

A Common Tool:

FIREARMS, VIOLENCE, AND CRIME



A woman holds up a photo of her son, who fell victim to gun violence in 1993, during a news conference in Los Angeles in May 1999.

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Armed violence, gun suicide, and unintentional shootings are a global concern, even in nations at peace. State agents wield small arms to violate, directly and indirectly, a wide range of human rights, including the rights to life, liberty, and security of person.

Meanwhile, a growing human security movement aims to hold states legally accountable for controlling high levels of armed violence perpetrated by private citizens, particularly in the absence of basic measures to promote public safety and security. Others see high rates of armed violence as justification for an individual's right to self-defence, a concept frequently used to legitimize private gun ownership. These conflicting interpretations highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between small arms and societal violence, defined here as the use of firearms in crime, suicide, and unintentional shootings.

This chapter considers the following questions:

- How prevalent is non-conflict-related gun violence?
- Does the accessibility of firearms affect overall levels of violence?
- How do communities experience and react to gun violence?

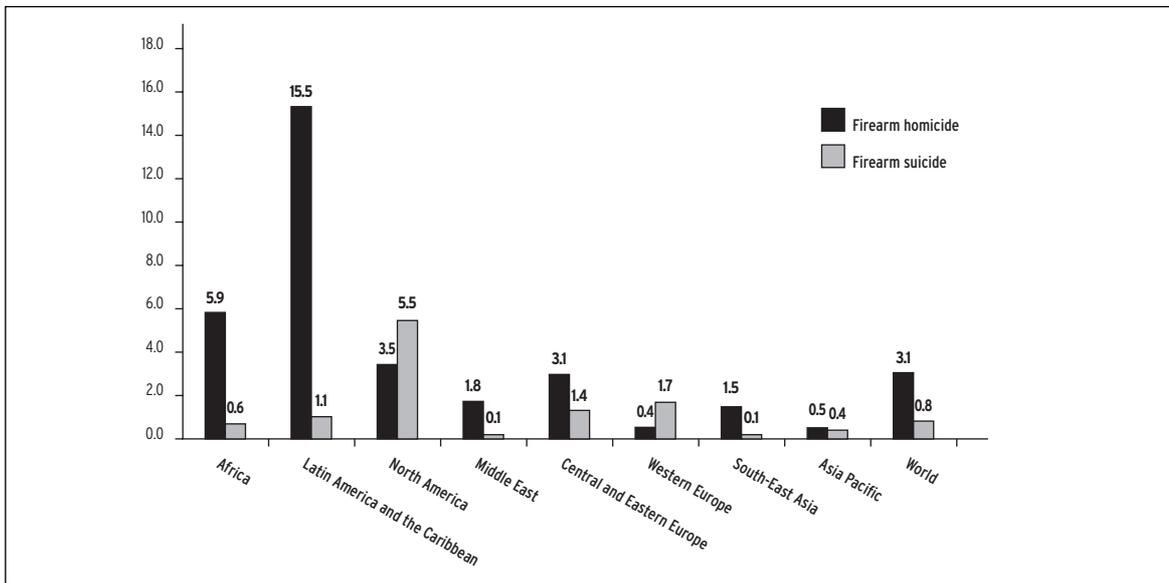
The chapter's first section draws on existing international evidence to measure the extent of gun violence at the global and regional levels, relying primarily on rates of firearm use in homicide and suicide. It shows that at least 200,000 non-conflict-related firearm deaths occur globally each year. Firearm homicides represent the vast majority of these deaths, with small arms used less frequently in suicides. Firearm homicides are most common in Latin America and the Caribbean, whose rates are five times higher than the world average (see Figure 6.3). Almost half the world's gun suicides occur in North America and Western Europe. This section also establishes gender and age profiles of the victims of gun violence, and confirms previous assumptions that firearm deaths are an overwhelmingly male phenomenon.

