

From Chaos to Coherence?

GLOBAL FIREARM STOCKPILES



Unsecured weapons: A US Army soldier studies a gun found during a raid in Baghdad in November 2003.

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Many of the most acute small arms problems of 2003 arose from the seemingly simple issue of stockpile management and control. In the most extraordinary case, the loss of control of millions of small arms and light weapons helped undermine the stability of an entire country. In other cases smaller leakages have contributed to crime and ethnic violence.

Iraq has become synonymous with gun chaos. In the wake of Saddam Hussein's defeat, the Iraqi people found themselves in possession of at least 7 million to 8 million small arms previously kept by security forces. But the situation in Iraq was not of a

unique type (something very similar happened in Albania in 1997). It stood out only in the unique scale and suddenness of the transfer. Iraqi demand for firearms quickly rose to meet and exceed supply—soon imported small arms were also flowing into Iraq.

With a combined population of 464 million people, the 11 Latin American countries examined in the chapter have roughly 45 million–80 million firearms. What is most distinctive about the firearms in Latin American and the Caribbean is not their absolute numbers but their exceptional lethality. The likelihood that a typical gun in this region will be used to kill is among the highest in the world (see Table 2.4). Even so, lethality varies dramatically from country to country. In Ecuador, for example, there is one homicide annually for every 150 to 380 guns. The situation is much different in Chile, where there is one murder annually for every 17,000 to 24,400 civilian guns.

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Table 2.4 The deadliest gun use: Stockpile lethality in nine Latin American countries
(with selected examples from elsewhere, ranked by highest gun lethality)

Country	Total civilian guns (millions)	Annual gun homicides	Gun homicides per 100,000 people	Guns per gun homicide	Gun homicides per 100,000 guns
Ecuador	0.2-0.5	1,321	10.16	150-380	260-660
Colombia	4.2-10.2	21,898	49.54	190-470	220-520
Venezuela	1.2-6.0	5,408	21.04	220-1,100	90-450
Brazil	20.0-30.0	25,603	14.35	780-1,170	85-128
Mexico	3.5-16.5	5,452	5.27	640-3,000	33-156
Argentina	4.1-5.6	942	2.45	4,350-5,940	17-23
Peru	0.5-1.0	161	0.59	3,100-6,200	16-32
Uruguay	0.9-1.6	104	3.05	8,650-11,400	7-12
Chile	1.4-2.0	82	0.52	17,000-24,400	4.1-5.9
Jamaica	0.08-0.2	450	16.97	180-440	230-560
South Africa	4.5	13,572	30.17	330	302.0
United States	243.0-281.0	10,310	3.45	24,000-28,000	3.76-4.2
Canada	7.9	170	0.54	48,000	2.2
Germany	20.0-30.0	155	0.19	129,000-194,000	0.5-0.8

Note: The data in this figure come from different base years. While firearm statistics are for 2002-3, gun homicide data are from the most recent year available, usually 1998-2001, except for Jamaica, which is 1995. Bolivia and Paraguay were excluded for lack of specific firearms homicide data. Figures for guns/gun homicide and gun homicide/100,000 guns have been rounded to avoid false precision.

