death and injury occurs: in Brazil and South Africa, homicide is the principal problem, while in Canada and Finland, it is suicide. Fatality rates for suicides attempted with small arms tend to be higher than for attempted homicide.

The costs among vulnerable populations are particularly high in both industrialized and developing contexts. Women are seldom users of small arms but are often victims both in the context of war and in domestic violence. Guns figure prominently in the cycle of violence against women and children whether in Canada, Australia, or South Africa.²⁰ The patterns of weapons use in domestic violence are remarkably consistent across many cultures. In many developed countries, small arms are a leading cause of mortality among children and youth²¹ and these groups represent a large percentage of the victims of conflict, both as combatants and casualties.²² A number of studies have revealed that the poor are more likely to be victims of violence.²³

Other Costs of Violence: Economic, Social and Political

Violence fueled by small arms also represents a significant threat to the reinstatement of democratic governance essential to sustainable peace.²⁴ In addition, the continued availability of weapons often can lead to the breakdown of civil order and dramatic increases in lawlessness, banditry, and illicit drug trafficking. Small arms can change the balance of power and may raise the level of violence. Even if in the short term their use is for self-defense, the long-term effect may be to limit—if not negate—other ways of addressing conflict resolution by peaceful means.²⁵ In Central America, for example, the UN has been very successful in peacekeeping, but the proliferation of light weapons presents challenges to long-term stability and reconciliation.²⁶ Criminal violence in South Africa has been defined as “the greatest threat to human rights” facing the young democracy.²⁷ In Latin America, criminal violence dwarfs political violence and has a huge impact on individual security, economic development, and governance. The economic costs of violence—including the costs of policing as well as the value of lives lost—have been estimated to consume 14 percent of GDP. In Brazil, 10 percent of GDP is consumed by violence, but in Colombia, the figure rises to 25 percent.²⁸ Small arms figure prominently, accounting for over 70 percent of homicides in Columbia and 88 percent of homicides in Brazil. Even in developed countries, the economic costs of violence are staggering. In Canada, the costs of small arms death and injury (including murder,

suicide, and unintentional injuries) have been estimated at \$6.6 billion per year.²⁹ In addition to the costs measured in terms of the economic value of lost life, violence in the United States diverts health, policing, and social resources from other problems.

Violence and the prevalence of weapons also create psychological stress that fuels other health problems and creates insecurity. Living in arms-infested environments often yields observable symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as overwhelming anxiety and a lack of motivation.³⁰ Other secondary effects include problems related to the blood supply. Not only are blood availability and transfusion key issues in developing countries, but emergency responses to large-scale violence often do not accommodate careful testing for HIV and can result in additional problems.³¹

Diversion and Disruption of Health Care Resources

In addition to diverting resources from other health and social services, violence has been identified as a major impediment to the provision of basic health care. In South Africa, scarce hospital resources are absorbed in dealing with violence and health care personnel are increasingly themselves the target of violence. Even hospital wards are not safe. Treating small arms injuries absorbs considerable emergency room resources.³²

Many field personnel have observed that more injured victims die during transport than at the treatment facilities. This statistic reveals the fact that the medical transportation infrastructure cannot carry the burden created by increased arms proliferation. The widespread availability of small arms among military, militia, criminal elements, youth gangs, and others formerly unarmed contributes to the limited availability of local personnel who are trained in first aid and wartime surgery.

Small Arms and the Global Culture of Violence

The “culture of violence” is both a cause and an effect of small arms and light weapons availability. With such a culture as a context, individuals are more likely to resolve problems using guns. For example, a Cambodian study reported that in areas with high levels of weapons possession, youths threaten people with guns over simple conflicts such as traffic violations.³³ Increased weapon availability fuels this “culture of violence.” Relief workers have noted increases in the number of common thieves who are armed and the number of armed military and police personnel who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs and carrying small arms.³⁴ Similar effects have been observed in terms of the militarization of culture in South Africa.³⁵ The demand for small arms—

