

small arms survey 2010

gangs, groups, and guns

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FOREWORD

Street gangs and armed groups may represent a tiny portion of all firearm holders worldwide, but the armed violence in which they engage can undermine the socio-economic progress of a nation, challenge the state's monopoly on the use of force, and create a tipping point in political and military stalemates. Through their use of illicit arms, groups as diverse as Central America's *maras* and Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army continue to undermine security, development, and justice.

Both street gangs and armed groups rely on the illicit arms market to access their firearms. While gangs may contribute to a general climate of insecurity through criminal activities, they typically use small arms to target rival gang members, as revealed by staggering gang-on-gang homicide rates. Armed groups, which may support or oppose the government, tend to have a greater impact on their communities, whether through cattle raiding, the hijacking of aid shipments, the use of children in conflict and crime, the intimidation of voters to influence election results, or the trafficking of drugs and other resources.

To reduce the harm caused by armed violence, it is essential to prevent gangs and insurgents from accessing guns—and from feeling the need to access them in the first place. As demonstrated in the *Small Arms Survey 2010*, addressing the factors that trigger conflicts and fuel gang violence has a much more lasting—and constructive—impact than simply incarcerating or marginalizing members of street gangs and armed groups. By examining both the causes and the responses to such violence, this volume provides policy-makers and other stakeholders with the tools to recognize relevant social, economic, and political realities in designing programmes to promote development and security at the local, national, and regional levels.

To reduce the supply of illicit small arms, more must be done to improve the safekeeping and destruction of stockpiles, and to stop the corruption that enables the diversion of legally held weapons into the black market. This year, as we mark the tenth anniversary of the United Nations Convention against Organized Crime, I urge Member States to ratify and implement the Convention's Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms. This would be a giant step towards reducing the danger posed by small arms and light weapons.

—Antonio Maria Costa
Executive Director, United Nations
Office on Drugs and Crime

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ABOUT THE SMALL ARMS SURVEY

The Small Arms Survey is an independent research project located at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. Established in 1999, the project is supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and by sustained contributions from the Governments of Canada, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The Survey is also grateful for past and current project support received from the Governments of Australia, Belgium, Denmark, France, New Zealand, Spain, and the United States, as well as from different United Nations agencies, programmes, and institutes.

The objectives of the Small Arms Survey are: to be the principal source of public information on all aspects of small arms and armed violence; to serve as a resource centre for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and activists; to monitor national and international initiatives (governmental and non-governmental) on small arms; to support efforts to address the effects of small arms proliferation and misuse; and to act as a clearinghouse for the sharing of information and the dissemination of best practices. The Survey also sponsors field research and information-gathering efforts, especially in affected states and regions. The project has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, and criminology, and collaborates with a network of researchers, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

NOTES TO READERS

Abbreviations: Lists of abbreviations can be found at the end of each chapter.

Chapter cross-referencing: Chapter cross-references appear capitalized in brackets throughout the book. For example, in Chapter 3, which provides the overview to this edition's thematic section: 'Gang homicide rates can be as much as 100 times greater than homicide rates for the broader population (GANG VIOLENCE).'

Exchange rates: All monetary values are expressed in current US dollars (USD). When other currencies are also cited, unless otherwise indicated, they are converted to USD using the 365-day average exchange rate for the period 1 September 2008 to 31 August 2009.

Small Arms Survey: The plain text—Small Arms Survey—is used to indicate the overall project and its activities, while the italicized version—*Small Arms Survey*—refers to the publication. The *Survey*, appearing italicized, refers generally to past and future editions.

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—Keith Krause, Programme Director
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A Sudanese government-supported militiaman attends a meeting with Chadian military and border police near Adre, on the border with West Darfur, in April, 2004.
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Introduction

In October 2009, two heavily armed drug gangs clashed in Morro dos Macacos, a Rio *favela* (slum) that, like many others, is controlled by gangs. When the police sent in a helicopter, small arms fire forced a crash-landing that killed three of the officers inside. Days of subsequent street battles with the police and military left dozens of gang members, *favela* residents, and police dead or wounded. The intensity of the fighting, although unusual for Rio, fit a pattern of persistent gang violence in the city's poorer slums.

