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| Report to the UNODC-INEGI Center of Excellence  *Aaron Karp*  Measurement and use of statistical data to analyze small arms in the Caribbean and Latin America  UNODC-INEGI Center of Excellence  Mexico City  28 April 2012 |

**Abstract**: This research paper is designed to introduce and evaluate the sources of data on arms inventories in 27 Caribbean and Latin American countries and the territory of Puerto Rico. This review finds that these countries have an estimated 53.5 million civilian firearms and 9.1 million state-owned firearms (law enforcement, military and paramilitary), for a combined total of 63 million firearms in the region. This equals an average distribution of 9.3 civilian firearms per every 100 residents, and 1.6 state firearms for every 100 residents. The predominant sources of data on small arms distribution in the region are civilian registration and various kinds of estimation. Neither is sufficient. While the former is very reliable, it is not comprehensive. The latter is compressive but less reliable. Large-sample polling is the most promising method for better understanding civilian firearms distribution in the region. State inventories are known in a few cases that have been made public, but the report here rely much more on extrapolation, making state estimation much like its civilian counterpart. The only solution to statist uncertainty is greater official transparency.

**Introduction: the sensitivity of small arms**

Firearms are the reality and the symbol of social uncertainty. They can represent and serve as instruments of the power of the state. They can empower individuals and offer them security. They also can underline trust and stability, becoming the embodiment of disorder and human brutality. It is no wonder guns are the fulcrum post-modern social policy and enormous controversy. Firearms statistics—showing how guns are distributed within societies—have emerged as a fundamental indicator of social malaise and a key to the development of effective responses to violence; knowing what to do is easier when we understand where we are.

Disputes over responses to social disorder and crime often take the form of debates over gun policy. Illustrating the problem is the wide range of estimates of civilian ownership. Three major disputes in contemporary Latin America reveal the sensitivity of small arms in public discourse:

* In Brazil, new research challenges older findings, and the legal reforms the older research supported. Research on the total number of civilian firearms available at the time of Brazil’s 2003 disarmament reforms was well accepted, showing almost 5.4 million registered civilian guns and 9.4 million suspected illegal guns. The challenge came from a rival study which showed ownership has risen dramatically, suggesting legal ownership alone had risen to 9.7 million in 2011.[[1]](#endnote-1) If the new figures are right, the Disarmament Statute has not reshaped the character of Brazilian gun culture. What might be dismissed as an arcane dispute over data interpretation is really about the future of domestic arms control policy. Can the Brazilian state assure civil security? But it may be the new data is mistaken, arising not from changes in empirical realities but from the confusion commonly created by gun statistics.
* In Venezuela, public officials found themselves trying to explain the nation’s chronic crime problems through progressively higher estimates for total civilian firearms ownership. The level of public gun ownership has long been elusive in Venezuela, previously estimated between 1.5 and 5 million, for an average estimate of 3.2 million civilian firearms. In 2009 prominent officials began to use the higher estimate of 5 million uncritically. In 2009 authorities escalated to 6 to 12 million. More recent estimates by national leaders reached to 9 to 15 million civilian firearms in the country. [[2]](#endnote-2) This would move the country from the ranks of moderate gun owners too one of the most heavily armed countries in the world. If the higher numbers are accepted, the kinds of interventions needed to alleviate the country’s crime and homicide problems could be very different than the solutions compatible with lower estimates.
* Mexican President Felipe Calderón stressed police data showing 90 percent of Mexican crime guns submitted for examination originated in the United States of America.[[3]](#endnote-3) The meaning of this data is challenged by American gun rights advocates, who point to unresolved doubt over the selection of crime guns for examination and doubt over the origins of Mexican small arms and light weapons generally. While the dispute might seem to reflect neutral interpretation of data, the rival positions are highly political, inseparable from larger debates on responsibility for Mexican drug violence and the future of North American gun rights. Mexican leaders believe that small-scale but continuous smuggling, the illegal trade from the United States, exacerbates their country’s organized crime problems. American gun rights advocates portray the Mexican allegations as part of a conspiracy to curtail rights they believe fundamental to the American social contract.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The politicization of data is a natural manifestation of its importance. Another sign of the rising importance of firearms statistics is their great availability. Two vital international agreements, the 1997 *Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms* (usually known by its Spanish acronym, CIFTA) and the 2001 *United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms And Light Weapons* (the PoA), have greatly enhanced official responsiveness and cooperation on small arms issues in Latin and North America. The greater availability of national reports on private firearms registration shows the culture created by these instruments also has led to greater transparency, at least about civilian gun ownership. But transparency is not systematic—reports arrive spasmodically with no central international agency to collect them—while state arsenals remain obscure. Public polling, the most reliable way to assess unregistered civilian gun ownership, is not prohibitively costly, but has only rarely been tried.

A careful sifting of available materials shows that a lot of data is available, or allows the generation of useful estimates. This review examines the kinds of data on gun ownership for 28 Latin American countries (27 independent states plus the territory of Puerto Rico). This review finds that these countries have an estimated 53.5 million civilian firearms and 9.1 million state-owned firearms (law enforcement and military), for a combined total of approximately 63 million firearms in the region. This equals an average distribution of 9.3 civilian firearms per every 100 residents, and 1.6 state firearms for every 100 residents.

The finding of approximately 63 million small arms in Latin America compares with previous estimates by the Small Arms Survey that the region had 45 to 80 million small arms. Public discussion was greatly affected by that estimate. Writers often made the mistake of using the higher estimate alone.[[5]](#endnote-5) Because data ranges can be difficult to explain, this review presents country data as single, median figures. The range of actual data points is noted throughout whenever possible.

The predominant sources of data on small arms distribution in the region are civilian registration and various kinds of estimation. Neither is sufficient. While the former is very reliable, it is not comprehensive. The latter is compressive but less reliable. Comtrade and other trade reports help reduce uncertainty, but have their own limits. Polling is the most promising method for better understanding civilian firearms distribution in the region. States inventories are known in a few cases that have been made public, but rely much more on extrapolation, making states estimation no better than civilian counterpart. The only solution to statist uncertainty is much greater official transparency.

This review is divided into four sections. It begins with an explanation of the kinds of data collected and developed here, noting the strengths and weaknesses of the basic material being applied. Section Two reviews regional trends by presented macro data and trends for the countries analyzed here. Section Three compares the small arms distribution and some effects, especially homicide. The last section is a detailed look at all 27 countries and Puerto Rico, exploring the specific issues each one raises.

**Section I: Data availability and issues**

Assessing small arms availability anywhere requires differentiating analytical tools by sector. The resources and estimating techniques that work for civilian guns do not help much for estimating law enforcement of military weaponry. The few resources that seem to cover all sectors—above all international trade data on firearms such as UN Register of Conventional Arms or UN Comtrade reports—only what was shipped, not what was delivered or trans-shipped. Even more confusing, they only say what was sent to a country, not who the recipient was: private citizens or rebels, police or paramilitaries? Figuring who has what requires more nuanced tools.

**Civilian firearms**

Unlike military and police weapons, civilian guns rarely are stockpiled in the Caribbean or Latin America. There are few if any ethnic groups or clans that maintain stockpiles under central control. Aside from wholesalers and some retailers, only collectors are likely to have more than handful. Instead the regions’ civilian guns are inventories, distributed throughout society.

The most reliable national data on civilian firearms covers legally registered civilian firearms. Most countries in the region require registration of civilian guns, although there are a few exceptions, such as Bolivia until very recently. But police seizures and the larger estimates show that registration applies to a minority of guns and owners. Many countries require periodic re-registration. In practice, this allows firearms to drop out of the registration system if they are not re-registered, which shows here as declining registration quantities. Even where registration is accepted, most guns tend to escape registration. Thus comprehensive estimation requires compensation for unregistered numbers. The best comprehensive estimates come from national experts, but these must be accepted for what they are. When possible, this review collects as many estimates as possible, drops outliers, and uses the median... Where such estimates are lacking, a statistical multiplier has been used here, usually 2.8, unless more specific information available.