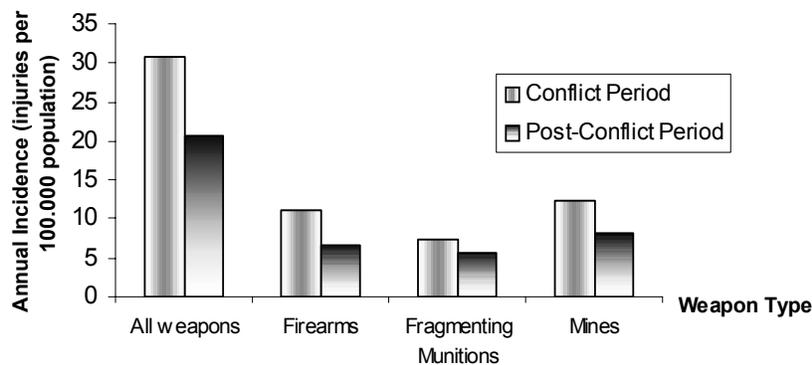
particularly for military weapons and handguns that serve little practical purpose—may be fueled by violent movies and television which tends to link heroism with guns and violence.³⁶ Certainly there are complex interactions between supply and demand. Criminologist Rosemary Gartner has suggested that stricter controls on small arms both reflect and shape values, particularly the “culture of violence,” in the same way legislation has been observed to have long term effects on other behaviors.³⁷ The notion that the unrestrained access of small arms fuels a “culture of violence” is by no means new or restricted to emerging democracies:

By our readiness to allow arms to be purchased at will and fired at whim; by allowing our movies and television screens to teach our children that the hero is one who masters the art of shooting and the technique of killing ... we have created an atmosphere in which violence and hatred have become popular pastimes.³⁸
- Martin Luther King, November, 1963

The Accessibility Thesis

Research has shown that rates of small arms death and injury are linked to small arms accessibility. In post-conflict situations, the presence of small arms in society fuels violence even after formal conflicts have ceased. A study comparing injuries during conflict and peacetime revealed that weapons injury declined only 20 to 40 percent after “peace” was established. Another study contrasted two areas in Afghanistan—one where there was “peace” and one where there was armed conflict between factions. It revealed a high rate of non-combat injury even in the peaceful region—80 deaths per 100,000 people, half of which were related to small arms.³⁹

Figure 1: Injuries in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations

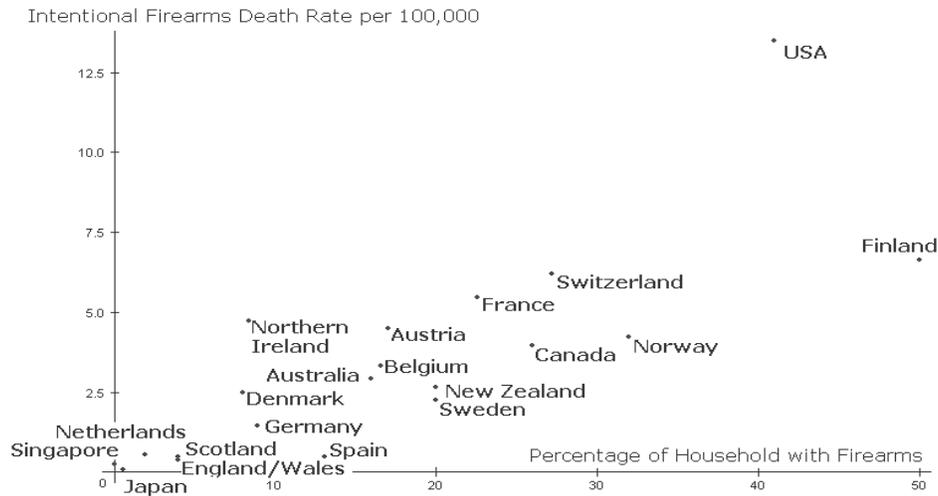


Source: ICRC, *Arms Availability and the Situation of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, Geneva, ICRC, 1999.

Many working on peacebuilding and disarmament argue that the link between violence levels and access to weapons is self-evident.⁴⁰ When small arms are not removed following conflicts, mortality rates remain high as interpersonal violence substitutes for war. The proliferation of small arms also leads to an escalation of a domestic “arms race,” causing widespread criminality and the breakdown of legal norms. “The proliferation of these weapons has facilitated an increase in the scale and duration of conflict in many states and, in some cases, has made the outbreak of armed violence more likely.”⁴¹

In industrialized countries, studies have shown that accessibility is related to firearm death rates. Studies comparing homes where small arms are present to those where they are not have concluded that the risk of death increases substantially if firearms are in the home.⁴² Other approaches have examined the rates of death from firearms across regions,⁴³ cities,⁴⁴ high-income countries,⁴⁵ and respondents to victimization surveys.⁴⁶ While more research could illuminate the interaction between the range of factors shaping the demand for firearms, at the societal level and at the individual level (criminal activity, drug use, parental factors)⁴⁷ there is a growing body of literature which reveals a relationship between access to firearms and the firearm death rates and crime.⁴⁸ This underpins the notion that reducing access to firearms through regulation will reduce the lethality of assaults and suicide attempts.

