

Critical Gaps: Firearms and Gender-based Violence in Chile

Mariela Infante Erazo, Alejandra Mohor Bellalta, and
Paula Salvo Del Canto

KEY FINDINGS

- In Chile, as in other Latin American countries, the impact of firearms on gender-based violence (GBV) remains understudied. More empirical evidence is needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue and to develop informed, adequate public policies.
- Institutional shortcomings hinder the government's ability to trace firearms and ensure owners' compliance with established registration criteria. Legal and administrative reforms are needed to modernize the arms control system, including efforts that take into account the gender-differentiated risks posed by small arms.
- The government's policies and programmes fail to effectively articulate the relationship between GBV and arms control. While national strategies have partially integrated gender and arms control perspectives, they lack a comprehensive approach that jointly combines and addresses both issues.
- According to available data, 0.1% of domestic violence cases against women involve the use or threat of use of a firearm. Nevertheless, this data likely does not reflect reality, because data on these types of violence, like other cases of GBV, suffers from underreporting. Additionally, domestic violence statistics rarely show whether threats with firearms were used as a form of coercive control.
- The recorded number of femicides committed with firearms decreased from 12 instances in 2018 to five instances in 2022. Moreover, since 2020 firearms are the primary means through which homicides are committed in Chile. These figures suggest the need for improving data collection and conducting further research to better understand the risks posed to women and girls by the increased circulation of firearms and to formulate appropriate and comprehensive policy responses.

Introduction

This paper is based on various sources of data. Firstly, it uses data from the Intersectoral Femicide Circuit (CIF), the National Police of Chile, the General Directorate of National Mobilization (DGMN), and the Undersecretariat for Crime Prevention (SPD) of the Ministry of the Interior and Public Security to obtain data points on homicide numbers segregated by gender and arms usage, injuries, number of registered firearms and firearms owners, and imports.¹ Secondly, the authors undertook an extensive review of legal documents and policies addressing arms control and gender-based violence (GBV) in Chile, exploring the interlinkages among the various issues involved. Thirdly, in cooperation with the Small Arms Survey and the University of Chile's Centre for Citizen Security Studies, a facilitated workshop on gender-responsive firearms control was held in June 2024. Representatives from women's rights organizations based in Chile, state institutions such as the ministries of the interior and gender, and the public prosecutor attended the workshop. The authors used their insights in preparing this paper. A second workshop was held in January 2025 with representatives from state institutions, civil society, and academia to validate the findings. The authors drew on the workshop participants' discussions to formulate the policy observations found at the end of this document.

National context

Citizen security, understood as a fundamental component of human security, entails the process of establishing, strengthening, and protecting democratic civic order. This involves mitigating (ideally eliminating) the types of violence threatening a country's population and fostering a safe and peaceful coexistence among its inhabitants. It encompasses the effective safeguarding of inherent human rights, particularly the rights to life, personal integrity, inviolability of the home, and freedom of movement (UNDP, 2013). Both conceptually and in practice, however, state action and media coverage regarding security in Chile have primarily focused on addressing economically motivated crimes, referred to as 'crimes of greater social significance' (AMUCH, 2022; Padilla Fuentes, Rodríguez Garcés, and Espinosa Valenzuela, 2022).²

Instead of addressing citizens' security through evidence-based and prevention-focused approaches, efforts have been directed towards the promotion of punitive policies that favour tougher penalties when crimes are committed and increase security in public places (Luneke, 2023). One of the underlying arguments on which security policies in Chile are based is that gun ownership will make citizens safer. Promoting gun ownership to enhance citizens' security is a concerning approach, because higher levels of gun ownership have been linked to increased levels of GBV, heightened crime rates, and decreased respect for human rights (Stoever, 2019).

According to the most recent *Global Study on Homicide* (UNODC, 2023), Chile remains one of the safest countries in Latin America, although homicide rates have increased, as have gendered crimes that victimize women and girls. In 2022 the rate of domestic violence and rape escalated to 548.4 and 24.6 cases per 100,000 people, respectively (SPD, 2024).³ This represents an increase compared to the average of 490.5 and 19.6, respectively, during the preceding five-year period (2017–21) (SPD, 2024).

1 In addition to the information available on institutional websites, specific requests for information were made to various bodies through the mechanisms established by Law No. 20.285 on access to public information.