For some countries, national data is completely absent, forcing reliance on statistical estimating. This uses correlation with per capita GDI and population, plus any insights about local gun culture, including anecdotal reports. This procedure provides useful approximations, but it poses problems as sample sizes decline and cases turn idiosyncratic. The very smallest states and territories, especially those under 100,000 population, are most challenging. And such enclaves are a peculiarity in which the Caribbean is exceptionally endowed.

Estimation suffers from a problem of inverse proportionality; it works best on big samples and worst on tiny ones. As country size drops radically, idiosyncrasies of geography, law, customs and registration procedures can have disproportionate effects. A single mid-level official with a distinctive attitude, for example, can shape the gun culture of small country. For this reason the smallest countries and territories of the Caribbean have been excluded, unless hard data was available from the country. Without registration data or something comparable, estimation for small states becomes speculation. Some of the countries missing here are under 100,000 people, like Dominica, Grenada, and Saint Kitts and Nevis. Others are somewhat larger, like Saint Lucia and San Vincent and the Grenadines. French Guiana and most Caribbean territorial enclaves have been excluded for the same reason, all oversights that deserve to be remedied.

All approaches to establish civilian ownership introduce possibilities for error, with a tradeoff between reproducibility and comprehensiveness... Registration data is eh most reproducible, but the least complete. Indeed, it usually appears to be quite partial. Estimates are comprehensive but much less reliable, arousing vigorous dispute. The final average estimates shown here are best used as indicators of magnitude, with sensational margin of error. Actual civilian arsenals are likely to lie with plus or minus 25 percent of the estimates shown here.

Missing from this review is separate treatment of two of the most prominent civilian sub-sets: *gangs and organized crime*, and *private security guards*. Both are readily included and have been examined in the past. They have been overlooked here but their weapons are included, as part of larger civilian totals.

**Law Enforcement**

A few countries have made details of their law enforcement arsenals public, notably Colombia and Nicaragua.[[6]](#endnote-6) To be more useful, transparency requires such declarations more systematically, and that others emulate their good practices. Instead they remain isolated examples.

The inventories of law enforcement agencies are estimated here at 1.1 or 1.3 small arms per sworn officer, depending on whether they sometimes carry automatic rifles as well as side arms, and on the wealth—the formal or suspected annual budget—of the agency.

**Paramilitary Forces**

A cross between police and the armed forces, most paramilitary organizations are heavy police or gendarmeries. They typically have arrest powers and heavier equipment like armored personnel carriers and heavy machine guns. They usually are used for security in the countryside and on national borders. As such they are assumed to be armed identically to constabulary armies—the two are almost impossible to distinguish in many respects—at 1.8 small arms per person.

The equipment paramilitary forces of many Latin American and Caribbean militias is suppressed here, in lieu of further evidence. Instead of 1.8t 1.8 small arms/person for their greatest year, most are assumed to operate at 1/1 or 1.2/1. Cuba’s one million member *Territorial Militia*, for example, are calculated here at 1/1, although his territorial defense organization could be much better armed than that. Similarly, Venezuela’s newly created *Armadas de Cooperacion* has received their first weapons and announced with plans to expand to 1.5 million personnel. For now, they too are calculated at 1/1, until better data is found.

**Military stockpiles**

As with civilian and enforcement totals, the best information about military stockpiles comes from the armed forces themselves. Of the countries reviewed here, only Colombia has made its military small arms information available.[[7]](#endnote-7) The Colombia revelations are important; they show much higher small arms/personnel ratios that previously expected. But the revelations have not been influential; no other country has emulated Colombia’s performance, including Colombia, which has yet to offer updated details.

In lieu of hard reports, the small arms deployments of military forces must be estimated. The key to estimating military stockpiles is knowing the highest number of uniformed personnel in modern times. Usually this means the highest number since the mid-1960s, when most countries converted to automatic fire small arms. For many countries, armed forces reached peak dimensions in the 1980s, leaving huge surpluses of old equipment as the number of personnel declined. Argentina and Guyana are clear examples. Several other countries are at peak contemporary size today, like Mexico and some smaller countries.

Most countries have reduced their militaries since the highest expansion of the mid-1980s Panama’s military is gone completely, eliminated in 1990. Argentina’s military is one-eighth its size during the 1982 Falklands war. But the weapons from before are still there. Based on highest personnel numbers, highest small arms requirements can be estimated. Small arms/personnel ratios vary depending on the organization and its operational doctrine

**Figure 1. Typical military small arms ratios**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *organization* | *small arms per person* |
| Air Force | 0.5 |
| Air Force, Reserve | 0.5 |
| Army, People’s War | 4.5 |
| Army, Heavy | 2.5 |
| Army, Constabulary | 1.8 |
| Army, Reserve | 1.0 |
| Navy | 0.5 |
| Navy, Reserve | 0.5 |

Also important are subsequent waves of rearming, usually modernizing. Unless older weapons were decommissioned—given away, transferred to other government agencies or sold aboard—they remain in storage.

**Inventory dynamics**

Most of the data and estimates presented here are *static*, snap-shots of the situation at a single moment. In a few cases enough registration records are available to construct a *dynamic* portrait of evolving civilian ownership, notably for Argentina, Chile and to a lesser degree for Brazil and Costa Rica. In practice, we are lucky to have single-moment snapshots, but longitudinal data is much more useful. This may be an area where UN Register of Conventional Arms or UN Comtrade can be used for illumination, although that has not been attempted in this review. Another alternative is constructing dynamic estimation models to predict changes over time.

While growth of civilian inventories can be evaluated, using tools designed to capture new purchases, there also are losses to be considered. If stored in a dry environment, guns last eternally. Even major breakage usually is repairable. But sometimes guns break irreparably, they corrode or get lost permanently. Sometimes they are destroyed through disarmament processes or seized as crime guns and eventually destroyed. Others are sold, leaving one country and popping up in another.

Estimating attrition has proven to be much harder than coping with stockpile growth. Most of the declining numbers identified here are associated with formal disarmament campaigns—as in Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela—or police seizures. The other cases where registration totals declined appear to be the result of weapons dropping out of registration through owner negligence; the guns did not evaporate. There still is no indicator that systematically captures other forms of inventory attrition.

**Section II: Where the guns are**

For the 27 countries surveyed here and the territory of Puerto Rico, civilian firearms are estimated to number 54.5 million or an average of 9.3 guns for every 100 people of the Caribbean and Latin America. Of course these generalizations conceal considerable national differences. As shown below, these figures are themselves averages, based on the composite of estimates for each country. The sources for each country are described in the country articles below.

Total numbers of civilian guns are the most commonly used indicator, but even more important for the local gun culture is the rate of ownership, expressed here as guns per 100 residents. This varies throughout the region, from a low in Cuba and Haiti of just 2 civilian guns per 100 people, to a high of approximately 32.6 in Uruguay. The distribution of ownership rates is curiously similar to Europe, where the spread between lowest and highest is similar, with Poland at the bottom and Finland, Serbia and Switzerland at the top. Behind these statistics lie national gun cultures: difference in the law, per capita wealth, availability of imports and domestic production, and attitudes toward gun ownership.