Figure 2: Intentional Firearms Death Rate vs. Percentage of Households with Firearms



Source: ICRC, *Arms Availability and the Situation of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, Geneva, ICRC, 1999.

The problems of evaluating the impact of any intervention on complex problems such as crime and violence have been well documented, but a number of studies have reinforced the notion that limiting the accessibility of small arms is an effective strategy. A comparison between Canada and the United States is illustrative. While similar in other dimensions, Canada has national laws that require licensing and registration of all firearms and restrict access to handguns. Statistics show these laws have had an effect. Canada has roughly 1 million handguns (about 15 percent of 6-7 million total firearms), while the United States has more than 77 million handguns (approximately 38 percent of 200 million total firearms). The U.S. murder rate with all types of firearms was 4.4 per 100,000, while Canada's was .5 per 100,000. Murders without guns in the two countries also show a similar relationship. For example, in 1998, the United States had a non-firearm homicide rate approximately 1.8 times that of Canada. In the same year, the handgun murder rate in the United States was 3.3 per 100,000 people—14.5 times higher than Canada's (0.23).⁴⁹

Table 1: United States/Canada Comparison

	Year	Canada	United States	U.S./Canada
Population	1998	30.2 m	270 m	8.9x
Number of All Firearms	1998	7.4 m	222 m	30x
Number of Handguns	1998	1.2 m	76 m	63.3x
Guns per capita	1997	.25	.82	3.3x
All Murders	1998	1.8	6.7	3.8x
Murders with Firearms	1998	0.5	4.4	9x
Murders with Handguns	1998	0.2	3.3	14.5x
Murders without Guns	1998	1.3	2.3	1.8x
Robberies with Guns	1998	18	63	3.5x
Robberies without Guns	1998	78	102	1.3x

All rates per 100,000 population.

Source: Wendy Cukier, "Firearm Availability: Canada Versus the US," *Firearm Availability and Misuse, The Accessibility Thesis, Aiming for Prevention, Helsinki, IPPNW, 2001.*

Perhaps even more surprisingly, studies have shown that even in very violent contexts, there may be evidence to suggest that restrictions on small arms can have an impact. A study of the effects of a ban on the carrying of firearms on holidays, election days, and on weekends after paydays in Bogota and Cali—coupled with rigorous enforcement—had an effect on small arms violence.⁵⁰ The incidence of homicide decreased by 13 percent in Bogota and 14 percent in Cali during the intervention periods, although other factors may have contributed.⁵¹ The complexity of factors influencing death rates and crime, particularly over time, makes longitudinal analysis particularly difficult. At the

same time, the political debates over firearms regulation—particularly in the United States—have made it difficult to mobilize domestically and internationally on these initiatives,⁵² despite the fact that some researchers have concluded that legislation regulating firearms reduces death and injury to a greater extent than does most other types of legislation.⁵³

Illicit Markets

Small arms are light-weight and “person-portable” weapons, including revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, light machine-guns, sub-machine guns (the Uzi), and assault rifles (the AK-47). Some might include hand grenades, landmines, and small mortars in the definition.⁵⁴ Military assault weapons, which are characterized by large-capacity magazines and semi- or fully automatic fire, are particularly efficient and require little skill. With such weapons, a single gunman can slaughter dozens of people in a short period of time.

To use a public health approach to reduce the proliferation and misuse of small arms, it is critical to start with a systematic analysis of a) the patterns of misuse including the types of weapons used, b) the causal factors and the links in the chain, c) ways of breaking that chain, and d) an evaluation of the interventions.

Understanding the instrument of violence

It is very clear that the patterns vary from region to region—in some, the principal problem is conflict; in others it is crime; in other areas such as Colombia and South Africa, the distinction between conflict and crime is virtually meaningless. Similarly the patterns of small arms that are misused and the sources of supply vary significantly. In some regions, most deaths are associated with military weapons. In others, most deaths are caused by handguns or even hunting rifles. In other regions it is a mix. While empirical evidence is limited, systematic analysis is key to avoid developing interventions that do not address the problem. Moreover, from a health perspective, the constructions of “conflict” and “crime” are not particularly meaningful or useful; the focus is the protection of human life within the context of human rights and humanitarian law.