The second section reviews recent developments in the academic and public policy debate over the use of small arms in violence. It offers an overview of recent studies assessing the impact of gun availability on violence and crime levels, and discusses the economic costs incurred by gun misuse. Whether gun accessibility affects overall levels of violence is difficult to

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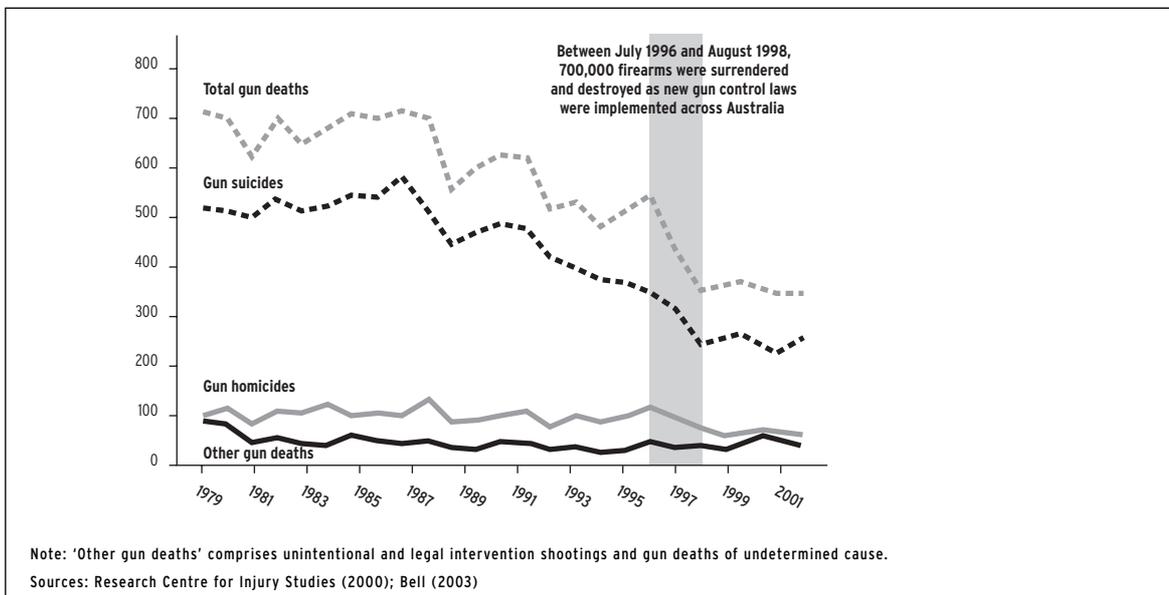
determine. The lethality of guns increases the risk of injury and death and raises perceptions of threat, but responsible firearm ownership can also contribute to deterring crime. The balance between these two effects is the subject of ongoing debate.

Figure 6.3: Levels of firearms mortality across regions (per 100,000)



The impacts of gun violence are not limited to fatal and non-fatal firearm injuries. Many varieties of small arms misuse—committed either by individuals or by the state—can threaten a community's physical, economic, social, political, and cultural security. While quantifying these impacts can be challenging, recent research suggests that the societal costs of gun violence are substantially higher than those of violence by other means. Further work in this area is critical, as it provides a rationale for reducing violence committed with small arms, a goal that gun control measures seem able to achieve (see Figure 6.6).

Figure 6.6: Firearm-related deaths in Australia, 1979-2002



The chapter then presents the main findings of field research conducted in African communities and other local contexts. Common issues include the use of military weapons in criminal activity, and the emergence of various private responses to cope with high levels of gun violence. Particularly in contexts where the state appears unable to curb armed crime, the privatization of security is a strong trend. While big businesses and the wealthy can afford the services of registered companies and guards, many must rely on informal vigilante groups—or on private gun ownership—to gain a greater sense of security. Unless effective responses to gun violence are put in place, the range of actors arming themselves for self-defence can only increase.

The privatization of security is emerging as a common response to high levels of firearm-related crime.