Gang violence is a daily concern for many public officials around the world. While such violence is typically directed at rival gang members, turf conflicts and retaliatory attacks can spread insecurity throughout an entire community. Although gang membership is associated with an increased risk of violence, not all gangs are inherently violent. Many street gangs—as opposed to the more professional drug gangs—primarily provide social structure and solidarity for their members. Gangs are groups in which young people can express themselves creatively, where internal norms are understood and respected, and where cooperation with peers is valued. All these features can be harnessed for positive ends.

Acknowledging this potential is politically risky, however, and the dominant model for addressing street gangs remains suppressive police action, including long prison terms for gang leaders. Evidence indicates that this approach can improve community security over the short term, yet threaten it over the longer term. The integration of street youths into toughened prison gang organizations—typically oriented around illicit drug trafficking and violence—has presented a particularly thorny problem for policy-makers. Clearly, a wide palette of prevention-oriented approaches is needed.

The *Small Arms Survey 2010: Gangs, Groups, and Guns* reviews current understandings of street gangs, the dynamics that give rise to them, the violence they commit, and efforts to curb the same. It examines traditional and emerging efforts to suppress gang violence as well as strategies to address the underlying factors influencing youths to join gangs. This edition also highlights another kind of organization that is widely associated with armed violence—non-state armed groups. They may oppose the government or support it in some form, although an armed group's orientation to the state can also be ambiguous or shift over time.

Gangs and groups are usually treated as distinct, but the blurring lines between politically and criminally motivated violence, and between economic or grievance-based violence, point to many similarities between gangs and armed groups. Both are organized collectives outside direct state control; each has the ability and willingness to deploy violence to achieve its objectives; and both are generally composed of young men, although the involvement of women is more prominent than often assumed. Both gangs and armed groups may be motivated by the need for social cohesion, in addition to more familiar ideological, economic, or political objectives. As in other areas, however, it is difficult to generalize; each gang or armed group has its own, context-dependent features.

Chapter highlights

Ten of the 12 chapters in the *Small Arms Survey 2010* look at gangs—primarily street gangs—and armed groups. This thematic section begins with a chapter that situates gangs and armed groups in the context of current understandings of armed violence and reviews the various approaches of other chapters in the section. The first of these distills current information on the firearms of gangs and armed groups, offering global estimates of their holdings based on available data. It is followed by a study of gang violence, including geographical variations in the intensity of such violence, along with the factors that appear to shape it. The chapter on prison gangs examines their consolidation, propagation, and projection of power, both within and beyond prison walls. A chapter on the role of girls and young women considers their motivations for joining gangs, as well as the differences between men and women with respect to the commission of gang-related violence. Traditional and innovative interventions designed to reduce gang violence and discourage youths from joining gangs are reviewed in the last gang-oriented chapter.

Two thematic chapters are dedicated to the subject of armed groups. The first looks at groups that can be considered ‘pro-government’, while the second reviews efforts to engage armed groups on international humanitarian norms relating to the use of weapons. Two case study chapters round out the discussion of gangs and armed groups. One focuses on the reintegration of gangs into society in Guayaquil, Ecuador, where efforts have been under way to work with—rather than try to break—existing gang structures while steering gang members towards positive social ends. The other case study places the 2009 surge of armed violence in ‘post-war’ Southern Sudan into historical context, underlining the influence of civil war dynamics. A photo essay documenting gang life in various settings completes the thematic section.

Two additional chapters in the 2010 edition review different aspects of the global trade in small arms and light weapons. One offers an estimate of the annual value of international authorized transfers in ammunition, confirming that earlier valuations of the overall trade in small arms and light weapons will need to be revised upwards. The second chapter examines controls on the transport—especially by air—of small arms and light weapons, concluding that many states already have the tools in place that, with some adaptation, could be effective in curbing illicit transfers.

Transfers section

Chapter 1 (Authorized transfers): As part of a multi-year project to estimate the annual value of authorized transfers of small arms and light weapons, their parts, accessories, and ammunition, this year’s transfers chapter examines the ammunition trade, supplementing up-to-date UN customs data with previously unused information sources, such as public procurement records.

The chapter concludes that the average annual value of authorized international transfers of small arms and light weapons ammunition—including undocumented transfers—was USD 4.3 billion between 2006 and 2009. Small arms ammunition comprised USD 1.8 billion of this total, with ammunition for light weapons accounting for USD 2.5 billion. This finding confirms that the long-standing estimate of USD 4 billion for the total annual trade (including weapons, ammunition, parts, and accessories) will need to be revised upwards once the multi-year study is completed.