In a country such as South Africa, for example, criminal violence has far outstripped overtly political violence as a threat to human rights. Despite the widespread claims made regarding the proliferation of military assault weapons in South Africa, the bulk of the weapons used are actually handguns, many of them at one time legally owned by civilians in South Africa. Military-style weapons such as assault rifles have represented a small proportion of guns used in crime.⁵⁵ Many states in Southern Africa have strict domestic controls on firearms and correspondingly lower crime rates; the smuggling and legal purchase

of firearms from South Africa, where controls are far less strict, affect Lesotho, Botswana, and Malawi.⁵⁶ Similarly in Brazil⁵⁷ and Colombia, most of the weapons recovered are actually handguns, not military assault weapons. In Latin America, small arms diverted from legal markets appear to be the principal problem: 80 percent of illegal small arms in Mexico originate in the United States, as do

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approximately 50 percent of illegal handguns in Canada. Proximity is not the only factor, however, as many of the small arms possessed by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) originated in the United States. Guns in Japan come from the United States and China but also from South Africa. In Asia and parts of Europe, state supplies from the former Soviet Union

appear to be the major problem both in ethnic conflict and in crime,⁵⁸ but there are anecdotes concerning seizures of weapons from dealers in Austria, Finland, Estonia, Poland, the United States, and elsewhere. In India, the provisions of the Arms Act and other regulations strictly regulate all types of firearms, but illegal weapons proliferate due to porous borders and the absence of controls in neighboring states.⁵⁹ Globalization has promoted trade in illegal as well as legal goods and focuses attention on the need for international strategies to counter illicit trafficking and, in particular, the need for harmonization and information-sharing.⁶⁰ The links are transnational, with examples of small arms being recovered after being transferred through many points in distribution networks that span the world.⁶¹

Despite the preoccupation with small arms transfers between states, there are more small arms in the possession of civilians worldwide than in the possession of governments and police.⁶² Furthermore, despite the attention given to military assault weapons in countries such as Brazil, South Africa, and Columbia, handguns are a major problem. The reluctance of the U.S. government and many American researchers to address this problem does not change this reality or the reality that civilian-owned small arms—particularly in the United States—fuel illicit small arms markets and cause deaths worldwide.

Moreover, virtually every “illegal” small arm began as a legal small arm. Careful analysis of channels through which small arms are diverted from “legal” to “illegal” markets and purposes are critical. An analysis of more than 200 reported incidents of illicit trafficking suggests that misuse and diversion occur

through a variety of mechanisms, but generally the evidence suggests that illegal small arms fall into three broad categories:

- Legally held small arms that are misused by their lawful owner (whether states, organizations or individuals);
- Legal small arms that are diverted—the “grey” market—sold by legal owners to unauthorized individuals, illegally sold, stolen, or diverted through other means;
- Illegally manufactured and distributed small arms (although these account for a small fraction).

Diversion takes many forms. One thing is clear, however: a comprehensive strategy must address all aspects of the problem. Some of the means of diversion which have been documented include:

- State to state transfers. The principal suppliers of military weapons worldwide include China, Russia, and the United States. Information about sales of small arms is limited, but the United States sold or transferred \$463 million worth of small arms and ammunition to 124 countries in 1998. Of these countries, about 30 were at war or experiencing persistent civil violence in 1998.
- Not only are weapons misused by states, but weapons supplied to one-time “allies” are often turned against the suppliers. This is often termed “blowback” or the “boomerang effect.” During the 1980s, for example, at least \$2 billion worth of arms and military training were transferred to Islamic rebel groups (the *mujabideen*) in an effort to topple the Soviet-backed Afghanistan government. The CIA funneled arms and money through the Pakistani Army’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The Taliban were armed with weapons left by the Soviets, weapons left over from the U.S. arms pipeline of the 1980s, and arms recently sent by Pakistan, which has leftover stores from the 1980s and acquires other items on the international black market.⁶³ The CIA allocated \$65 million in the 1990s to try to purchase the Stingers back off the black market, with limited success.⁶⁴
- There is substantial evidence of illegal sales by legal sellers whether in military or civilian markets. More than half of the weapons submitted by local and state police to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms for tracing originated with less than one half of one percent of the United States’ 180,000 licensed dealers.⁶⁵ Dishonest dealers have engaged in legal firearms trade while diverting some of their firearms to illicit markets. Several cases of this type have been identified by major police investigations such as Operation ABONAR in the United Kingdom.⁶⁶