2 Crimes of greater social significance include the following crime groups: robbery with violence or intimidation, surprise robbery, motor vehicle theft, robbery of objects from a vehicle, robbery in an inhabited place, robbery in an uninhabited place, other robberies with force, theft, less serious injuries, serious or very serious injuries, minor injuries, homicides, and rapes (SPD, 2024).

3 Law 20.066 defines domestic violence as any mistreatment that affects the life or physical or psychological integrity of a person who is or has been the spouse or cohabitant of the offender (Chile, 2005). Domestic violence also includes mistreatment if the victim is a relative by blood or affinity in the direct line or collateral line up to the third degree, inclusive of the offender, their spouse, or current cohabitant. This means that domestic violence occurs when it is directed against parents, children, siblings, grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, great-grandparents, and great-grandchildren. Relatives can be consanguineous, meaning they share blood, or in-laws, meaning they are the family of the spouse or cohabitant.

As of 2020, firearms are the main means of perpetrating homicides in the country (CPHDV, 2023⁴). According to the CIF 2023 annual report, in 2023 firearms were used in 14.3% of femicides (CIF, 2024). These numbers suggest the need for improving data collection and conducting further research on the risks posed to women and girls of increased firearms circulation as part of a comprehensive policy response.

The increase in crimes associated with firearms law infringements should be a central element in modifying the paradigm of public security centred on the state and national security.⁵ Insecurity does not affect all people equally, and security policies often do not consider the private family space, which is the place where the main threats to the life and well-being of women and girls can occur (SPD, 2024).⁶

Current legislation

Law 17.798, first published in 1972 and last amended in 2022, regulates the acquisition; possession; carrying; manufacture; importation; storage; commercialization; and use of arms, ammunition, explosives, and related items. It establishes rules for the registration of weapons, carrying permits, and the control of explosives, and classifies weapons into categories (war, sport, hunting, and personal defence), including prohibited weapons (automatic, semi-automatic, and handmade weapons, and homemade explosives) and those that may be authorized under certain conditions. It also provides for sanctions for those who do not comply with regulations on the possession, carrying, trafficking, or manufacture of arms and explosives, with penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment (Chile, 1972; 2015; 2022a).

The regulation of the use of firearms in Chile is the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence through the DGMN, complemented by various functions of the Ministry of the Interior in terms of the prevention of armed violence and related data processing. The relevant laws establish a traceability system for manufactured or imported arms and ammunition, and require the armed forces, law enforcement agencies and security forces, the Chilean gendarmerie, and the General Directorate of Civil Aeronautics to maintain an arms register and traceability systems for their weapons and ammunition (Chile, 1972; 2015; 2022a).

In July 2024, through Final Report 195-2024, the Office of the Comptroller General of the Republic (the agency responsible for auditing other public agencies) issued a report on the DGMN's implementation of procedural and technological aspects of the system set up for arms control. The report pointed out serious shortcomings such as the issuing of certificates by deceased psychiatrists and the issuing of medical certificates by medical professionals who were not from the required medical field, and the granting of firearms permits to people with criminal records (CGR, 2024). This paper highlights that the legal and regulatory provisions in force might need to be amended and improved to avoid such occurrences.

These shortcomings in the registration system stem from a broader issue, namely that the Chilean arms control system is a large bureaucratic apparatus designed primarily to establish an inventory of individuals who have been granted permits to possess and carry firearms. It relies on individuals to register their firearms and, as such, has not been designed to track or control the firearms themselves.⁷

Furthermore, no procedure is currently in place for the recovery of weapons from the illegal market. The initiation of an investigation is contingent on the existence of a complaint or lawsuit, and the Public Prosecutor's Office generally

4 This source is only accessible from Chile.

5 In 2018, 42.5 cases of crimes associated with the gun law per 100,000 people were recorded, which rose to 51.7 cases in 2023 (SPD, 2024).

6 According to official figures, the crime that most affects women in Chile is domestic violence. In 2023, 523 cases were reported for women per 100,000 inhabitants, and 117 cases for men (SPD, 2024).

7 Author interview with a public law, security, and human rights expert, August 2024.

does not undertake such investigations *ex officio* (Chile, 1972; 2015; 2022a). The current administrative control of firearms in Chile is therefore insufficient to prevent armed violence.

Other regulatory gaps were identified, based on a workshop with government actors, researchers, and representatives of civil society held in July 2024 and aimed at identifying national challenges facing research attempting to evaluate the impact of firearms on GBV. Workshop participants noted that there is no monitoring of police-issued firearms used to intimidate or kill women and girls in cases of domestic violence when the perpetrator is a police officer, unlike in other countries where such statistical records exist.