**Figure 2. Estimated civilian gun ownership**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Country* | *population 2010* | *civilian small arms* | *civilian small arms per 100 people* |
| Antigua & Barbuda | 105,000 | 6,000 | 5.7 |
| Argentina | 40,700,000 | 3,600,000 | 8.8 |
| Bahamas | 345,000 | 75,000 | 21.7 |
| Barbados | 256,000 | 9,000 | 3.5 |
| Belize | 313,000 | 32,000 | 10.2 |
| Bolivia | 10,000,000 | 250,000 | 2.5 |
| Brazil | 195,000,000 | 16,800,000 | 8.6 |
| Chile | 17,100,000 | 1,750,000 | 10.2 |
| Columbia | 46,300,000 | 3,200,000 | 6.9 |
| Costa Rica | 4,640,000 | 400,000 | 8.6 |
| Cuba | 11,200,000 | 220,000 | 2.0 |
| Dominican Republic | 10,200,000 | 600,000 | 5.9 |
| Ecuador | 13,800,000 | 350,000 | 2.5 |
| El Salvador | 6,190,000 | 450,000 | 9.7 |
| Guatemala | 14,400,000 | 1,200,000 | 11.1 |
| Guyana | 761,000 | 155,000 | 20.4 |
| Haiti | 10,200,000 | 200,000 | 2.0 |
| Honduras | 7,610,000 | 850,000 | 9.9 |
| Jamaica | 2,730,000 | 180,000 | 6.6 |
| Mexico | 111,000,000 | 15,000,000 | 13.5 |
| Nicaragua | 5,800,000 | 450,000 | 7.8 |
| Panama | 3,500,000 | 450,000 | 12.9 |
| Paraguay | 6,500,000 | 1,000,000 | 15.4 |
| Peru | 29,500,000 | 750,000 | 2.5 |
| Puerto Rico | 4,000,000 | 800,000 | 20.0 |
| Suriname | 524,000 | 75,000 | 14.3 |
| Trinidad & Tobago | 1,340,000 | 30,000 | 2.2 |
| Uruguay | 3,370,000 | 1,100,000 | 32.6 |
| Venezuela | 29,000,000 | 3,250,000 | 11.2 |
| *totals* | *586,384,000* | *53,532,000* | *9.1* |

*Sources*: country articles below

State small arms arsenals can be thought of the same way, both in terms of raw numbers or state-owned weapons per capita. The largest state arsenals belong to those countries with be biggest law enforcement agencies and armed services. As shown here, combined state arsenals (law enforcement, paramilitaries and military) tend to be about one-sixth the size of civilian small arms inventories, with 9.3 million small arms in all, compared to over 53.5 million in civilian hands. The countries of Latin America average less than 1.6 state firearms for every 100 residents, compared to an average of 9.3 civilian guns for every 100 residents.

There are problems with this simple state-to-civilian comparison. The far greater civilian numbers conceal important differences in capability. State firearms include large numbers of fully automatic pistols and especially automatic rifles, which remain rare in public hands. And state forces are, above all, organized and subject to orders, capable of rapid and coherent deployment and disciplined use.

**Figure 3. Caribbean and Latin American regional small arms distribution**



As one might expect, the countries with the biggest population and territory have the biggest state arsenals, led by Brazil above all and Mexico second, followed by Argentina, Colombia and Peru. All this is very consistent with population, except the second ranking small arms owner appears to be much smaller Cuba. With a disproportionately large military and one of the largest paramilitary organizations in the world, Cuba’s state arsenal is impressive, as is the proportional ownership rate, 13.6 government small arms per 100 people.

**Figure 4. State firearms ownership**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Country*** | ***population 2010*** | ***law enf. total*** | ***paramilitary total*** | ***military total*** | ***total state small arms*** | ***state small arms per 100 people*** |
| Antigua & Barbuda | 105,000 | 400 |  | 250 | 650 | 0.62 |
| Argentina | 40,700,000 | 175,000 | 16,000 | 430,000 | 621,000 | 1.53 |
| Bahamas | 345,000 | 4,000 |  | 1,500 | 5,500 | 1.59 |
| Barbados | 256,000 | 1,600 |  | 1,400 | 3,000 | 1.17 |
| Belize | 313,000 | 1,600 |  | 2,500 | 4,100 | 1.31 |
| Bolivia | 10,000,000 | 29,000 |  | 68,000 | 97,000 | 0.97 |
| Brazil | 195,000,000 | 800,000 |  | 1,300,000 | 2,100,000 | 1.08 |
| Chile | 17,100,000 | 26,000 |  | 265,000 | 291,000 | 1.70 |
| Columbia | 46,300,000 | 285,000 |  | 430,000 | 715,000 | 1.54 |
| Costa Rica | 4,640,000 | 5,000 | 550 | 0 | 5,550 | 0.12 |
| Cuba | 11,200,000 | 43,000 | 1,065,000 | 415,000 | 1,523,000 | 13.60 |
| Dominican Republic | 10,200,000 | 32,000 |  | 56,000 | 88,000 | 0.86 |
| Ecuador | 13,800,000 | 42,000 | 600 | 240,000 | 282,600 | 2.05 |
| El Salvador | 6,190,000 | 18,500 |  | 102,000 | 120,500 | 1.95 |
| Guatemala | 14,400,000 | 44,000 |  | 112,000 | 156,000 | 1.08 |
| Guyana | 761,000 | 2,500 | 1,500 | 15,500 | 19,500 | 2.56 |
| Haiti | 10,200,000 | 10,000 |  | 13,000 | 23,000 | 0.23 |
| Honduras | 7,610,000 | 23,000 |  | 92,000 | 115,000 | 1.51 |
| Jamaica | 2,730,000 | 9,000 |  | 6,500 | 15,500 | 0.57 |
| Mexico | 111,000,000 | 655,000 | 18,000 | 505,000 | 1,178,000 | 1.06 |
| Nicaragua | 5,800,000 | 8,500 |  | 425,000 | 433,500 | 7.47 |
| Panama | 3,500,000 | 15,500 |  | 29,000 | 44,500 | 1.27 |
| Paraguay | 6,500,000 | 26,000 |  | 194,000 | 220,000 | 3.38 |
| Peru | 29,500,000 | 170,000 | 8,000 | 360,000 | 538,000 | 1.82 |
| Puerto Rico | 4,000,000 | 24,000 |  | 12,000 | 36,000 | 0.90 |
| Suriname | 524,000 | 2,000 |  | 8,000 | 10,000 | 1.91 |
| Trinidad & Tobago | 1,340,000 | 9,000 |  | 6,500 | 15,500 | 1.16 |
| Uruguay | 3,370,000 | 11,000 | 15,000 | 77,000 | 103,000 | 3.06 |
| Venezuela | 29,000,000 | 120,000 | 100,000 | 170,000 | 390,000 | 1.34 |
| *totals* | 586,384,000 | *2,592,600* | *1,224,650* | *5,337,150* | *9,154,400* | *1.56* |

*Sources*: country articles below

The breakdown between state agencies shows that militaries are by far the largest repositories of official small arms, outnumbering police and other law enforcement agencies typically 2 to 1 (5.3 million versus 2.6 million). Again, averages conceal divergent national practices. In Mexico, for example, law enforcement inventories almost outnumber military small arms stockpiles. In Cuba the military out paces law enforcement weapons inventories by 35 to 1. And Nicaragua’s military controls a stockpile 50 times bigger than what the cops have. At the other extreme are Costa Rica and Panama, countries that have no militaries, although both deploy paramilitary or gendarmerie forces for specific tasks like border control.

There also are technological preferences in weapons choices that tend to mirror image ether other. While law enforcement traditionally relies on side arms (revolvers or pistols) with some rifles or submachine guns in reserve, the armed forces rely on automatic rifles with handguns in reserve.

The importance of national policy and culture in each country’s ownership mix is illustrated by the following four pie charts, each showing an example of the variations among particular categories of small arms owners in a society. Costa Rica shows extreme civilian dominance. In Mexico, law enforcement is exceptionally disproportionate compared to the military. In Nicaragua the military predominates over civil society. Peru is designated here as the normal example, with a more typical Latin American balance. But with so many outlying cases, one is entitled to ask who is normal?









**Section III: Comparative assessment**

The data assembled here allows us to put the twenty seven countries and the territory of Puerto Rico in comparative perspective. While all countries of the region have crime and firearm problems, they differ greatly on the severity and scale of their problems.

**Figure 5. Country ranking by total civilian gun ownership**



The raw listing of countries by total civilian arsenal, shown here, is both the most obvious way to rank countries in the region and perhaps the least important. As presented here, national small arms inventories are a proxy for country size, with an obvious connection between population and civilian arsenal, with a few exceptions, the list of largest gun owners follows the list of largest population.