- There are also many documented cases of military weapons, police weapons, and weapons recovered in crime re-entering the secondary market through theft or illegal sales. In Australia, military personnel falsified records to conceal the theft of firearms from national stockpiles.⁶⁷ Police in South Africa have reported more than 14,000 firearms lost or stolen.⁶⁸
- Diversion of civilian held small arms also fuels the illicit supply. In many countries, most small arms recovered in crime appear to have at one time been legally owned by states or by civilians. In countries where legally owned small arms are more readily available, civilian weapons fuel the illegal markets.⁶⁹ In the United States alone, where there are 260 million people with an estimated 200 million firearms, it has been estimated that 500,000 firearms are stolen each year—by definition entering the illegal market. Inadequate controls over gun sales also fuel illegal markets.⁷⁰
- Unregulated sales. For example, gun shows have proved to be a major source of illicit guns to international illegal markets.⁷¹
- The falsification of import and export documents aggravates the problem. Recently a Canadian dealer was charged with smuggling more than 40,000 mislabeled military small arms and components into the United States that were bound for the Middle East.⁷² A major consignment of parts for M-2 automatic rifles originating in Vietnam and destined for Mexico was found in a sealed container in San Diego falsely labeled as “hand tools and strap hangers.”⁷³ A corrupt official in Estonia falsified paperwork for 1,310 handguns and pump action shotguns purchased from Finland. In another case, a Finnish official granted a permit to import 25,000 AK-47s and 40,000 handguns from Poland and Austria. The weapons “disappeared,” although several have been recovered in crime.⁷⁴
- In general, illegally manufactured firearms are a small proportion of the problem. For example, in South Africa, of the firearms seized by the South African Police Service in 1998 approximately 15 percent were home-made.⁷⁵ Reactivation of firearms is also a problem. For example, in Great Britain, more than 70 deactivated Mac 10 machine pistols were imported from the United States and reactivated by a dealer.⁷⁶

Public Health Approach to Small Arms

Fact-based interventions

More data regarding the extent of the problem and the causal factors is needed, and the public health approach places a priority on continuing to collect empirical surveillance data. In addition, it focuses on interventions that are closely linked to the causal chain that leads to death and injury. As noted above, extensive work has established the strong link between mortality and morbidity and the

proliferation of small arms. This fact provides general support for measures aimed at improving controls over legal small arms in order to reduce the risk of misuse and diversion. At the same time, considerably more research is needed in order to better understand the contextual factors and to assess the effectiveness of particular forms of interventions.

Many states and most NGOs, including the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA),⁷⁷ have maintained that much more needs to be done to prevent the diversion and misuse of small arms. The priority assigned to measures by governments and some NGOs, however, is not necessarily tied to empirical evidence of their relative effectiveness. Rather, political expediency and symbolic significance are often factors in policy-making at the national and international levels. For example, the United States was successful in removing the references on the duty of states to provide adequate regulation over the possession and use of firearms from the final program of action of the UN 2001 Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms in All Its Aspects,⁷⁸ under pressure from the National Rifle Association. Similarly, even though research has suggested that many “social marketing” or educational efforts are the least cost-effective injury prevention strategies (“say no to drugs”), they are often the most politically attractive, affording high visibility.

The principles of sound public health approaches to the problem of small arms have been outlined in a variety of contexts but include a multilevel strategy:

Addressing the root causes of violence

- Whether in the context of crime, injury, or conflict, most strategies must begin by examining and addressing the root causes of violence. While this is a complex and long-term project, it is essential as many of the other interventions proposed are essentially aimed at “harm reduction.”

Controls at the point of manufacture to reduce the lethality of products

- Marking at point of production and bans on particular types of weapons or ammunition. While the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime includes a regime for marking all firearms destined for commercial markets, it has also been proposed that a legally binding global convention is also needed for all small arms traded by states.