Chapter 2 (Air transport): This chapter assesses the strengths and weaknesses of current—and proposed—approaches to the regulation of arms and ammunition transport, in particular air transport. While arms transfer licensing, customs, and civil aviation authorities have developed a significant body of controls over air transport, both direct and indirect, certain hurdles must be overcome if these controls are to be used to prevent or stop illicit small arms transfers. These include low levels of cooperation and information exchange among different state bodies as

Definition of small arms and light weapons

The Small Arms Survey uses the term 'small arms and light weapons' to cover both military-style small arms and light weapons as well as commercial firearms (handguns and long guns). It largely follows the definition used in the *Report of the UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms* (UN doc. A/52/298):

Small arms: revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles, and light machine guns.

Light weapons: heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, recoilless rifles, portable anti-tank missile and rocket launchers, portable anti-aircraft missile launchers, and mortars of under 100 mm calibre.

The term 'small arms' is used in this volume to refer to small arms, light weapons, and their ammunition (as in 'the small arms industry') unless the context indicates otherwise, whereas the terms 'light weapons' and 'ammunition' refer specifically to those items.

well as their different—sometimes incompatible—priorities and notions of 'security risk'. The chapter offers a critical analysis of current initiatives for strengthened controls on air transport—most notably, that led by the French and Belgian governments.

Groups, Gangs, and Guns

Photo essay: Through the lenses of two dozen photographers, *Gang Life* offers an intimate glimpse into the daily realities of current and former gang members around the globe. Having gained the trust of their subjects, the photographers capture what usually remains hidden from view: initiation beatings in Guatemala and Los Angeles; gang patrols in Caracas and New York; communal meals among gang girls in the Philippines; the 'styling and profiling' of gangs in Papua New Guinea and Spain; incarceration, injury, and death in Central America and Mexico; and the hurdles of post-gang life in El Salvador and South Africa.

Chapter 3 (Overview): The first chapter in the thematic section offers a framework for the chapters that follow. It begins by highlighting important definitional issues: the wide variance in types of gangs and armed groups and the blurry distinction between these two broad categories (and the many sub-groups that fall within each). It then touches on the main findings arising from the chapters. Finally, it highlights some common themes arising in the section. In particular, the chapters call for a greater emphasis on measuring violence, obtaining better information about various gangs and groups, and conducting comparisons across different groups and contexts in order to develop effective policies and programmes for reducing violence.

Chapter 4 (Firearms): Understanding the small arms controlled by non-state groups is important for gun policy and specific programmes such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. This chapter, a first cut at the difficult task of estimating the number of firearms held by gangs and armed groups, shows that they are dwarfed by civilian, military, and law enforcement guns. Of some 875 million firearms worldwide, gangs probably have between 2 million and 10 million. Other non-state armed groups have roughly 1.4 million altogether, of which some 350,000 belong to groups that were actively fighting in 2009. Indirect evidence suggests that gangs are getting progressively more powerful small arms, feeding arms races with other actors.

Chapter 5 (Gang violence): Over the course of the last decade, gang violence has become a global concern. Although gangs are present on six continents, their levels of violence and arms use vary greatly. While more is

known about gangs in North America, principally in large US cities, this chapter also reviews a growing body of research in Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. It notes that differences in gang violence around the world mostly appear to track national variations in the availability of firearms. The chapter also offers a model illustrating the dynamic process of gang violence within and between countries.

Chapter 6 (Prison): Prison gangs, although long recognized as a challenge for penitentiary administrations, have rarely been analysed as a threat to public security in general. And yet, as worldwide inmate populations have grown, prison gangs have expanded in size and reach, and in some places are now capable of organizing large-scale criminal activity and armed violence outside, as well as inside, prisons. This chapter surveys gangs and armed groups in prisons in the United States, Latin America, South Africa, and Northern Ireland. Through a detailed case study of Brazil's powerful prison gangs, it develops a model of prison gang expansion based on three dynamics: *consolidation*, *propagation*, and *projection* of power, concluding that the long-term costs of mass incarceration may be far higher than decision-makers realise.

Chapter 7 (Girls): Young women are involved in gangs as victims, supporters, and active participants. This chapter complements an up-to-date literature review with primary research from Haiti. It takes a global perspective, exploring parallels between gangs and other armed groups in terms of motivations for membership and the roles members play.

