Trends & Figures

Illicit small arms trade

- While the authorized international small arms trade was worth at least $6 billion in 2014 alone,¹ the total scale of the global illicit small arms trade is difficult to assess, but seems to be worth roughly US$ 1 billion annually.²

- There are likely to be close to 900 million firearms in the world, 75 per cent of them in the hands of civilians.³

- Less than 15 per cent of the guns held by civilians seem to be registered.⁴

- In particular, the diversion of weaponry is a colossal problem in many parts of the world. It allows rebels, gangs, criminal organizations, pirates, terrorist groups and other perpetrators to exponentially bolster their power. Diversion may occur as a result of a transfer without proper controls, unauthorized retransfer, thefts from poorly secured stockpiles, hand-outs to armed groups or barter involving natural resources. Corruption is a problem often associated with diversion.⁵

- Poor weapons management is an area of alarming concern. Many States lack thorough planning and consistent attention to safe storage, handling, transportation and disposal. Poor national inventory practices mean that surpluses cannot be identified, leading to extensive build-ups of frequently unnecessary stockpiles.⁶

- The illicit proliferation of arms and ammunition is a key driver in the outbreak and prolonging of armed conflicts. Flows of illicit arms also affect countries supposedly at peace, contributing to sustained high levels of violence.⁷

- Links between transnational organized crime, illicit small arms trafficking and terrorism are on the rise, as is an increasing use of the Internet – including the "dark web" – and emerging technologies for illicit gun manufacture and trafficking.⁸

Armed violence

- In the period 2010-2015, nearly half of violent deaths in the world involved the use of a firearm – which averaged to nearly a quarter million each year.⁹ Millions more are wounded, or their lives upended when access to development aid, markets, health, education and human rights is disrupted by people wielding guns.

- More human rights violations and abuses are committed with small arms than with any other weapon. Small arms frequently play a role in the deaths of United Nations employees and peacekeepers, as well as workers from humanitarian and non-governmental organizations.¹⁰

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³ Small Arms Survey 2007
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ S/2015/289.
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Small Arms Survey 2013.
¹⁰ S/2017/1025.
• Between 2010 and 2015, firearms were the weapon of choice in 50 per cent of homicides and 32 per cent of conflict deaths. In some regions that rate is as high as 90%.11

• In countries characterized by the highest levels of lethal violence, 50 per cent of all killings were committed with a firearm, as opposed to about 12 per cent in countries with the lowest rates.12

• 2017 was the deadliest year for UN peacekeeping forces in over two decades, with illicit small arms contributing to the kind of pervasive violence that killed 56 peacekeepers last year alone.13

Economic and social cost of armed violence

• It is estimated that nearly 2 trillion US dollars could be saved – equivalent to 2.6 per cent of the global GDP – if the global homicide rate was significantly reduced.17

• Armed violence aggravates poverty, inhibits access to social services and diverts energy and resources away from efforts to improve human development. Armed conflict and high levels of armed violence represent a grave impediment to economic growth. There is nothing more damaging to an investment climate as armed insecurity.18

Impact of arms conflict and violence on men and women

• Armed conflict and criminal violence affect women and men differently. While there are exceptions to all situations, in general women and men have diverse roles in conflict and post-conflict environments and in settings of pervasive crime.

• Men constitute a massive majority of the owners of small arms. Perpetrators and victims, either in conflict, post-conflict or peaceful societies, are often over 80 percent young men.

• Men dominate professions and activities with easy access to arms and the domains of decision-making on international, national or local security: politics, diplomacy, law enforcement, military, municipal councils, committees of elders.

• For women all over the world, guns and intimate-partner violence form a deadly combination. Globally, over one third of murders of women are committed by a male intimate partner,21 and in many countries guns are the weapon of choice. In areas of conflict, sexual violence abetted by armed intimidation is a recurring scourge.

• The proportion of women who are killed by a firearm—as opposed to other mechanisms—is greater in areas that exhibit high rates of firearm homicide.22

• Moreover, in both conflict and crime settings women bear a heavy burden – psychological, economical — when male family members are injured or killed.

• Attitudes towards arms often diverge between the sexes. Women are more likely to see the presence of arms as a threat to their own and their families’ security. In contrast, men perceive arms more often as a means for security and as an expression of their masculinity.

13 UN data.
15 S/2017/1025.
16 S/2017/1025.
19 S/2015/289. See also: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Reducing the Involvement of Youth in Armed Violence 2011.
20 UNODA Occasional Paper No. 23.