Measures to reduce the risk of misuse

Controls throughout the product life to reduce the probability that individuals, organizations, or governments likely to misuse small arms will gain access to them:

- Measures to reduce the risk that arms will be sold to states likely to misuse them. The European Union Program for Combating and Preventing Illicit Trafficking in Conventional Arms (1997) establishes criteria for the export of small arms and record keeping aimed at preventing the sales to conflict zones and to states likely to violate human rights. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Moratorium on the Import, Export and Manufacture of Small Arms was aimed at stemming the flow of small arms. The need for global standards must again be emphasized.
- Measures to control sales include international standards for import, export, transfer, and brokering of small arms sales whether between states or commercial shipments. Examples include the Organization of American States (OAS) Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, adopted in November 1997, and the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime.⁷⁹ Measures at the national level are also essential given the extent to which illegal sales fuel the market.
- Domestic regulation of civilian possession, for example, licensing firearm owners, is specifically aimed at reducing the risk that dangerous or unstable individuals will gain access to firearms or that firearms will be diverted to illegal markets and was proposed in the 1997 Resolution of the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.⁸⁰ A ban on civilian possession of military weapons was also originally proposed in the UN 2001 Programme of Action. Despite continued opposition by the United States,⁸¹ it is clear that strong domestic regulation of civilian possession and use are critical.⁸² Efforts of the international community to establish norms for domestic regulation have been consistently blocked by the United States, owing largely to the influence of the National Rifle Association. At the UN 2001 Conference, the United States forced the removal of any reference to the responsibility of states to adequately regulate civilian possession of firearms.⁸³

Safeguards and accountability

Measures to reduce the likelihood of diversion from legal to illegal purposes:

- Safe storage—whether of state, police, or civilian weapons—is aimed at reducing the problems of “leakage” from state-owned firearms stocks
- There are a wide range of proposals for improving stockpile management,⁸⁴ including improved record-keeping and registration procedures.

Measures to reduce the number of weapons in circulation or access:

- International standards have been proposed for the destruction of confiscated or surplus small arms and light weapons. Weapons collection programs in post-conflict areas are critical to the establishment of lasting peace—otherwise the risk of high levels of violence remains.⁸⁵ Decommissioning the IRA, for example, has proved to be a huge impediment to lasting peace in Northern Ireland.⁸⁶ Amnesties and buybacks have been legislated and enforced in support of changes to domestic laws as well. The value of voluntary weapons collection programs in other contexts, however, appears to be largely educational.⁸⁷
- There has been renewed emphasis on local measures, for example, more strictly controlling access in public places. Some countries, such as South Africa, have legislated “gun free zones” to reduce risk.

Improved injury control

- From a public health perspective, injury prevention must be also supported by injury control. Timely and appropriate treatment of injuries due to small arms can significantly reduce mortality. Consequently, improved emergency services, training etc. are critical parts of any strategy.

Enforcement

- Conventions, laws and resolutions are merely words on paper, and while they may have symbolic import, their effective implementation is critical. Enforcement mechanisms and accountability are essential and in many parts of the world this means improving capacity to use these laws.

Community development and awareness

- The development of multi-sectoral coalitions and improved cooperation is also critical to addressing the global problem and to ensuring the implications are understood from a variety of perspectives. This begins within arms affected communities but reaches all the way to the international agencies. Improved cooperation and information exchange is critical.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Monitoring and evaluation of initiatives and exchange of information on demonstrated “best practices” is fundamental as feedback to the development of effective and integrated strategies to affect change.

Conclusion

Given the enormity of the problem of illicit trafficking in small arms—in the context of both crime and of conflict—it is surprising that there has been so

little research on its dimensions and effects. One of the major challenges in understanding the problem, quite apart from the limited availability of empirical evidence, results from the inherent complexity, diversity and political sensitivity of the issue in many contexts. This article illustrates that there is much to be learned about the problem of illicit trafficking. The dynamics of the problem, the types of small arms, and their sources vary considerably from region to region. At the same time, there is enough empirical and anecdotal evidence to draw some broad conclusions.

One critical conclusion that can be ascertained from this discussion is that the vast majority of illegal small arms began as legal small arms, whether traded illegally by states, diverted from military stockpiles, or bought in legal civilian markets. Consequently, the interplay between licit and illicit markets coupled with the durability of firearms and uneven national regulatory standards results in very different market dynamics. This interplay also illustrates the need for multi-faceted intervention strategies. Finally, while effective crime, conflict, and injury prevention all rest on addressing root causes of violence—the demand for weapons, if you will—there are also opportunities to reduce the lethality of violence by restricting access to small arms. The research to date, while limited, does suggest some potential intervention points but clearly, more research is required. ❌

Notes

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3. R.T. Naylor, “The Rise of the Modern Arms Black Market and the Fall of Supply Side Controls,” in Virginia Gamba ed. *Society under Siege: Crime, Violence and Illegal Weapons*, (Cape Town: ISS, 1997).
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Wendy Cukier

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