As experienced, though, total civilian ownership is less important than the circumstances in which arms appear. It is more the social context that gives firearms their meaning, less their physical qualities as firearms. Total ownership is more important, rather, in specific contexts. Quantity obviously matters as a direct lever on a country’s potential to transfer weapons to other countries. Brazil, for example, has the ability to flood its neighbors—virtually every other country of South American—with firearms. If demand is rising across their borders and authorities are negligent in their supervision, individual Brazilian smugglers have enormous markets to call upon. Similarly, Mexico, today a recipient of another country’s smuggled guns, has enormous export potential. By virtue of its size poses an implicit threat to drown neighboring countries like Guatemala in Mexican guns.

**Figure 6. Countries by civilian-owned firearms per 100 residents**



The context of civilian ownership becomes more visible when the same countries are ranked by rate of ownership, guns per person. Then a very different impression emerges. Using the standardized statistic of civilian firearms per 100 residents, the hierarchies shift dramatically. Here the highest ranking countries are smaller states with strong traditions of firearms ownership like Guyana, Paraguay or Uruguay, or they are countries close to major markets, such as Bahamas. Puerto Rico is included here for comparative purposes and regional completeness. The island territory has some of the strictest gun laws in the United States, but still ranks high of ownership compared to other countries in the hemisphere. Panama’s high comparative standing is an anomaly which warrants careful investigation. Does it really have the highest rate of ownership among Central American countries, or are the statistics misleading?

Just as important as countries with high rates of ownership are those at the bottom of the scale. Here is a mixture of high and low crime countries. The same can be seen in the middle of the scale, where high and low crime countries cohabitate. The uneven association of crime and gun ownership rates suggests a weak correlation between gun ownership and crime generally, although there does appear to be a strong correlation in particular cases.

While rate of ownership is an important indicator, it also is misleading. In reality, guns are not distributed evenly across society, whether the country has a low ownership rate of 4 guns per 100 people or a high rate of 30 per 100. These are country averages. They do not show domestic distribution. In practice, guns ownership tends to concentrated among a smaller proportion of society that owns firearms. Establishing the degree of concentration is very difficult. Some rules of thumb are helpful. Rural households are more likely to have guns than city dwellers. Many owners have three guns: a handgun, rifle and shotgun. But it is not uncommon to collect guns. An owner can easily have ten or many more firearms.

**Figure 7. Countries by state-owned firearms per 100 residents**



What is true for civilian ownership is not the same for state arsenals, the government owned firearms of security agencies. Ranking countries by state firearms per resident produces a dramatically different ranking. To be sure, there is some overlap. The high rank of countries like Guyana, Paraguay and Uruguay suggests high civilian ownership may be connected to high state ownership. But a different group countries shift to the top position for state firearms per person, led by Cuba and Nicaragua. Leftist rule is the obvious connection. For Nicaragua, there may be a connection between its exceptional state arsenal and the Contra War legacy from the 1980s.

No less interesting is the exceptional mixture of states at the lower end of the state ownership rate scale. Here we see countries with less extreme social tensions like Costa Rica and others with serious crime problems like Haiti, Jamaica and Mexico. While serious crime is associated with more aggressive policing and sometimes domestic deployment of the armed forces, this does not show in a dramatic increase in overall state arming. The Mexican security services, for example, are among the largest in the region, but their level of arming is not exceptional.

**Figure 8. Proportion of homicides with firearms**



If the number of guns in a society matters less than what people do with them, there are few statistics more consequential than the portion of homicides committed with a gun. Firearms are uniquely deadly; the substitution of a knife or blunt weapon for a gun significantly reduces the likelihood of fatal injury. But multi-national comparison is slippery. Comparing homicide data always calls for caution. Determination of homicide usually is made by police on the scene; medical examiner reports and subsequent judicial investigation may lead to other judgments about the cause of death. In some countries, all violent deaths are categorized a homicide, including the category of justifiable homicide, while others distinguish between homicide and manslaughter.

Public health sources—usually based on hospital death certificates—often differ as well, sometimes dramatically.[[8]](#endnote-8) Like estimates of firearms ownership, homicide numbers should be used as vague indicators, not exact measure, or completely comparable between countries.

National data differ sometimes as well. Venezuela statistics show that 94 percent of all homicides are committed with a gun.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Even allowing for problems with homicide data, Cuba is the extreme regional outlier. Not only are Cuban homicide rates low, but guns are least likely to be used there of any country in the hemisphere. Cuban guns are few and relatively safe. This may be because Cuban firearms tend to be long guns—rifles and shotguns—less suitable for crime, but that is just conjecture. The criminology of Cuba is an important question with broader political and social implications.

All other countries surveyed here show relatively consistent tendencies, with guns used in one-half to over two-thirds of all homicides. When Latin Americans kill, they do it with a gun. It is tempting to conclude that the gun is a catalyst for killing; if guns were fewer, attacks would be less deadly. At the extreme are several countries and the territory of Puerto Rico, where over 80 percent of homicides are committed with firearms. The high regional correlation between firearms and homicides suggests that public disarmament can significantly reduce total homicide. This has been the experience in Brazil and to a lesser extent Argentina, where the biggest gun amnesties have occurred. The same approach holds promise throughout the region.

**Figure 9. Ranking by civilian firearms lethality**



Lethality measures the likelihood that any random firearm will be used to kill someone in a particular year. This scale does not include countries for which firearms fatalities could not be disaggregated from total homicides: Antigua & Barbuda, Barbados, Bolivia, Chile and Haiti.

The lethality of each country’s civilian arsenal varies greatly. . For every civilian owned gun in the region, there is a 6/100,000 probability it will be involved in a killing, one killing for every 15,000 firearms. In some counties the risk that an average gun will used to kill is much higher, notably most countries of Central America, Jamaica, Venezuela, and Suriname above all.

Missing here is a sense of which kind of gun is most likely to be used in homicide. It would be extremely valuable to know the relative deadliness of revolvers and pistols versus long guns, rifles and shotguns. How often are assault weapons used in commission of crimes, especially homicide? In other words, should certain types of firearms be regulated more carefully than others?

Countries with low lethality are especially important to study; they seem to balance gun ownership while escaping the worst gun pathologies. At the far end of the scale is Cuba, which not only has a small level of civilian ownership—although that is a supposition based on inferences—but those guns are extremely unlikely to kill anyone. The exceptional stability of Cuban society is not hard to explain. Countries like Argentina and Uruguay are much more interesting. One is a middle level ownership and the other high gun ownership, but their guns are used quite rarely to kill. Both appear to have relatively safe firearms. This is a contrast that deserves greater study.[[10]](#endnote-10) Are their lessons from the Argentine and Uruguayans experience that can be applied elsewhere?

At the opposite end of the scale are countries where firearms are most likely to be used to kill. Most of the countries at the far right side of the scale are well known for serious violence. Central America and the Caribbean predominate there. None of this is surprising. A gun in Suriname is an especially dangerous object; with a possibility of one in one-hundred it will kill someone this year. Elsewhere in Central America and the Caribbean, the risk that a typical civilian gun will kill someone generally is between one in four to seven hundred.

Some countries have very serious violence problems, but do not have exceptionally dangerous guns. Mexico’s ranking as a relatively low lethality country is surprising if one thinks only of its gruesome reputation for narco murders. Although it has a terrible homicide problem, Mexico also has a lot of civilian firearms. The chance that a typically civilian gun will kill anyone is low, about the same as guns in more peaceful societies like Costa Rica and Paraguay. The majority of the country’s firearms are not the problem, but an important sub-set is extraordinarily dangerous. The implication is that effective gun control in Mexico probably has to target the right guns rather than just guns in general. Indeed, a national disarmament campaign might affect attitudes, but seems unlikely to get directly at the guns of the gangs and drug traffickers causing the worst problems.

Once again, lethality is a tricky statistic when used selectively. Obviously, some guns tend to be more dangerous than others. Careful research is needed to distinguish which kinds of guns and which owners are most likely to use their weapons in homicide.

