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After the Smoke Clears: Assessing the Effects of Small Arms Availability

Small arms have direct effects, measured by the hundreds of thousands of intentional and unintentional deaths and injuries that occur every year as a result of armed violence. They also have indirect effects, such as overburdening medical systems, contributing to the privatisation of violence, fuelling gun cultures, contributing to massive refugee flows and undermining economic development.

Is there a relationship between arms availability and violence? According to research carried out for this chapter, the answer is a qualified yes. While the presence of small arms increases the risk of intentional and accidental death and injury, this relationship is far from straightforward. Firearm availability affects the modus operandi of aggravated assault and the likelihood of death or serious injury during a dispute or act of crime. For example, handgun-related murders are 15 times more common per capita in the United States, where guns are readily available, than in Canada, which has more restrictive gun laws.

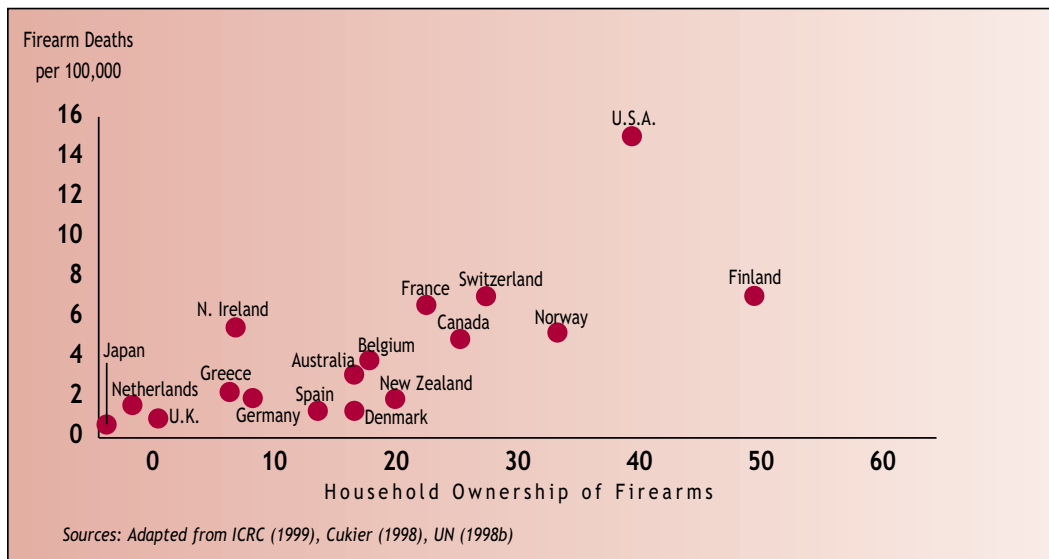
Other factors, such as social and cultural norms also condition the likelihood that small arms will be used. Even in situations of mass violence where firearms were not the most prominent weapons, their presence can be essential in allowing killing to occur. During the Rwandan genocide of 1994, for example, gunmen used small arms to coerce and 'round-up' hundreds of thousands of victims who later were killed mostly with bladed weapons.



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There is some evidence that various types of violent crime are positively associated with gun ownership rates and availability.

Figure 6.2 Firearm ownership and deaths in industrialized countries



Statistics provide a preliminary assessment of the direct effects of firearm violence. In Latin America, for example, firearm homicides occur at twice the global rate. In the late-1990s Colombia had 54 firearm homicides for every 100,000 people per year, compared to 27 and 26 in South Africa and Brazil respectively. Meanwhile the United States has consistently experienced firearm homicide rates of 6 and the United Kingdom less than 0.2 per 100,000. Though many exceptions exist, the more weapons there are in a society, the more likely they are to be used.

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An estimated 300,000 intentional firearms deaths occur each year as a result of armed conflict. An additional 200,000 people die intentionally in 30 countries ordinarily classified as 'peaceful'. Millions more suffer life-threatening injury. Firearms are the most lethal instruments of suicide: 93 per cent of suicide attempts with guns are successful, compared to only 30 per cent without guns. Specific groups are especially vulnerable. In the United States firearm injury is the leading cause of preventable death among African-American men. In Brazil, guns account for 60 per cent of all deaths among youth. Evidence suggests that less developed countries face higher risks of firearm related homicide, while industrialised countries grapple more with firearm suicides.

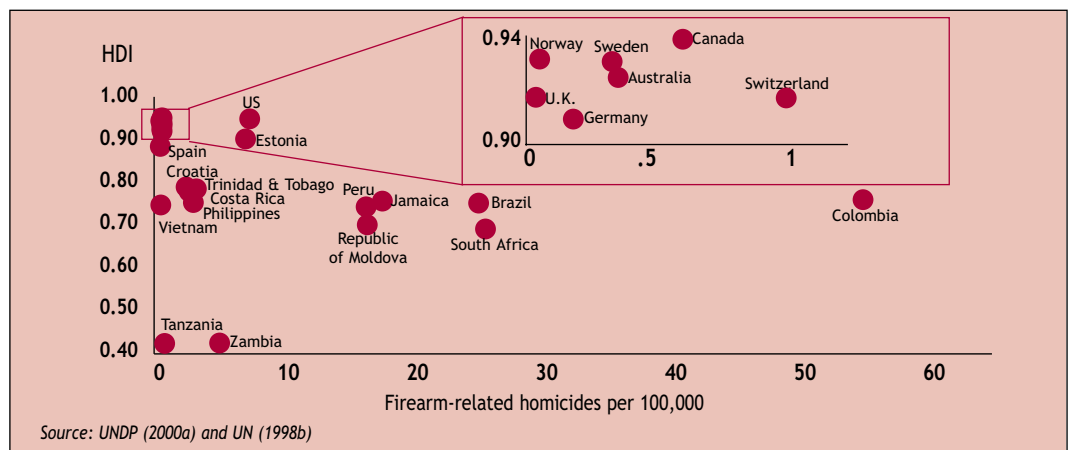
In considering the indirect effects, the most immediate are medical expenditures for treatment of firearm-related injuries. In 1997, for example, in North America for every person killed there were three people injured by firearms. The average medical cost per victim was US\$ 154,000. The total costs, including lost productivity were estimated at roughly US\$ 100 billion annually in the late 1990s.

The proliferation of small arms, whether it feeds conflict or crime, contributes to unproductive investment in private security services. In the United States alone, private security firms employ more than four million people. On a global scale, revenues from the private security industry topped US\$ 97.6 billion in 1990 and are expected to rise above US\$ 400 billion by 2010. Private military companies, paid to guarantee the security of governments, political figures, and/or large multinational companies, now operate in many parts of the world.

Small arms proliferation discourages foreign investment and damages the prospects for economic development.

Armed conflict and widespread social violence are concentrated in the world's poorest countries, reducing or even reversing economic gains. Farmers are forced off their land, city-dwellers are denied access to work, and youth with few prospects for gainful employment are attracted to arms to secure their livelihoods. Small arms proliferation discourages foreign direct investment and destroys essential infrastructure. During 1998, for example, armed violence cost Latin America an estimated 12 per cent of its GDP in lost human capital, investment and capital flight. The unchecked spread of small arms damages the prospects for economic development by encouraging investors to take their money elsewhere.

Figure 6.7 Is there a relationship between human development and firearm homicide?



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