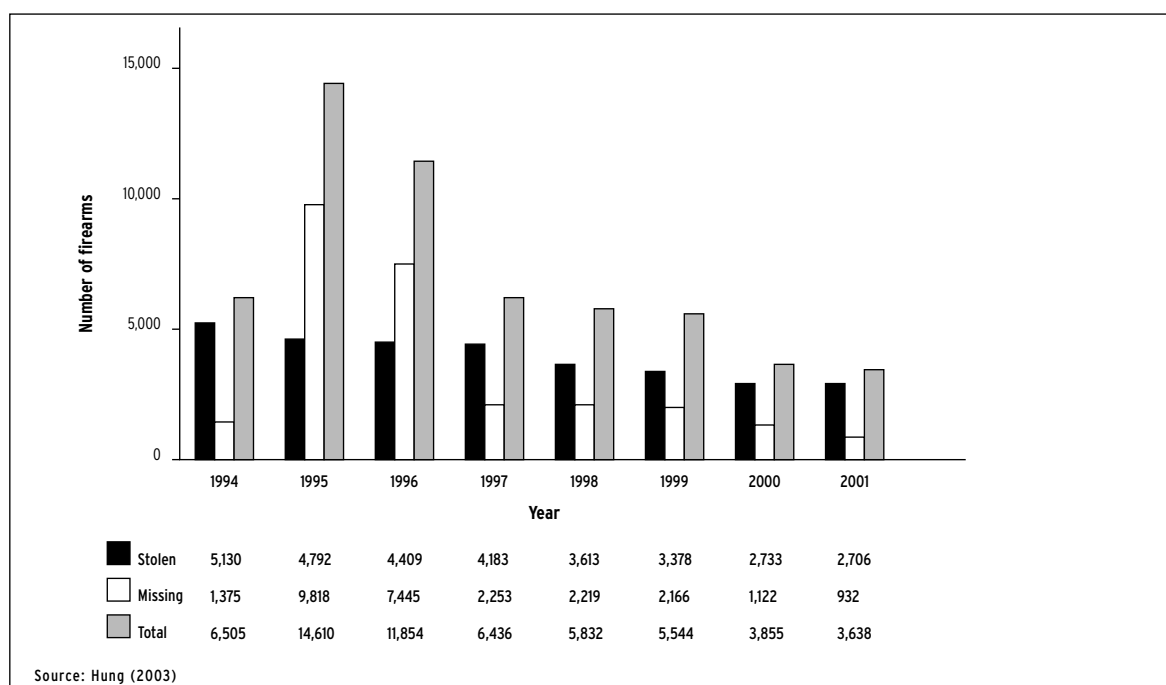
Sources: compiled from Table 2.1 and 2.2 above. Firearm homicide data from Chetty (2000); CRIME; UN (1998); UNODC (2003). Civilian stockpile data for other countries from Cross *et al.* (2003), GPC (2002), and Small Arms Survey (2002).

Stockpile security should be of much greater concern to all weapon owners. Because governments keep the largest arsenals, they also face some of the greatest problems in stockpile control. Losing small arms to criminals or rebels is a betrayal of the social contract that establishes the state's authority. Poor storage practices and the lack of personal responsibility facilitate pilfering and unexplained losses. Police guns often make their way into criminal hands through trade-ins of old police firearms brokered by manufacturers. For excess or obsolescent weapons, the best solution is almost always destruction. More than eight million institutional small arms were destroyed during the last decade.

At least one million civilian firearms are stolen or lost annually worldwide. Theft and loss are serious problems in virtually every country, although some are more successful in combating them than others (see Figure 2.1). Stolen firearms are widely acknowledged to be among the most likely to be used in violent crime. By focusing exclusively on theft by street criminals, current practices in many countries fail to deal with other, equally important aspects of stockpile vulnerability. Most countries do not penalize gun owners for losing their weapons. In the light of the relatively permissive control cultures found in much of the world, more needs to be done to discourage not just the theft of small arms but also their loss. Creating cultures of responsibility should be a major goal of gun policy.

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Figure 2.1 Canadian firearms reported stolen or missing, 1994-2001



One result of growing concern about these problems is increasing interest in stronger firearm laws. This trend takes two general forms: *reform* of existing laws to better address changing public priorities, and the establishment of *new legal systems* regulating public firearm ownership. In the United States, for example, the debate focuses exclusively on reform approaches. Other countries are debating or implementing new legal systems.

Small arms registration, one of the boldest policies for many countries, can be *active-universal*, requiring the participation of all gun owners, or *passive-partial*, involving only registration of newly purchased guns. A prominent example of the former is Canada, where the most ambitious registration initiative in recent years registered a total of 6.5 million firearms as of July 2003. Still controversial, the Canadian system might do more to reshape the international climate for registration of personal weapons than any comparable measure has before. In December 2003, Brazil established a major new gun control system to combat firearm proliferation and radically alter the national gun culture. The most revolutionary part of the programme is a planned plebiscite to ban all gun sales. This could set an active-universal registration system in motion. Thailand may be positioned to follow.

It is no surprise that the huge numbers of small arms stolen or lost from official control lead to growing interest in better stockpile management in much of the world. The Iraqi small arms problem is an egregious example of the management problems responsible for the steady flow of weapons from public to criminal hands worldwide. Assuring the security of official and civilian small arms inventories is something that can be improved everywhere.