**Section IV: Country analyses**

What follows are short summaries of major elements of inventory statics debates in each of the 27 countries evaluated here and the territory of Puerto Rico. Each section reviews firearms distribution data for one country. The emphasis of each section is not a comprehensiveness assessment of its firearms problems, but explaining how country estimates were derived, noting distinctive methods, adjustments to standard models, as well as distinctive findings. The sections also identify some of the most serious lacuna in our knowledge; priorities for further research.

**Antigua and Barbuda**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 105,000 | 6,000 | 400 | 0 | 250 | 650 | 6,650 |

The basis of the Antigua and Barbuda civilian small arms estimate is the reported registration total of 1,449 registered civilian firearms reported by in Henry Christian.[[11]](#endnote-11) A higher figure of 1,671 is available but may be less reliable. The unregister total is unknown but there is no reason to suspect it not consistent with the usual rule of three-to-one. As with other countries where there is comparable doubt, the preferred source of answers is scientific polling.

**Argentina**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 40,700,000 | 3,600,000 | 175,000 | 16,000 | 575,000 | 621,000 | 4,366,000 |

Argentine gun culture has evolved greatly in recent years. Civilian attitudes are liable to dramatic swings, from an emphasis on guns for personal security to an awareness of social problems associated with excess availability. In the early 2002, during the economic contraction of the era, gun ownership was seen positively and civilian ownership appears to have expanded dramatically, with stores reporting a fifty percent increase in sales.[[12]](#endnote-12)

In the mid-2000s concern with the dangers of small arms proliferation became more important. An initial reform appears to have been a cleaning of older registration records, which appear to have been balloted with redundant or otherwise mistake entries. Although entirely surmised here, this would explain the otherwise extraordinary and inexplicable reduction in civilian gun registrations between 2001 and 2006, shown in the table below.

A second reform was a series of regional and national disarmament initiatives started under the reform law of 2006. These led to the buy-back and destruction of more than 128,000 firearms through 2011. Weapons came in fastest in the first year of the program, when 104,782 came in.[[13]](#endnote-13) Another report says the initial total was 107,761.[[14]](#endnote-14) Participation has been slower since then. Even so, advocates go so far as to claim “Since the establishment of its policy on the destruction of firearms in 2006, the Government had destroyed 128,734 small arms, which represented 10 per cent of civilian-owned weapons.” [[15]](#endnote-15) While the destruction record is significant, the portion of total national guns destroyed is much less than ten percent, since civilian gun ownership includes both registered and unregistered firearms, the latter usually uncounted.

Evidence suggests the latter predominate in Argentina as in most other places. The number of registered firearms declined from 2006 to 2008, but increased since, possibly as unregistered guns were integrated into the legal system, possibly because new sales continued pretty well regardless. As shown in the table below, the decrease in public ownership due to the disarmament program has been eliminated by subsequent registrations, which now surpass the levels of 2008, although reports differ about how much, ranging from a 10 to 12 percent increase during the next two years. Disarmament probably did more to slow the pace of inventory growth.

**Argentine civilian firearms registration reports**

*available years 2001-210*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *registered* | *year* | % change | *source* |
| 2,597,122 | 2001 |  | Viva Rio background research in *Small Arms Survey 2004*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 51. |
| 1,185,467 | 2006 | -0.54 | Aaron Karp, *Surplus Arms in South America: a Survey*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2009. |
| 1,123,059 | 2008 | -0.06 | Aline Gatto Boueri, “Argentina Turns in Its Firearms”, *Comunidade Segura*, 3 March 2011\* |
| 1,240,000 | 2010 | 0.09 | *Report on Citizen Security in the Americas 2011*, Washington, D.C.: OAS, January 2011, p. 22 |
| 1,261,758 | 2010 | 0.02 | Anayancy Espinoza, *Arms Trafficking in Latin America*, manuscript, UNODC, Mexico City, 2012, p. 28. |

\* The total of 1,123,059 is reported for the year 2004 in *Report on Citizen Security in the Americas 2011*, Washington, D.C.: OAS, January 2011, p. 22. This appears to be a mistake. The figure is associated with 2008 in Aline Gatto Boueri, “Argentina Turns in Its Firearms”, *Comunidade Segura*, 3 March 2011.

The number of registered civilian firearms has been reported variously, making it hard to be confident about any figure. While the approximate scale of registered inventory is known, at roughly 1.2 to 1.3 million, total ownership is higher. A survey in 2007 suggested there are 2.2 million Argentine gun owners. Many owners have more than one firearm.[[16]](#endnote-16) Illegal firearms are estimated at 2 to 2.5 million, for a national civilian total averaged and rounded here at 3.6 million.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Argentina stands out for its extraordinary military surplus, which appears to include about 300,000 unneeded weapons. The surplus is the result of dramatic reductions of its armed forces, following the collapse of the military’s political role and social prestige in the 1980s and the end of conscription. Most impressive, it eliminated its reserve force of 377,000. Other countries shrank their armed forces but kept or inflated the reserves, which has the effect of justifying maintenance of surplus stockpiles. In lieu of such justifications, Argentina’s military surplus is an outstanding candidate for disposal.

**Bahamas**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 345,000 | 75,000 | 4,000 | 0 | 1,500 | 5,500 | 80,500 |

Firearms ownership is legal in the Bahamas with registration, but limited to rifles and shotguns. Handgun ownership is illegal. The registered total is 17,111.[[18]](#endnote-18) The total number of civilian guns—registered and unregistered—is estimated here based on the registered figure and the study cited in the article. With the Florida coast within easy reach, the Bahamas is profoundly affected by the American gun market.

**Barbados**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 256,000 | 9,000 | 1,600 | 0 | 1,400 | 3,000 | 12,000 |

The Barbados estimate presented here, 9,000 total civilian guns, is based on extrapolation from total registered civilian firearms, reportedly numbering some 3,000, multiplied by a factor of three.[[19]](#endnote-19) Police and military inventories are derived from standard multipliers.

**Belize**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 313,000 | 32,000 | 1,600 | 0 | 2,500 | 4,100 | 36,000 |

With 10,755 registered civilian firearms, Belize can be estimated to have a total of 32,000 registered and unregistered firearms, using standard multiplier of 3/1. Registration statistics show handguns allowed.[[20]](#endnote-20) Police and military inventories have been estimated based on standard multipliers. Complicating estimates for Belize is the sensitivity of any small country’s total to sudden incidents. illustrated in 2011 by the theft of 24 automatic rifles and 18 pistols from the army’s principle barracks.[[21]](#endnote-21)

**Bolivia**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 10,000,000 | 250,000 | 29,000 | 0 | 68,000 | 97,000 | 347,000 |

One of the most mysterious countries in Latin American gun policy is Bolivia, where virtually nothing is known because until recently there was no legal system. While export and imports trade in all military equipment is regulated, including small arms, public ownership was virtually unregulated.

Bolivia became the last country in the region to create a modern registration system in 2009, when it passed its first gun law. The law came after ten years to paralysis caused by unresolved tension between the army and police over responsibility for implementation. Under the 2009 bargain, the military regulates production and the police register civilian ownership.[[22]](#endnote-22)

While waiting for the 2009 law to have an effect and generate statistics, Bolivian firearms data are improvised here based on extrapolation from countries with comparable wealth and population. That makes this among the weakest numbers in this set. Military and law enforcement small arms estimates are stronger, reflecting known manpower and typical arming rates.

**Brazil**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 195,000,000 | 16,800,000 | 800,000 | 0 | 1,300,000 | 2,100,000 | 18,900,000 |

There has been more research on small arms in Brazil than any other country in the region, except perhaps Colombia. Brazilian firearms data is complicated and ambiguous, though, prohibiting conclusive findings. The resulting doubt makes firearms distributions in well-studied Brazil only slightly less confusing than those of a much less carefully studied country like Mexico.

