

# Elusive Arsenals

## GANG AND GROUP FIREARMS

How many non-state combatants—guerrillas, insurgents, militiamen, and gang members—are there in the world? And how many weapons do they have? The types of weaponry non-state actors use is well known, whether the result of insights from display or often-deadly confrontations. While the actual numbers involved are much more elusive, this chapter makes an attempt to quantify the weapons of gangs and armed groups.

Uncertainty about the quantity of small arms controlled by non-state groups has aroused bitter controversy over the effectiveness of gun policy and specific programmes such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. The passionate debate in the United States and Mexico over illegal civilian arms sales to Mexican gangs is another manifestation of uncertainty over how many guns these groups actually have and where they come from.

**There are two-ten million gang firearms in the world.**

This chapter shows that gangs and groups are by far the least numerous of all major categories of firearms owners, much smaller than individuals, militaries, or law enforcement agencies. Among its findings:

- Gangs in the best-understood countries own between 1.2 and 1.4 million firearms.
- Worldwide gang arsenals include at least 2 million and probably no more than 10 million firearms.
- Other non-state armed groups—insurgencies and militias, including dormant and state-related groups—have a total of about 1.4 million small arms.
- The non-state armed groups actively fighting in 2009 had roughly 350,000 small arms altogether.
- Armed groups and gangs together control roughly 0.4 to 1.3 per cent of all small arms.
- Indirect evidence shows gangs and armed groups are obtaining more powerful small arms, feeding arms races with other actors.



A Jamaican gang member wields an automatic assault rifle in a public housing hallway, December 2008. © Scott Nelson

**Table 4.1 Approximate global distribution of small arms, 2009**

Category	Sub-category	Firearms (millions)
Armed forces		200
Law enforcement		26
Civilian		650
	Non-state armed groups	1.4
	Gangs	2 to 10
<b>Total (rounded)</b>		<b>875</b>

Sources: armed forces and law enforcement totals: Small Arms Survey (2006b, ch. 2); civilian: Small Arms Survey (2007, ch. 2); non-state armed groups and gangs: this chapter

Because the kind of information available about gangs and armed groups is far from uniform, this review uses different methods to calculate their small arms. Gang small arms inventories have been deduced by extrapolating overall totals from well-known cases. The arms of non-state armed groups are estimated building-block style from the numbers of combatants in various groups.

No effort was made in previous editions of the *Small Arms Survey* to estimate gang-owned small arms. Their weapons were largely included in broader measures of civilian firearms. Gang firearms are extrapolated here from 18 cases—countries, cities, and provinces—shown to have roughly 1.2 to 1.4 million small arms. Total gang arsenals worldwide appear to include at least 2 million and probably no more than 10 million firearms.

**Armed gang members are most common in societies with high gang membership and gun ownership.**

The small arms of non-state armed groups were estimated for 386 groups, with ownership rates averaging 0.5 to 1.6 small arms per combatant. In 2001, the total for all non-state armed groups—insurgencies and militias—was estimated at roughly one million weapons. This should be compared to the new estimate of roughly 350,000 small arms among groups actively fighting in 2009, a *real decrease* in both the number of active non-state fighters and their small arms inventories. If dormant groups and groups associated with state institutions are included, though, the total rises to 1.4 million small arms controlled by all non-state groups. This increase is partially *real*, due to the rise of armed factions, but also partially *apparent*, the result of greater research attention to previously overlooked types of groups.

Compared to the small arms of other major elements of society—private citizens, law enforcement agencies, and the armed forces—the groups examined here are statistically small, no more than 1.3 per cent of all small arms worldwide, and probably less. Gang arsenals appear to make up the largest part of this category.

Compared to arsenals of other gun-owning groups, those of insurgencies, militias, and terrorist movements can be quite small. Of some 875 million firearms worldwide, no more than 11.4 million are controlled by gangs and non-state groups. By comparison, law enforcement agencies have about 2.5 times as many, armed forces about 20 times more, and the individuals of the world about 60 times as many.

Even these comparisons tend to exaggerate insurgent numbers, inflated by groups currently dormant or militarily inactive and those that have become de facto or legitimate rulers. Small numbers, however, are not always inconsequential. Some of the most dangerous groups number no more than a few thousand; some number just a few hundred. The extraordinary disparity between the scale of rebel movements and their humanitarian and political damage is the source of their greatest significance. ■