The current Chilean regulatory framework also lacks a gender perspective, because it addresses neither the gender-differentiated impacts of firearms, nor how firearms are used to commit the various forms of GBV.

Current policies and programmes

In Chile, national plans are strategic documents drawn up by the state to define objectives and actions in key areas of the country's development for a specific period. These plans serve as guidelines for the formulation of public policies and the coordination of the activities of the various state institutions.

Based on the focus of this study, four recent national plans were selected for analysis that represent the main public policy guidelines in their respective fields:

- Plan Nacional de Seguridad Pública y Prevención del Delito 2022–2026 (National Plan for Public Security and the Prevention of Crime 2022–2026) (PNSP) (Chile, 2022b);
- Plan Nacional por el Derecho a Vidas Libres de Violencia de Género para Mujeres Niñas y Diversidades 2022–2030 (National Plan for the Right to Lives Free from Gender-Based Violence for Women, Girls and Diverse Groups 2022–2030) (PNVG) (Chile, 2023);
- Menos Armas, Más Seguridad (Fewer Weapons, More Security) (PMA) (Chile, 2022c);⁸ and
- Segundo Plan Nacional de Derechos Humanos 2022–2025 (Second National Human Rights Plan 2022–2025) (PNDH) (Chile, 2022d).

The following sections analyse whether and how these plans incorporate a gender perspective and to what extent they consider GBV, firearms control, and the link between GBV and firearms in order to provide an overview of how the state is addressing these issues.

These plans constitute a general framework for developing state policies and actions in their respective areas. Despite this existing legal framework, however, there may be important implementation gaps, as will be seen in the following section, where these guiding principles are not always applied in terms of data collection, institutional transparency, and the availability to citizens of up-to-date information.

Gender focus

The PNSP incorporates a gender perspective in several of its lines of action, recognizing that security is not equal for all groups of the population, and that women more generally—and LGBTQ+ people specifically—are vulnerable to

⁸ This plan was published in 2022 without a specific implementation period.

specific types of firearms-related crime. It also states that policies and programmes should ensure that all people, regardless of their gender, have equal access to security, protection, and justice.

The PNVG incorporates a cross-cutting gender perspective to ensure that public policies respond to the needs of women, girls, and people with diverse gender identities by addressing structural barriers and applying an intersectional approach. In contrast, the PMA focuses on arms reduction without including a gender approach. The PNDH integrates specific gender-equality actions in some chapters, but does not fully integrate them across all its thematic axes; however, it stands out for including consultations with women's organizations in its conception.

Gender-based violence

The PNSP proposes specific actions to address women's safety needs, such as ensuring the implementation of the Comprehensive Law to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence against Women on the Basis of Their Gender (Chile, 2024) by expanding support centres and services for victims of domestic violence. The PNVG focuses its actions on prevention, protection, and access to justice for women, especially those in vulnerable situations. The PMA does not include measures related to gender or GBV when it refers to the use of weapons. The PNDH dedicates a chapter on 'equality and non-discrimination' that prioritizes the fight against gender violence through prevention, legal action, and reparation, and strengthens mechanisms for reporting and victim support.

Firearms control

The PNSP dedicates a specific part to arms control with the objective of addressing the increase in crimes committed with firearms in Chile. It recognizes that the increased circulation of firearms is a key factor in the increase of violent crime and seeks to implement stricter control measures to mitigate this phenomenon. The primary measures to be implemented are as follows: the strengthening of the control and regulation of arms and ammunition; the criminal prosecution of possessors of illegal firearms; and stricter regulation of arms possession.

The PNVG does not specifically mention gun control as an explicit or direct course of action. Although it has a violence prevention strand, it does not detail specific measures related to the possession or use of weapons in relation to GBV.

The PMA includes a series of specific arms control measures for Chile, with the aim of reducing the number of weapons in circulation and combating illegal arms trafficking.

The PNDH does not explicitly mention firearms control as a specific measure; however, it covers issues of public security and the use of force by the Carabineros de Chile and the Investigative Police, which ideally should have included strengthening the supervision and control of weapons used by law enforcement agencies and security forces.

Linking GBV and arms control

The PNSP does not establish a specific measure that directly links GBV and arms control. The two issues are addressed separately in the plan, and no specific measure combining the two issues is outlined.

The same is true of the PNVG, which does not explicitly link GBV and the use of firearms. Nor does it include specific measures regarding the confiscation of firearms in cases of complaints of domestic violence or in situations of high risk to women's lives and integrity, which could be key to reducing lethality in these cases.

