

Man, the State, and War

THE THREE FACES OF SMALL ARMS DISARMAMENT

Disarmament measures for small arms, light weapons and ammunition are becoming routine and widespread. For centuries, the vision of disarmament has tantalized with revolutionary possibilities to transform relations between peoples and governments. The data and examples in this chapter support a more modest understanding of the prospects for small arms collection and disarmament. It should arouse neither 'irrational exuberance,' nor dismissiveness or anxiety. The experiences recounted here show it is neither a universal antidote for armed violence and political instability, nor, when undertaken with public consent, a threat to liberty and security.

This chapter clarifies the accomplishments and limitations of small arms collection and disarmament as it affects civilians, the state, and non-state actors. It shows that collection and disarmament measures are usually associated with a reduction of armed violence and promotion of political stability. Among its key findings:

- The destruction of state-owned small arms has been roughly comparable to that of civilian-held firearms.
- Quantitatively, disarmament of non-state forces is by far the smallest, but it may be most important for international and domestic security.
- The best prospects for further large-scale disarmament involve destruction of state surpluses.
- Disarmament has destroyed 40 per cent of existing military arsenals in particular cases and perhaps 20 per cent of civilian weapons.
- At the global level, at least 76 million military small arms and 120 million civilian firearms could be eliminated.
- Whether voluntary or compulsory, civilian weapons collection and destruction is most effective when accepted as legitimate. Coercive disarmament efforts often fail.
- The impact of civilian weapons collection and destruction is difficult to separate from that of other reforms, but it is associated with reduction or control of homicide and suicide rates.

Three major categories of small arms and light weapons disarmament are examined here. *Civilian weapons collection and destruction* addresses the safety and social environment of individuals. *State disarmament* usually is undertaken by governments to reduce their own arsenals. *Disarmament of non-state actors* is about reducing the risks of renewed warfare and continuing armed violence.

Table 5.2 Examples of major civilian collection programmes

Country	Registered civilian guns	Est. total civilian guns ^a	Destroyed	Years	Proportion destroyed
Australia	3,200,000	3,900,000	713,000	1997-2003	18%
Brazil	3,688,506	15,000,000	748,177	1998-2005	5%
China	680,000	40,000,000	4,000,000	1996-2006	10%
Solomon Islands	n/a	3,520	3,714	2003-04	106% ^c
South Africa	3,737,676	5,950,000	442,337 ^d	2001-05	7%
United Kingdom ^e	1,934,633	3,700,000	162,198	1997-98	4%

Notes:

^a Estimated total civilian guns before destruction.

^b United Kingdom data here refers only to England, Scotland, and Wales.

^c The number of weapons in the Solomon Islands was underestimated; more were destroyed than previously thought to exist.

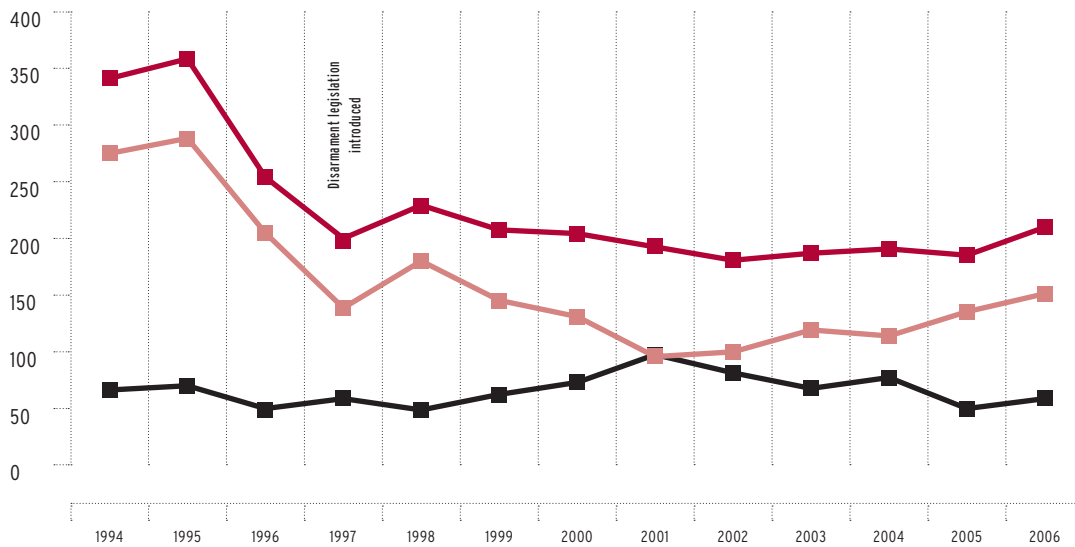
^d The South African disarmament total subtracts 88,640 decommissioned police weapons (Gould et al., 2004, p. 243).

Sources: Australia: Chapman et al. (2006, p. 365); Lee and Suardi (2008, p. 23). Brazil: Dreyfus and Nascimento (forthcoming). China: Parker and Cattaneo (2008). Solomon Islands: AP (2004); Muggah and Alpers (2003). South Africa: Lamb (2008, p. 20); Gould et al. (2004, p. 243). United Kingdom: UK Parliament (1999). Other data: Small Arms Survey (2007a, ch. 2, app. 3).

Figure 5.3 Intentional firearms death in England and Wales, 1994-2006

■ Total ■ Homicide ■ Suicide

NUMBER OF GUN DEATHS



Sources: Kaiza (2008); Povey (2004, p. 49)

Disarmament's impact may be largely positive—it may even be essential in some situations, but it rarely achieves major improvements in human security by itself. In the context of homicide and suicide trends, surplus stockpile disasters, and the maintenance of political stability, even highly incomplete disarmament typically plays a positive role. Recent small arms collection and destruction successes—such as civilian programmes in Brazil and the Solomon Islands, state disarmament in Germany and South Africa, and the disarmament of non-state actors in Colombia, Liberia, and Mozambique—were not stand-alone events. Each was a complex, integrated effort.

Gun destruction is a symbol of commitment more than an impediment to renewed fighting.

More controversial examples—such as partial civilian disarmament in Britain, state destruction in the Russian Federation or Ukraine, and many experiences of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR)—show few, if any, negative effects. Even with obvious failures—such as DDR in Haiti—it is extremely difficult to show that voluntary collection and disarmament efforts do any damage. The only evidence of systematic harm is associated exclusively with particular instances of coercive disarmament.

Even incomplete disarmament can contribute to political stability and reductions in armed violence.

The prospects for further small arms collection and disarmament are considerable. Roughly 40 per cent of state arsenals—some 76 million small arms—appear to be surplus to requirements and highly suitable for destruction. State disarmament appears to be the easiest to negotiate and simplest to implement, although, even here, frustrations are common. Collection and destruction seems readily feasible for perhaps 20 per cent of all civilian firearms—at least 120 million altogether. Disarmament of former non-state combatants will never elicit comparable numbers of weapons, but, as these are some of the most destabilizing and symbolically important weapons, they warrant disproportionate attention. The chapter reveals that even relatively small and incomplete undertakings can also have invaluable symbolic effects, influencing prospects and expectations for further reduction of violence. ■