Efforts to understand the total number of civilian firearms in Brazil rest upon the highly influential work of Pablo Dreyfus and his collaborators. They found that there were 5,370,500 privately-owned guns registered in 2005. Dreyfus estimated the nation’s unregistered firearms at 9,499,900.[[23]](#endnote-23) A series of disarmament campaigns beginning in 1997 reduced these numbers. Even before the 2003 Disarmament Statute came into effect, approximately 1.3 million civilian firearms had been collected and destroyed. Under the new law, citizens were encouraged to turn in unwanted guns for destruction, a process that gathered another 570,000 for destruction.[[24]](#endnote-24) Another success of the campaign was legalizing another 600,000 previously unregistered firearms.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Four years after the disarmament campaign, in 2009, Brazil’s private firearms registrations had risen to 7,312,227. This includes some 2 million additional guns registered 2006-2009. Complicating what looks like a straight-forward increase is the mixture of newly procured and older weapons shifted from illicit to legal, registered ownership. Most of the increase appears to be from previously unregistered firearms, since sales of new guns were tightly limited after 2003.[[26]](#endnote-26) The country’s total private firearms inventory presumably was not changing in size, instead guns were moving from one category to another.

Other sources see a growing private inventory. According to data from the Brazilian Army, the agency responsible for tracking firearms sales, gun sales dropped 89 percent from 2001 to 2004, due the Disarmament Statute. Beginning in 2005, though, sales of new guns grew 70 percent. Domestic sales grew from 68,000 new guns in 2005 to 116,900 in 2009.[[27]](#endnote-27)

A report relased in 2012 concldues that sales rose much faster than previously thoguh, from an aveage of 250,000 new guns annually before 2003 to 1,001,549 new Brazilian-made firearms sold in 2009, the peak year. In all, 4,339,846 new, domestically-maufactured firearms allegedly were bought by the people of Brazil in 2005-2010.[[28]](#endnote-28) In other words, public ownership rose after the year 2005 from approximately 5.4 million to more than 9.7 million, an increase of 80 percent. Sales at this level would mean Brazilian gun culture is much more dynamic that previously through, so much that the vector of change (up or down) is not easily identified. If so, earlier understandings of the situation in Brazil were badly flawed. Another explanation is it is the new data that is flawed, overlooking the fact that most of their production is exported.

The rival data points make certainty about Brazilian gun ownership unachievable. The latest data might be right, but do not inspire overwhelming confidence either. This review relies on a combination of data from 2005 and 2009, registered ownership of 7,312,227 and unregistered ownership of 9,499,900. This imperfect compromise deserves reexamination as more recent and reliable data emerges.

**Chile**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 17,100,000 | 1,750,000 | 26,000 | 0 | 265,000 | 291,000 | 2,041,000 |

Chile offers the best documented case in Latin America of declining interest in among the public in acquiring additional firearms. As the table below shows, Chileans register more firearms every year, but the rate of increase—over an admittedly short time—is declining, from 7 percent growth in 2003-2005, to 2 percent growth during the three year period in 2006-2009. The decline in purchases of new guns has been widely observed, including in the country’s periodic poll of public attitudes, which found a decline in the percentage of individuals acknowledging they own a gun, dropping from 5.3 percent to 4.9 percent. [[29]](#endnote-29) Similarly, gun sales reportedly fell 57 percent over the past five years. In 2006 there were 10,235 new guns registered, while in 2010 the Chilean public registered 4,353 gun purchases.[[30]](#endnote-30) Declining public interest in firearms may explain greater receptiveness for various gun control proposals, such as the plan to prohibit guns at public events.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Even as sales of new guns decline, Chilean society harbors an impressive inventory of registered and unregistered guns. Among the latter were an estimated 750,000 to 1,300,000 unregistered in 2002, a number that probably has grown considerably in the decade since.[[32]](#endnote-32) While new gun buying is going down overall, sectors of society are spending more. The clearest contrast is an increase in the proportion of wealthy Chileans owning guns, which rose from 9.5 percent to 13.8 percent.[[33]](#endnote-33) Also not captured in this data is the strong market among poorer Chileans for cheap craft guns, none of which normally get registered.[[34]](#endnote-34)

**Chilean civilian firearms registration reports**

*available years 2003-2009*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *registered* | *year* | *% change* | *source* |
| 649,524 | 2003 |  | Viva Rio background research in *Small Arms Survey 2004,* Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 51. |
| 695,968 | 2005 | 0.07 | *Report on Citizen Security in the Americas 2011*, Washington, D.C.: OAS, Jan. 2011, p. 22. |
| 737,980 | 2006 | 0.06 | Arturo Contreras, “Chile”, unpublished ms for Small Arms Survey, 2007. |
| 756,000 | 2009 | 0.02 | “Gobierno llama a entregar armas a las policías o iglesias”, *Sábado* (Santiago), 14 Nov. 2009 |

The biggest growth area in Chilean gun culture may be the state security services. With the help of the country’s famous Copper Law of 1958 (*Ley Reservada del Cobre*), the military has access to exceptional financing, enough to sustain continuous procurement of highly modern equipment. The Army, for example, continues to purchase the locally manufactured version of the Swiss SIG-540 rifle, perhaps the most costly military rifle in standard use, and smaller numbers of American M4 carbines for special forces and other elite units.

Chilean military stockpiles of firearms are estimated here at 265,000, or 35 percent lower than my previously published estimate.[[35]](#endnote-35) This reflects differences in estimating procedures, especially lower multipliers for reserve forces, whose actual allotments remain unknown and very speculative.

**Columbia**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 46,300,000 | 3,200,000 | 285,000 | 0 | 430,000 | 715,000 | 3,915,000 |

The gun culture of Colombia has been studied about as carefully as any in Latin America. A series of reports show registered gun ownership rising rapidly, from a total of 706,210 registered firearms in 2006, to roughly 1.2 million registered in 2012.[[36]](#endnote-36) Estimates of unregistered ownership are approximately proportional, at a rate of two to three times the rate of legal ownership. Estimates of unregistered firearms go up to 4 million, although a lower figure is used here.[[37]](#endnote-37)

The right to carry a gun is prominent element of the Colombia firearms culture. Carrying requires a license. The country has issued 662,666 carrying licenses as of 2006.[[38]](#endnote-38) More recently there has been a reaction against public gun carrying, with a campaign led by Bogotá mayor Jorge Rojas Rodríguez to stop the practice, a campaign that seems to have reduced gun crime.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Colombia is relatively open with details of its law enforcement and military small arms inventories, summarized in the accompanying appendixes. Police armament is noticeably heavier than normal practices in many countries, averaging 1.6 firearms per sworn officer. The Colombian Army is armed at a relatively low level of 1.8 firearms per soldier, a level standard for constabulary or counterinsurgency forces. The deployment levels of the Air Force and Navy, at 1.35 and .76 small arms per airman and sailor, are almost one-hundred fifty and fifty percent higher than normally expected levels for those services, respectively. [[40]](#endnote-40)

With the Colombian armed forces switching to the locally manufacturer Galil rifle, older models of the Galil and G3 rifles are being retired from service. Whether they will be cascaded to the police, stored or destroyed is not clear.[[41]](#endnote-41)

A major goal of Colombia policy is to stop the flow of weapons to FARC guerrillas, Latin America’s largest current insurgency. A study of documents recovered after the death the FARC’s procurement chief in 2008 shows the group struggling to arm itself. Aside from key moments like the supply of rifles from Peru and occasionally support from Venezuela, the guerrillas lack a steady source of supply. The report found no evidence they ever acquired man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS).[[42]](#endnote-42) Shortly after the period covered in the report, the FARC got shoulder-fired AT-4 light anti-armor weapons, apparently from Venezuela.[[43]](#endnote-43) There is still no persuasive evidence they have been able to acquire MANPADS.

**Costa Rica**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 4,640,000 | 400,000 | 5,000 | 550 | 0 | 5,550 | 625,550 |

Although it is well-off by regional standards and famous for its lack of an army, Costa Rica is not immune to broader Latin American trends of gun violence. Firearms ownership is rising, albeit slower than elsewhere in the region, and *tico* culture appears to be more comfortable with registering firearms.