The PMA focuses on reducing the circulation of firearms and combating organized crime. It does not address the link between gun use and GBV, nor does it propose specific GBV-related measures.

The PNDH also does not link GBV and firearms control. In the framework of its measures to guarantee lives free of violence for women, the plan includes measures to strengthen the prevention and punishment of GBV and to improve the capacities of institutions involved in the care of GBV victims. In all these guidelines, measures related to firearms control are absent, however.

As can be seen, there has been some progress in terms of public policies. The national plans have gradually incorporated a gender perspective as a guiding principle or cross-cutting approach, though the main shortcoming of these strategies is that they do not articulate measures linking GBV and firearms control, and these phenomena are addressed in isolation as if they were unrelated. Although the PNSP includes measures to deal with both gender violence and firearms control, they are introduced as parallel issues, without any meaningful kind of interconnection (see Table 1).

Table 1 Summary of Chile’s national action plans

Plans	Gender focus	GBV	Arms control	Linking GBV and firearms
PNSP 2022–2026	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
PNVG 2022–2030	Yes	Yes	No	No
PMA, adopted 2022	No	No	Yes	No
PNDH 2022–2025	Limited	Yes	No	No

Sources: Chile (2022b; 2022c; 2022d; 2023)

Impact of firearms on violence against women

Having up-to-date data is essential for understanding the evolving relationship between firearms and violence against women. The National Institute of Statistics’ website can be useful in this regard. It provides data that can be used to measure key indicators developed by government ministries to monitor the level of women’s empowerment. Nine indicators, contained in two thematic blocs (‘Security and Justice’, and ‘Gendered Violence’), are especially useful for understanding the gendered impacts of firearms (Chile, 2019; INE, 2024).

- ‘Security and Justice’ includes two of the nine indicators: ‘Gender gap in personal victimization for crimes of major social significance’ and ‘Gender gap in perception of increased crime in the country’, both with data provided by the SPD.
- ‘Gendered Violence’ includes seven indicators on the different types of violence to which women are exposed. These indicators refer to situations of violence such as completed femicides, attempted femicides, domestic violence, violence against women, violence in public places, and violence between intimate partners. The data for these indicators comes from the Victim Support Programme, CIF, SPD, and National Youth Institute.

These indicators constitute a fundamental advance in the monitoring of the magnitude and some characteristics of violence against women. Also noteworthy is the production of a CIF annual report,⁹ starting in 2010. Deficits in data and evidence generation from police, prosecutors’ offices, courts of justice, and other related bodies still exist, however (Ramírez, 2021).

Aggregated statistics are available in the DGMN presentation entitled ‘Armas en Cifras’ (Arms in Figures) (DGMN, 2024¹⁰).

⁹ The institutions from which these reports draw their information are the SPD; Servicio Nacional de Protección Especializada a la Niñez y Adolescencia; Carabineros de Chile; Servicio Médico Legal; Policía de Investigaciones; Ministerio de la Mujer y la Equidad de Género; and Servicio Nacional de la Mujer y la Equidad de Género.

¹⁰ This source is only accessible from Chile.

In terms of associated crimes, the SPD has an open information system that links secondary offences that fall under the Weapons Act (Chile, 1972) with police cases, but does not differentiate those that refer to firearms in particular. A similar situation exists with regard to the category ‘threat with a weapon’.

The following sections present some relevant data on both topics and their intersection with the objective of systematizing and analysing the statistical information available on the origin, registration, transit, and control of firearms in Chile, as well as on the use of firearms in femicides and GBV-related crimes. The sources of information for this section draw from available official statistics and requests for information from state agencies through the transparency law.

Entry and circulation of firearms

The DGMM reports a slight but sustained increase over a 12-year period since 2010 in the number of firearms registered in the country. Regarding arms entering the country, data is available as of 2011 (with 4,826 firearms entering Chile), and the general trend seems to be irregularly increasing, reaching 7,813 firearms entering the country by 2023 (DGMM, 2024).

With respect to firearms acquired in Chile, women’s purchases and registrations of authorized firearms have increased steadily, almost doubling over a six-year period: in 2023, women represented 6.5% of arms purchasers, while in 2018 they represented 3.4%.

In accordance with the information requested from public bodies for the purpose of preparing this paper, one figure that demonstrates the problems of control in this area is that, as of July 2024, approximately 40% of registered firearms did not have a known current owner.

