

# Rounding out the Gun:

## AMMUNITION



Palestinian children look at bullets donated to Hamas activists during a campaign in the Gaza Strip in April 2004.

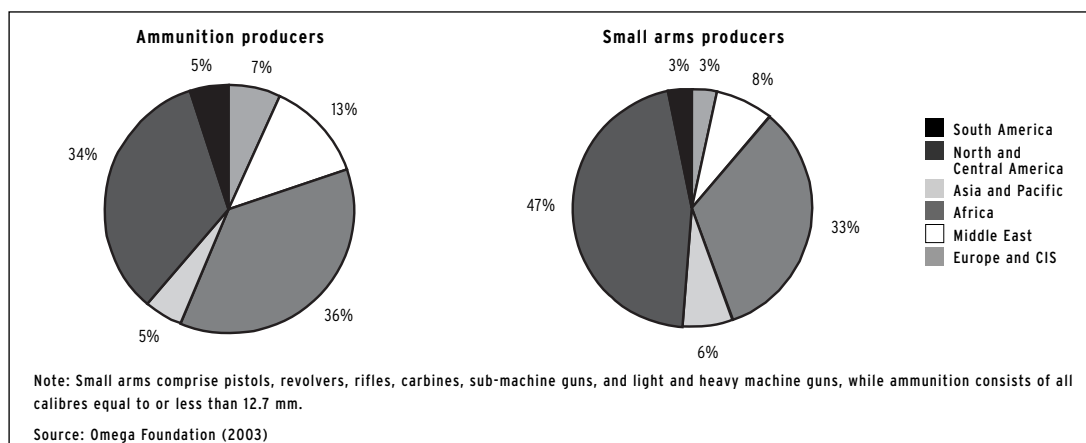
Without ammunition, small arms lack the power to threaten, injure, and kill. This simple fact suggests that the international community—concerned with the impact of armed violence on human security—should pay as much attention to the projectile as to the object that fires it. Regardless of its critical role in conflict, however, ammunition has so far been neglected in the arms control debate, and that despite preliminary efforts undertaken in 1999 by the UN Group of Experts on the problem of ammunition and explosives.

Despite its critical role in conflict, ammunition has so far been neglected in the arms control debate.

For the first time, a *Small Arms Survey* chapter highlights the main issues raised by ammunition production, use, transfers, storage, and destruction. It focuses on small arms ammunition, which covers such products as cartridges for handguns and rifles, shotgun shells, and their components. The key findings of this chapter are:

- Ammunition producers are generally distinct from manufacturers of small arms, although the geographical distribution of producers is similar in both cases (see Figure 1.2). Most ammunition producers specialize in certain types of products (ammunition for 'big game' hunting or law enforcement, for instance). The big picture of ammunition production is not well understood, however, largely because of poor state transparency with respect to the volume of ammunition manufactured and the number of operating factories. Developing countries willing to undertake local production often work under licence from major companies; some of these technology transfers have raised concerns about end users, especially when the recipients are located near—or in—conflict zones.
- The availability of ammunition often proves decisive in the selection of weapons and influences the value that combatants place on a given model. In Ghana, for instance, weapons are craft-produced depending on the type of ammunition that can be procured on the market; in the conflicts in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands, some guns were hand-made specifically to suit ammunition stocks inherited from the Second World War.

**Figure 1.2 Distribution of total ammunition and small arms producers by region**



- The amount of ammunition available affects potential weapons misuse. In wide circulation worldwide, assault rifles consume a large number of cartridges, and the lack of training and discipline in certain armed groups leads to excessive expenditure of ammunition. If ammunition is scarce, armed groups may enforce a 'shooting discipline' to avoid wasting precious stocks. When ammunition is easily available, by contrast, the discharging of firearms is less likely to be restrained.
- Stockpile mismanagement can represent a serious threat to life and the environment as well as risks of diversion. Ammunition that has expired, or become obsolete or unserviceable, is routinely removed from military stockpiles. At other times, however, such ammunition is simply retained, leading to excessive accumulation and storage problems. This issue is most acute in post-conflict settings: despite the complementary roles played by weapons and ammunition in conflict, ammunition is not always included in weapons collection and destruction programmes.
- Although most international and regional instruments cover ammunition in their definitions, their operational provisions often ignore ammunition. The UN *Programme of Action* is no exception, although a number of countries have chosen to include ammunition issues in their reports. Today multilateral discussions also revolve around measures aimed at improving traditional ammunition marking (primarily limited to headstamps, i.e. the producer's acronym and year of manufacture engraved in the bullet case).

Ammunition is often forgotten in weapons collection and destruction programmes.

Controlling ammunition proliferation is as important as controlling weapons proliferation. It may be easier as well. Indeed, ammunition production sources are easier to map than those of weapons simply because there are fewer ammunition producers than small arms producers in the world, and the former are more easily identified.

Other factors suggest that ammunition is a strong 'pressure point' in efforts to reduce small arms misuse. Its one-time use means that stocks must be replenished, requiring constant attempts to locate new sources. Given that ammunition is fragile and in danger of exploding, it is difficult to remove or obliterate ammunition markings that can help law enforcement trace information on origins and first purchasers.

Up to now, international instruments have covered ammunition imperfectly, leaving it mostly to individual governments to decide whether to report on ammunition-related matters. Due to the critical role it plays in weapons misuse in conflict settings and elsewhere, however, ammunition deserves a more prominent role on the international agenda.