In 1998 there were 149,423 registered civilian guns in Costa Rica. Today the total is closer to 206,912.[[44]](#endnote-44) Police seizures suggest roughly half of all crime guns are unregistered. [[45]](#endnote-45) This is significantly less than the ratio of 3 to 1 found in most of the region. At one illicit firearm for every registered gun, this translates as roughly 400,000 civilian firearms total. This would mean the country has 8.6 civilian firearms for every 100 people.

Another area where Costa Rica stands out is the remarkably low rate of state small arms ownership. State inventories are equal to 0.1 firearms for every 100 residents, the lowest state rate in all of Latin America. The lack of a military—a characteristic now shared with Panama—and a small police system do not isolate Costa Rica from problems of official firearms seen elsewhere. Official weapons are a target for theft, for example, and security has been a serious problem. After 215 pistols were stolen from police storage in early 2012, some were recovered in Panama.[[46]](#endnote-46)

**Cuba**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 11,200,000 | 220,000 | 43,000 | 1,065,000 | 415,000 | 1,523,000 | 1,743,000 |

In lieu of hard data on Cuban civilian firearms ownership, the level has been estimated by the author at 2 firearms forever 100 residents, or 220,000 in all. This is a low rate, consistent with the extremely low rates of firearms homicide; the lowest in the region. But this also is essentially an informed guess, and should be careful interrogated as evidence becomes available.

In 2010 Cuba announced a major revision of its arms registration law, with an amnesty to encourage registration. Media coverage of the new rules did not indicate the scale of civilian inventory being regulated.[[47]](#endnote-47) What was the impetus for the reform? While the specifics remain completely unknown, it would appear that Cuba is not completely insulated from the illegal firearms trade that lassoed the rest of the Caribbean. The low rates of firearms homicide suggest Cuba’s gun proliferation problems are not severe, and its civilian inventories small, but the government appears to be very sensitive.

Another source of uncertainty is the nation’s massive Territorial Militia, a force of roughly one million. Developed during the 1980s with large-scale Soviet support, it is one of the largest paramilitary organizations in the world. It has a reputation for fanatical loyalty to Castro and the revolutionary ideals, but otherwise is very poorly understood. Some authors see it as a forced designed to defend the territory of the country at a time when the Revolutionary Armed Forces were increasingly distracted with military assistance in Africa, the Caribbean and Central America.[[48]](#endnote-48) Relying on People’s War tactics to defense the homeland, it can be presumed to be well equipped with infantry weapons.

While Costa Rica has the lowest rate of *state-owned* small arms in Latin America, Cuba has the highest rate in the hemisphere and one of the highest rates in the world, with 13.6 state firearms for every 100 residents. By comparison, the rate of civilian ownership, estimated here at 2/100, is very low but not extraordinary. It is the unusual balance between state and civilian inventories, reversing more common patterns from society in favor of state dominance, which makes Cuba a curiosity.

**Dominican Republic**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 10,200,000 | 600,000 | 32,000 | 0 | 56,000 | 88,000 | 688,000 |

There has been considerable confusion about civilian gun ownership in the Dominican Republic, due to an unprecedented spurt in demand for new gun licenses 2011. The country has a well-respected licensing system, the obvious explanation for the eight month period in which the number of Dominicans with firearms licenses grew from 152,000 to more than 333,000.[[49]](#endnote-49) As the new license holders buy weapons or legalize their previously unregistered guns, the total of firearms registered seems likely to grow just as rapidly.

At the end of 2011, the expected growth in registrations had not been seen yet. Even so, registration already was growing rapidly, from 178,193 civilian firearms in 2005 to 198,426 at the end of 2010. This is equal to four percent annual growth in legally registered firearms, a rapid rate in global experience.[[50]](#endnote-50) If it continues uninterrupted, four percent growth will double the registered inventory in18 years. When compared to licenses, registration figures suggest that Dominican gun owners tend to have only slightly more than one firearms per license. If everything is proportional, the licensing spurt will push registrations up by more than 120 percent within a period of months, by approximately 240,000 additional guns, to a total of some 440,000 registered guns nation-wide.

This does not include illegal or unregistered firearms. Currently these estimated here at 3 unregistered for every legal gun, for a combined total of approximately 600,000. How this will change as new licensees register additional guns is hard to predict. If they buy mostly new guns, the total unregistered might not change much at first. But if they mostly register illicit guns they already had, the number of illicit firearms will decline. Dominican officials believe that most of the illegal firearms entering the country come by sea or air, not across their land border with Haiti.[[51]](#endnote-51) Licensing reforms probably will reduce this trade, in the short run.

**Ecuador**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 13,800,000 | 350,000 | 42,000 | 600 | 240,000 | 282,600 | 632,600 |

Ecuadorian civilian gun registration has risen from 117,000 in 2006 to 145,595 registered as of 2010.[[52]](#endnote-52) Apparently not a high ownership country, approximately two times as many guns may be in civilian hands, for a total of roughly 350,000. Ecuador has a reputation for hosting significant craft production, some of which supplies rebels in Colombia and Peru.[[53]](#endnote-53) The actual scale of Ecuadorian craft production and export is very difficult to estimate.

Ecuador also stands out with a military reserve system that proportionately may be the largest in all the Western Hemisphere, with 118,000 reservists against an active duty military less than half as large. The huge reserve justifies maintenance of large amounts of infantry equipment that otherwise could be declared surplus and eliminated, but now invite theft or diversion.

**El Salvador**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 6,190,000 | 600,000 | 18,500 | 0 | 102,000 | 120,500 | 720,000 |

The civilian firearms registration data of El Salvador is meticulously recorded and readily shared, but not as easily understood. In all, the country registered 220,493 firearms during the years 1994-2011, but 128,000 of these were not been re-registered, leaving a deficit in the system.[[54]](#endnote-54) Unregistered weapons include weapons acquired before 1994 and never registered, over 128,000 lost from the system when their owners failed to re-register them, and additional weapons acquired illicitly. If all categories of unregistered weapons are roughly three times as numerous as those formally registered before, the country would have over 600,000 civilian firearms.

The end of the Central American wars in the early 1990s and the subsequent shrinking of El Salvadorian armed forces, from 44,600 in 1996 to 25,000 today, left substantial amounts of equipment surplus in long-term storage. Among that equipment are more than 300,000 hand grenades were sent by the United States to El Salvador and other friendly Central American countries in the 1980s. Some of those have since passed into the hands of Mexican organized crime.[[55]](#endnote-55)

**Guatemala**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 14,400,000 | 1,200,000 | 44,000 | 0 | 112,000 | 156,000 | 1,756,000 |

The most recent data shows that Guatemala had 400,483 registered civilian firearms in 2011. This was an increase from 2009 when the total was 393,996 and 170,000 in 2000.[[56]](#endnote-56) Unregistered civilian guns were estimated at 800,000 in 2005, a figure that remained in use as recently as 2010 and is used again here.[[57]](#endnote-57)

In debates over the origins of illegal weapons in Mexico, Guatemala figures prominently in American refutations—by gun rights advocates and sympathetic members of Congress—of the usual Mexican narrative. While Mexican leaders stress the roll of American civilian sales facilitating cross-border smuggling, American refutations stress weapons coming into Mexico from Guatemala. The presence of grenades and to a lesser extent machine guns in the hands of Mexican organized crime is stressed in these accounts, weapons unavailable in the United States but known to be diverted from Central American armed forces, especially from Guatemala, as well as El Salvador and Honduras.[[58]](#endnote-58)

The Guatemalan armed forces appear to preserve large surpluses of infantry equipment, despite the reduction in active duty personnel from 44,000 in the mid-1990s to 15,000 today. The resulting arms surpluses are concealed by concomitant expansion of the country’s military reserve system, which doubled to 64,000 during the same period.