Firearms and violent crimes against women

The overall picture of women’s participation in violent crimes against persons in the period 2018–23 shows an imbalance in terms of their role as victims and perpetrators. Women and girls represent 22.1% of those reported as alleged perpetrators,¹¹ while as victims, they represent 57.8%. Particularly relevant is the proportion of child and adolescent victims (see Table 2).

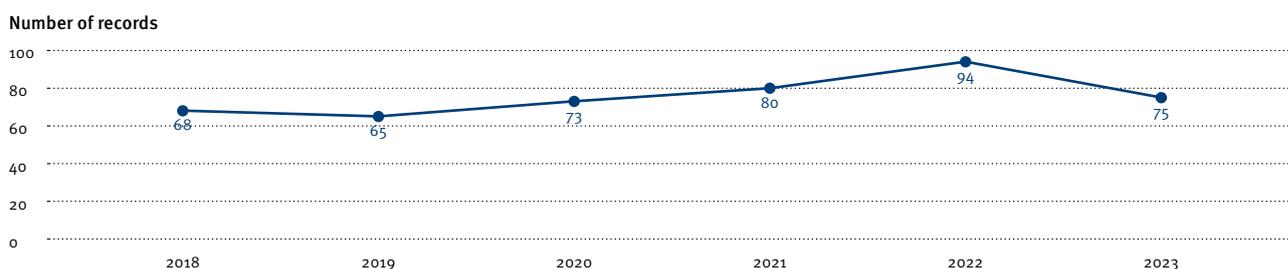
Table 2 Share of women as victims and perpetrators of violent crimes against persons, 2018–23

Age range	Victims			Perpetrators		
	Total victims	Female	% female	Total offenders	Female	% female
1–13	80,184	49,579	61.8	1,950	642	32.9
14–17	117,398	68,497	58.3	55,377	15,103	27.3
18–29	799,831	475,558	59.5	385,258	90,241	23.4
30–44	946,530	553,941	58.5	490,860	106,270	21.6
45–64	642,298	354,263	55.2	259,359	52,981	20.4
65 and over	152,011	81,049	53.3	35,642	5,786	16.2
Total (average)*	2,740,887	1,584,256	(57.8)	1,231,316	271,911	(22.1)

Note: * Totals do not tally due to the omission of cases for which no age was identified.

Source: Authors’ summary based on SPD (2024)

¹¹ These are the police cases reported by the Carabineros de Chile and Investigative Police (since 2019) to the SPD, which aggregates and makes them available through the Centre for Crime Studies and Analysis (CEAD, n.d.).

Figure 1 Number of cases of domestic violence against women involving firearms use, 2018–23

Source: Authors' summary based on Carabineros de Chile (2024)

Among the types of crimes included in the category of violent crimes against persons are those of domestic violence, and here the gap identified above widens, with women accounting for almost 80% of victims in the period 2018–23 (SPD, 2024).

Available records, whether surveys or administrative data, do not usually refer to quantitative information on the use of firearms as a significant variable in the analysis of GBV. According to the information provided by the Carabineros de Chile, the prevalence of firearms is low: only 0.1% of the cases of domestic violence against women involved the use or threat of use of a firearm (see Figure 1). This data needs to be taken with careful consideration, as the last Domestic Violence Survey shows that less than 30% of physical violence events and less than 20% of cases involving psychological or sexual violence were reported to the police (SPD, 2020).

Femicides are the ultimate expression of criminal violence against women. The first systematized data on femicides was generated for 2007, when 62 femicides were recorded, 22.6% of which involved firearms (CIDH, n.d.). If we consider this as a baseline, the relatively stable number of cases in the period we are analysing (2018–23) seems to be positive, because the maximum number of annual cases in the period was recorded in 2019, with 46 cases, 17% of which involved the use of firearms (see Table 3).

Table 3 Annual frequency of committed and attempted femicides and use of firearms, 2018–23

Year	Femicides committed			Femicides attempted		
	Total	With a firearm	%	Total	With a firearm	%
2018	42	12	28.6	121	8	6.6
2019	46	8	17.4	109	4	3.7
2020	43	6	14.0	151	10	6.6
2021	44	7	15.9	163	10	6.1
2022	43	5	11.6	180	9	5.0
2023	42	6	14.3	259	18	6.9

Source: Authors' summary based on SPD (2024)

Conclusions and policy observations

In recent years, Chile has made progress in incorporating a gender perspective and the right to live free from GBV into laws and public policies (CEDAW, 2024). Similarly, public security policies have begun to consider strategies to make firearms control more effective and efficient as crime prevention measures; however, GBV and firearms control continue to be addressed separately, and the nexus between these phenomena has not been established as a priority area of state attention.