Girls and women are both victims and perpetrators of violence. A gang's gender composition appears to be a good proxy for its engagement in violent acts, as women and girls tend to use weapons and violence less frequently and with lower intensity (less use of firearms) than their male counterparts. The chapter shows that, while initially 'empowering', gangs may put females at greater risk of abuse and socio-economic marginalization in the longer term.

Chapter 8 (Ecuador): High murder rates in Latin America are often attributed to the rise in youth gangs. The small country of Ecuador is no exception. Over the past three decades, political instability, urban poverty, and inequality, coupled with easy access to firearms, have accompanied the proliferation of these groups. At the same time, suppressive law enforcement measures have had limited success in combating gang violence. This chapter profiles the efforts of the non-governmental organization SER PAZ ('Being Peace') to reduce violent crime in Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city. By cultivating the positive elements of gang culture, the organization has sought, with some success, to 'reintegrate' youth gangs into Ecuadorian society.

Chapter 9 (Interventions): This chapter examines the prevention, treatment, and suppression of youth street gangs in both theory and practice. Although gangs are a global phenomenon and appear to be influenced by US gang culture, they are ultimately context-specific, a fact that many gang interventions do not reflect. Preferences for certain types of interventions appear to be culturally entrenched. Overall, street gang interventions are more often guided by conventional wisdom than by evidence.

Short-term suppressive interventions remain most common. Longer-term interventions that combine suppression with prevention and treatment, involve the community, and are tailored to a specific context (cultural, socio-economic, developmental, gender) appear the most promising, yet tend to be costly. There are no shortcut solutions to the world's gang problems.

Chapter 10 (Pro-government): Research on non-state armed groups has often overlooked those tied to, or operating in support of, a government—whether visibly or covertly. These 'pro-government non-state armed groups'

(PGAGs) run the gamut from youth movements to street gangs, political thugs to militias, and community defence organizations to paramilitary forces. Governments have created, co-opted, and allied with PGAGs for economic, strategic, and political gain, using them to wage war, provide community security, and win elections, while obscuring government responsibility for abuses.

Despite their utility to many governments, PGAGs pose a serious risk to civilians—potentially much more so than national security forces. This is particularly true when governments outsource the worst violence to PGAGs and allow them to operate with impunity or when PGAGs turn against the government.

Chapter 11 (Sudan): In 2009, four years after a peace agreement was signed to end a civil war and eliminate armed groups, armed violence in Southern Sudan led to the deaths of an estimated 2,500 people. Much of the violence involved armed ‘tribal’ groups, was spurred by competition over scarce resources, and reflected long-standing local conflicts. The fledgling Government of Southern Sudan has been largely unable to address the violence, which has become increasingly politicized ahead of national elections scheduled for April 2010 and the referendum on self-determination for Southern Sudan in January 2011. This chapter examines the context and dynamics of the recent armed violence, highlights key threats to security (from both groups and individuals), and reviews possible scenarios as the South moves towards a likely vote for independence in a few months’ time.

Chapter 12 (Engagement): In recent years, a growing number of humanitarian actors have sought to elicit greater respect for international norms from armed groups. These efforts have led diverse armed groups to facilitate the delivery of aid to populations affected by armed conflict, ban anti-personnel mines, and renounce the recruitment and use of children.

Existing engagement efforts, however, have yet to tackle the threats posed by armed groups’ small arms and ammunition arsenals. Drawing upon lessons learned by humanitarian actors, as well as a review of more than 50 declarations, agreements, and regulations adopted by armed groups, the chapter identifies areas of potential engagement in the small arms domain. These include measures to prohibit small arms misuse, safety precautions to prevent weapons-related accidents, and commitments to refrain from transferring arms to criminals and other ‘misusers’.

Conclusion

Gangs and armed groups pose particular challenges for governance and security around the world. Policies of containment and suppression have shown merit, but they also have serious unintended consequences. As this volume suggests, the show of state force—whether intermittent or systematic—is seldom effective in reducing rates of armed violence over the long term. The potential transformation and social reintegration of both gangs and armed groups warrants closer consideration as part of a broader set of strategies that look beyond the symptoms of violence to underlying causes.

Through its examination of these key actors, this edition of the *Small Arms Survey* seeks to advance understandings of the causes, consequences, and correctives to the problem of armed violence, with a particular focus on small arms and light weapons. The 2011 edition of the *Survey* will continue to investigate these themes by shifting the spotlight from non-state entities to the state itself, including state security forces and national regulation and control of small arms and light weapons. ■