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Half a Billion and Still Counting: Global Firearms Stockpiles

The total number and global distribution of small arms has been one of the great enigmas of international peace and security. The automatic rifle—the small arm par excellence—has been in continuous production for more than fifty years, yet there are few reliable statistics on production or inventories. This chapter focuses on establishing the minimum number of firearms in the world today.

New research has revealed that there are at least 550 million firearms around the world. This includes weapons under the control of police, government armed forces, insurgencies and some private owners. This figure is a conservative estimate. It does not include a large proportion of the world's legal privately owned guns, notably privately owned firearms in countries such as China, France, India and Pakistan. Nor was it possible to include the world's illegally owned firearms. A comprehensive total, including these missing categories, would be greater by tens to hundreds of millions more. This figure also does not include other kinds of small arms and light weapons.

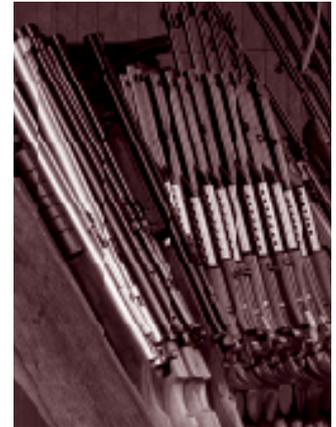
Figure 2.10 Comparative distribution of known global firearms in 2001

| Group | Estimated number of firearms | Percentage of total |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Police firearms | 18,000,000 | 3.0 % |
| Government armed forces | 226,000,000 | 41.0 % |
| Private legally owned | 305,000,000+ | 56.0 % + |
| Insurgents and non-state forces | 910,000 | 0.2 % |
| Private illegally owned | Unknown | Unknown |
| Approximate total | 550,910,000 + | 100.0 % |

Firearms are most common among countries with highly permissive legislation and traditions of public gun ownership, a highly diverse group ranging from Afghanistan and Yemen to Switzerland and the United States. With some 84 firearms for every 100 people, the United States alone is home to almost fifty per cent of the world's known firearms. In a second group of countries like Canada, New Zealand, much of Europe and some Latin American countries, firearms are still commonplace, with approximately 25 guns per 100 people.

Among countries like Argentina, Brazil, Eastern Europe and Russia, firearms are more unusual. But even in these countries civilian ownership is substantially greater than the arsenals of the police and armed forces. Only among the fourth, and most restrictive, group of countries like Japan and the United Kingdom do official firearms equal or outnumber those in private hands.

Firearms possession and ownership falls into five basic categories. The most visible of all firearms are police weapons. Ironically, these actually appear to be a small proportion of all global firearms, constituting some 3 per cent of global firearms, roughly 18 million in all. Among the second group, the firearms of government armed forces are estimated here based on a few countries for which accurate data is available. This leads to a conservative estimate of at least 226 military firearms internationally, or some 41 per cent of the known global total.



Reuters/Emmy Nurabani

There are at least 550 million known firearms around the world. If all privately and illegally owned firearms were included, the number would be greater by tens to hundreds of millions more.

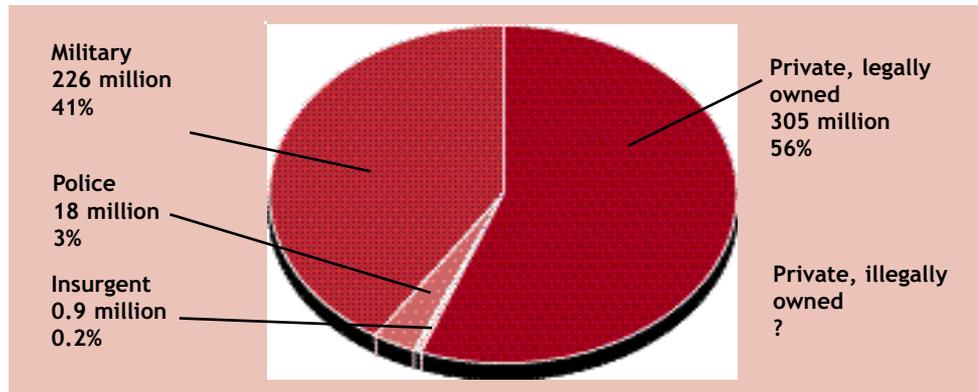
Secrecy about police firearms often arises from their desire to prevent criminals and terrorists from knowing how little they have.

In the late 1990s the greatest flow of illicit small arms to insurgents went to Sub-Saharan Africa.

Third are the firearms of non-state actors, mostly insurgencies. These almost certainly are the most destabilizing of all small arms, but they also are the smallest category, amounting to approximately one million firearms, less than one per cent of the global total. Although their numbers are not great, their impact often is. The greatest concentration of insurgent firearms today appears to be in Central Africa.

The fourth group examined is legally owned weapons of private individuals. Based on the most reliable sources available, the total number of legal, privately owned guns is at least 305 million, or a little more than 55 per cent of the known global total. But this figure is far from complete, excluding many important countries. The fifth and worst understood category is illegally owned private firearms, which cannot be reliably estimated.

Figure 2.5 Known global firearms, 2001



More and more governments are willing to provide information on the official firearms they control and the private guns they license. A more complete picture of global small arms will depend not only on the release of national statistics, but also on greater international action to encourage transparency regarding official small arms stockpiles and licensed firearms, and systematic international public surveys to establish the extent of illegal firearms ownership.

For further information and current developments on small arms issues please check our website at www.smallarmssurvey.org