Through an exploratory analysis of the link between GBV and firearms in legal and policy documents, this paper identifies three challenges in this area. Firstly, the current regulations on firearms control do not incorporate a gender perspective or specific provisions to prevent GBV perpetrated with firearms directly or as a means of coercion.

Secondly, the main national policies on public security, GBV, firearms control, and human rights reflect the same deficit and do not take a comprehensive approach to the link between these phenomena. Thirdly, the statistics of the main public agencies do not include relevant information on the impact and incidence of firearms use in domestic violence.

Thus, it is evident that there is no public policy line in Chile that clearly articulates the link between the prevention of GBV and firearms control.

Given the international voices that call on states to understand the repercussions of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and their misuse in GBV against women and girls (UNSC, 2015), this paper concludes with a series of recommendations outlining a roadmap to advance steps to deal with this challenge.

- Promote regular coordination between institutions dedicated to firearms control and the prevention and eradication of violence against women and GBV so that they work collaboratively and design comprehensive plans and policies incorporating measures to prevent and eradicate GBV perpetrated with or aggravated by the use of firearms.
- Reform the general approach of the Chilean arms control system and the DGMN's internal processes, with special emphasis on the revision and updating of procedures and the modernization of the firearms control system.
- Generate data on the use of firearms in GBV, including both cases where weapons are used directly to perpetrate violence and those where they are used as a threat to then perpetrate other forms of GBV. In particular, there is a fundamental need to systematize the data recorded by the Unified Initial Risk Assessment Guidelines (Carabineros de Chile, 2022) instrument, which aims to assess the risk of women being victims of domestic violence at the time that an incident is reported, and to facilitate the adoption of protective measures and make the data accessible for analysis.
- Evaluate the effect of public policies, plans, and programmes on the decrease in femicides in general (using the year 2007 as baseline) and with respect to the use of firearms to commit them. ●

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Abbreviations

CIF	Intersectoral Femicide Circuit/Circuito Intersectorial de Femicidios
DGMN	General Directorate of National Mobilization/Dirección General de Movilización Nacional
GBV	Gender-based violence
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer persons
PMA	Fewer Weapons, More Security/Menos Armas, Más Seguridad
PNDH	Second National Human Rights Plan 2022–2025/2º Plan Nacional de Derechos Humanos 2022–2025
PNSP	National Plan for Public Safety and Crime Prevention 2022–2026/Plan Nacional de Seguridad Pública y Prevención del Delito 2022–2026
PNVG	National Plan for the Right to Lives Free from Gender-based Violence for Women, Girls and Diverse Groups 2022–2030/Plan Nacional por el Derecho a Vidas Libres de Violencia de Género para Mujeres Niñas y Diversidades 2022–2023
SPD	Undersecretariat for Crime Prevention/Subsecretaría de Prevención del Delito

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About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a centre for applied knowledge dedicated to preventing and reducing illicit small arms proliferation and armed violence. The Survey informs policy and practice through a combination of data, evidence-based knowledge, authoritative resources and tools, and tailored expert advice and training, and by bringing together practitioners and policymakers.

The Survey is an associated programme of the Geneva Graduate Institute, located in Switzerland, and has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, criminology, and database and programme management. It collaborates with a network of researchers, practitioners, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

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About Corporación Humanas

Corporación Humanas was founded in 2004 by a group of feminist women and human rights defenders, with the aim of promoting discussions, action and advocacy related to Chile's institutional development, contributing to a more inclusive democracy for women. Over the course of its 20 year history, it has established itself as a national and international reference for women's human rights, working in coordination with the broader human rights movement in Chile and the region.

Through its engagement with the global human rights system, it has positioned itself as a key source of information for international committees, strengthening linkages with organisations working on the rights of women, people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, victims of the dictatorship as well as with academic institutions.

Credits

Project coordinator: Callum Watson

Production coordinators: Olivia Denonville, Lionel Kosirnik, and Katie Lazaro

Editor: Mira Fey

Copy-editor: Alex Potter

Layout: Rick Jones

Proofreader: Stephanie Huitson



Contact details

Small Arms Survey, Maison de la Paix, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

t +41 22 908 5777, **e** info@smallarmssurvey.org

www.smallarmssurvey.org