

Small arms are weapons of mass destruction



Small arms = big problem

Small arms are weapons of mass destruction, killing half a million people around the world each year. That's far higher than the casualty count from conventional weapons of war like tanks, bomber jets or warships.

These lethal weapons are relatively cheap, highly portable, easily concealable, long lasting, and so easy to operate that a child as young as eight years old can carry and use them. These characteristics make small arms particularly susceptible to illicit trafficking. They are often sold illegally in exchange for hard currency or goods such as diamonds, drugs, or other contraband. Estimates of the black market trade in small arms range from US\$2-10 billion a year.

Small arms = big business

Making and selling small arms is a worldwide business. Nearly 7 million commercial handguns and long guns were produced during 2000. About 75% of these were made in the USA or the European Union. Other important producers include Brazil, China, Canada, Japan and the Russian Federation.

- At least 98 countries can or do produce small arms and/or ammunition.
- Around 16 billion units of ammunition were produced during 2001.
- The value of small arms and ammunition production was at least US\$7.4 billion in 2000.
- The global small arms stockpile is estimated at 639 million guns. Approximately 59% of this arsenal is in the hands of civilians – over 377 million weapons. The remainder are owned by government armed forces (about 39%), police, insurgents and other non-state forces.

What are small arms & light weapons?

The term 'small arms and light weapons' refers to weapons that can be carried by a single person, either for military or civilian use. The term is often shortened to 'small arms' or 'SALW'. It covers a wide range of weapons – from pistols, machine guns and other firearms, to grenades, portable anti-tank systems and mortars. For more details, see the UN's Report of the Panel of Government Experts on Small Arms: [www.disarmament.un.org/cab/small arms/docs/rep52298.pdf](http://www.disarmament.un.org/cab/small%20arms/docs/rep52298.pdf)

Small arms = big damage

Worldwide, small arms are devastating communities through conflict and crime. Because they are so durable, the same guns are sometimes recycled from one conflict area to another, thereby exacerbating the conflicts and contributing to humanitarian crises.

Deaths and injuries

War deaths The majority of people killed in wars, coups d'état and other armed conflicts are victims of small arms – about 300,000 deaths each year. Most of these are civilians. Small arms truly are weapons of mass destruction.

Peacetime deaths Small arms kill an additional 200,000 people in 'peaceful' nations each year in homicides, suicides, unintentional shootings and shootings by police. In countries like Brazil, USA and South Africa, guns are a leading cause of death among young men.

Child deaths An estimated 2 million children have been killed with small arms since 1990.

Non-fatal injuries In addition to those killed, an estimated 1.5 million people are wounded by small arms each year.

Humanitarian impacts

Forced migration Guns do not have to be fired to cause damage – they are the primary tool used to force families and entire villages to flee their homes. There are 35 million refugees and displaced persons around the world, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has noted that 'armed conflict is now the driving force behind most refugee flows.'

Restricting basic needs

Rampant small arms availability and misuse generates a climate of fear and a culture of violence that can last for generations. Insecurity affects decision-making, access to food, water and shelter, as well as mobility and commerce. Those most in need are often the worst affected, as humanitarian aid agencies withdraw their staff because of the risks posed by guns.

Inhibiting development

Small arms proliferation discourages foreign investment and damages the prospects of economic development. Armed conflict undermines the hard-won economic gains of already impoverished nations. For example, the Inter-American Development Bank estimates that violence costs Latin American countries nearly 15% of their GDP.

Despite regional and international embargoes, small arms are still often sold directly and indirectly to regimes that have a record of human rights abuses.

Small arms = global challenge

Small arms proliferation is on the agenda of the United Nations. In July 2001, member states met for the UN Conference on the Illicit Transfer of Small Arms & Light Weapons in All its Aspects. The result was a Program of Action (PoA) to address gun trafficking. It commits countries to:

- adopt effective regulations to control SALW production, export, import and transfer
- identify and prosecute those engaged in the illegal manufacture and trade in small arms
- ensure that manufacturers adequately mark all small arms for identification and tracing
- ensure comprehensive, accurate record-keeping on SALW manufacture, holding and transfer
- take appropriate measures against violations of any UN Security Council arms embargo
- ensure confiscated, seized or collected small arms are destroyed.

IANSA participants are monitoring how effectively national governments are fulfilling these promises, and helping with advice, information and public awareness. The UN's first major follow-up meeting will be held on 7-11 July 2003.

For many participants regional agreements and other aspects of SALW are more relevant to their daily work on gun violence. For example, in the Americas participants are pushing governments to sign up to the OAS Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing & Trafficking in Firearms. European NGOs are working to strengthen the European Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. In Africa, the ECOWAS Moratorium on Light Weapons and the Nairobi Declaration on the Problem of Proliferation of Illicit SALW have particular resonance. The Bamako Declaration on an African Common Position on Illicit Proliferation, Circulation & Trafficking of SALW, signed in 2000, has led to the establishment of national focal points in many African countries where civil society and governments meet to discuss the implementation of all of these agreements.

IANSA participants are also engaged in advocacy to improve national laws and policies on gun control, data collection, export / imports, as well as on police, military and private security forces. For more information on small arms and light weapons, or to get involved in preventing SALW proliferation, visit our website www.iansa.org or email IANSA at communications@iansa.org