

Fewer Blanks:

GLOBAL FIREARMS STOCKPILES

Continuous research has gradually improved knowledge about global small arms stockpiles. Global stockpiles, estimated last year to number at least 639 million small arms, continue to grow steadily. Regional dynamics can be very different. This chapter shows that some regions previously thought to have few small arms actually have large quantities in public hands. Other regions widely assumed to hold a lot actually have relatively few.



A Brazilian soldier guards a mountain of confiscated firearms to be destroyed by the government of Rio de Janeiro.

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Public gun ownership in Europe is much higher than commonly believed, with 17.4 guns per 100 people in the 15 EU countries.

The largest numbers of publicly owned firearms continue to be found in the United States, where there are an estimated 238 million to 276 million private firearms. With roughly 83 to 96 guns for every 100 people, the United States is approaching a statistical level of one gun per person.

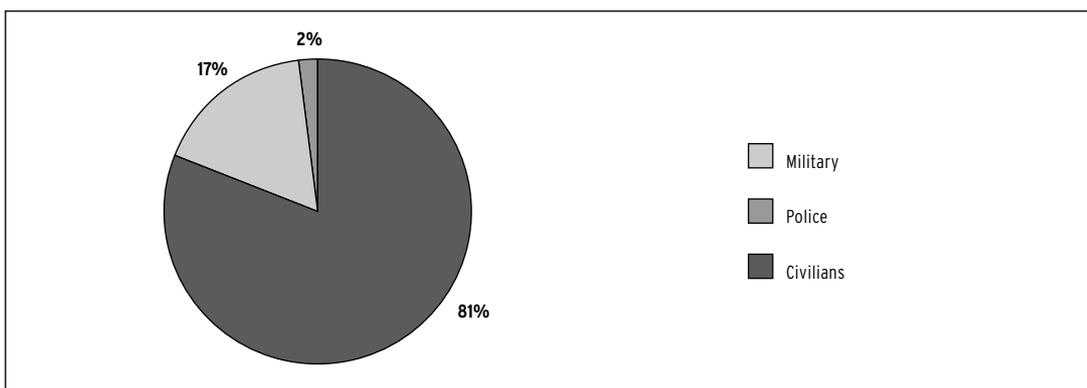
While it is tempting to contrast peace-loving Europe against gun-wielding America, careful analysis shows that this is not confirmed by facts. Contrary to assumptions that

Europeans are virtually disarmed, the 15 countries of the European Union alone have an estimated 84 million firearms. Of these, 80 percent or 67 million guns are in civilian hands. In countries like Finland, France, and Germany, gun laws are relatively permissive and rates of gun ownership may be about one-half the American level. Regulations tightly limit ownership in only a few European countries, such as the Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Across most of the continent public officials acknowledge that unlicensed owners and unregistered guns greatly outnumber legal ones.

Small arms stockpiles often are exaggerated. Sometimes, as illustrated by a study of Macedonia, this serves political purposes. Other exaggerations may reflect little more than habit. Although it is widely believed that Afghanistan has ten million small arms or more, careful analysis places the actual total between 500,000 and 1.5 million weapons. While far lower than previous estimates, such a total is more than enough to permit a rapid start of large-scale warfare if the government of Hamid Karzai should collapse. It also suggests that better small arms control may not be impossible.

The total number of small arms in Afghanistan probably is between 0.5 and 1.5 million.

Figure 2.1 Approximate distribution of firearms in the European Union



Exaggeration of stockpiles has also become routine in Africa. Contrary to the impression created by images of unrestrained warfare and crime, guns are less common in Africa than most other regions. Among the 44 countries of sub-Saharan Africa there probably are no more than 30 million firearms in all, including civilian, insurgent, and government owners. This is enough guns to perpetuate fighting in many countries and raise the danger of criminal violence in many others, but not enough to render the situation totally beyond hope of control.

Israel has 363,000 registered small arms in public hands, or 6 for every 100 residents.

Other regions still remain virtual blank spots on the map of global stockpiles. China is an especially important, and potentially very large, unknown. Virtually no hard data is available on the Middle East, with the exception of Israel and Jordan.



Afghan children squat next to grenade launchers handed in by local villagers to the UN as part of a voluntary weapons collection effort.

The chapter uses recent crimes and acts of terror to show how misleading it can be to assume that the greatest dangers come exclusively from the most numerous and advanced small arms. They challenge the logic that divides small arms into easy categories—legal and illegal—to guide policy.

Among the 44 countries of sub-Saharan Africa, there probably are no more than 30 million firearms.

The terror attacks of 11 September 2001 seem to have had little effect on the size of the global stockpile.

Its implications were greater

for stockpile management, redoubling official vigilance, and complicating criminal and insurgent access to small arms. While far from conclusive, the observations here suggest that stockpiles are becoming harder to move. Older problems with weapons-saturated post-conflict environments are being handled somewhat more skillfully. While there is no evidence that reforms have substantially reduced the overall global stockpile, they do seem to be slowing the speed with which weapons shift from one region to another.