**Guyana**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 761,000 | 155,000 | 2,500 | 1,500 | 15,500 | 19,500 | 175,000 |

Gun politics became a major issue in Guyanan politics in the 2000s as illicit trafficking brought increasing numbers of unregistered weapons into the country. Dealing with the threat has become major issue for inter-agency and international cooperation.[[59]](#endnote-59)

By one estimate there are as many as 150,000 illicit firearms in the capital of Georgetown alone.[[60]](#endnote-60) More conservative estimates suggest about 55,000 illicit firearms for the entire country.[[61]](#endnote-61) The number used here averages those alternatives. A related problem is theft of firearms from the armed forces, possibly a result of inside cooperation or poor security.[[62]](#endnote-62)

**Haiti**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 10,200,000 | 200,000 | 10,000 | 0 | 13,000 | 23,000 | 213,000 |

The only example of outright state failure among the 28 cases examined here, Haiti presents especially severe problems of small arms estimation. It can be said with some certainty that following the collapse of the Duvalier dynasty most of the 12,800 or so small arms previously belonging to the Haitian armed forces made their way into public hands. The country’s other security services probably lost a comparable quantity. The number previously in civilian hands can only be guessed. Given the country’s extreme concentration of wealth in a small middle class, the number probably was not more than a few tens of thousands. Virtually all suppliers ceased legal deliveries during the 1990s, and international peacekeepers led efforts to remove guns from gangs and political parties.[[63]](#endnote-63)

Haiti was not immune to the same illegal trade found throughout the Caribbean.[[64]](#endnote-64) The major break in policy came in 2006 when the Bush administration approved export licenses to supply rearming the reconstituted Haitian police force.[[65]](#endnote-65) The nation’s registration system is active and over 20,000 firearms had been registered as of 2006.[[66]](#endnote-66) Total civilian ownership today is typically estimated at 200,000.[[67]](#endnote-67) But that figure must be regarded cautiously when it comes to a country whose gun culture remains very obscure.

**Honduras**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 7,610,000 | 850,000 | 23,000 | 0 | 92,000 | 115,000 | 865,000 |

A recent report released by the National Commissioner for Human Rights (CONADEH), in Honduras indicates that there are more than 850,000 weapons in circulation in the country. Only 258,000 of these weapons, however, are officially registered in 2011.[[68]](#endnote-68) The registered total represents an increase of more than ten percent from the previous year, and more than four-hundred percent since 2003.[[69]](#endnote-69) The strong consensus among these and other sources reveals greater than normal confidence among Honduran authorities in the reliability of their registered and unregistered civilian firearms figures, and the vigorous upward trend.

# Honduras also stands out as a widely suspected source of illicit transfer of light weapons. Within Central America, Honduras is widely viewed as a prominent illicit supplier of small arms and ammunition.[[70]](#endnote-70) A Wikileaks cable from the U.S. State Department in 2008 reveals American officials identifying 40mm grenades found in Mexico as part of a batch supplied to Honduras in the 1980s and LAW rockets that were supplied there in 1992. Some commentators are careful not to isolate Honduras for special criticism of a phenomenon they associate with weak government control through the region.[[71]](#endnote-71)

A major element of the Honduran illicit trade problem appears to be the accumulation of large military surpluses. A related factor is the declining size of the country’s military, from 18,800 active personnel in 1996 to just 12,000 today. The ostensible reserve of 60,000 personnel serves as a sink to justify this surplus. Past build-ups and recent declines both contribute to surpluses whose mere existence is a continuous source of temptation for illicit diversion.

**Jamaica**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 2,730,000 | 180,000 | 9,000 | 0 | 6,500 | 15,500 | 195,500 |

Although gun policy has long been a major public issue in Jamaica, comprehensive numbers on total gun ownership still must be estimated. Registration procedures were tightened to require licensed owners to re-register their firearms in person and discouraging owners from licensing more than one gun. This reform may have contributed a decline in the number of weapons being registered. As recently as 2006, there were some 65,000 licensed guns in Jamaica. While this figure remains in use, more recent research gives a registration total of 32,600 firearms, apparently dropping as licensing procedures discouraged renewals.[[72]](#endnote-72) The total estimate here is a multiple of the older registration figure.

**Mexico**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 111,000,000 | 15,000,000 | 655,000 | 18,000 | 505,000 | 1,178,000 | 16,178,000 |

Mexico requires registration of civilian firearms, and numbers are released periodically. But dramatic differences between reported registration numbers make them difficult to fully understand. Reports of Mexican registration totals vary from a low of 1.5 million reported in 2004 to almost 4.5 million in 2005 and a middle figure of 2.8 million in 2010. There is more agreement on estimates of total civilian ownership, registered and unregistered, which several estimates place at roughly 15 million.[[73]](#endnote-73) The latter total is used here, but it has been in use for many years and should not be thought in any way authoritative. Anecdotal reports indicate that public demand for firearms has risen dramatically with the surge in drug trafficking and organized crime violence. Since regulatory barriers make it hard to satisfy this demand through legal channels, people are searching for guns in illegal markets. Whether they are successful there is very hard to judge.[[74]](#endnote-74)

If one accepts the lower numbers of registrations, the gap between registered and unregistered weapons could be extraordinary. The higher registration number is used here because it is more plausible internationally, but its veracity can only be ascertained with the help of the Mexican government. The overall rate of civilian ownership used here—13.5 firearms per every 100 residents—is consistent with regional polling. For example, one poll found that 1 out of every 8 households reported having a gun in Izúcar de Matamoros, in the southwest of the state of Puebla.[[75]](#endnote-75)

Another sign of the scale of Mexican public ownership are seizures of crime guns by law enforcement. The more than 140,000 weapons have been seized since the army joined the fight against drug cartels in December 2006. A very similar number—134,881—were recovered this way during a similar campaign in 1988-1994.[[76]](#endnote-76) The number is comparable to total seizures of crime guns in Venezuela during a slightly longer period of time, and the number turned in by the Argentine public through voluntary disarmament. Might this symmetry indicate that the public firearms inventories are comparable in all three societies?

In Mexico it is widely accepted that most illegal firearms come from the United States. Partial confirmation comes from crime guns seized in Mexico and traced to smuggling across the border with the United States, as confirmed by American investigations.[[77]](#endnote-77) Some observers in the United States reject the conclusion that most crime guns in Mexico come from the north. They maintain that Central America is an important of supply, especially for light weapons like grenades and machine guns, items unavailable on American retail markets.[[78]](#endnote-78)

**Nicaragua**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 5,800,000 | 450,000 | 8,500 | 0 | 425,000 | 433,500 | 883,500 |

In Nicaragua the number of registered firearms rose dramatically from 70,000 in 2002 to over 288,000 in 2010.[[79]](#endnote-79) The change appears to reveal significant change in gun policy, emphasizing registration much more than in the past. Presumably a greater proportion of newly purchased firearms being registered by their owners, with the implication that unregistered shares are declining. This appearance is reflected in the total number of civilian firearms shown here.

The total firearms of the Nicaraguan police were revealed for 2006, when their armories included 4,795 pistols and 3,795 automatic rifles, mostly North Korean Type-68 AKMs.[[80]](#endnote-80)

Nicaragua also stores a large military surplus. When its armed forces were reduced from 322,000 active and reservist personnel in 1986 to just 24,000 in 2010, over 90 percent of the country’s military arsenal became redundant. This surplus creates substantial incentives for un-authorized exports. The best known example came in 2001, when a shipment of 3,000 Cuban-supplied Kalashnikovs and several million rounds of ammunition were delivered to Colombian AUC paramilitaries, in an affair named the *Otterloo Incident*, for the ship that carried the weapons. [[81]](#endnote-81) Given the magnitude of Nicaraguan leftovers, the possibility for similar diversion will remain serious until unneeded weapons are disposed of permanently.

**Panama**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 3,500,000 | 450,000 | 15,500 | 0 | 21,000 | 44,500 | 844,500 |

According to Anayancy Espinoza, Panama had 126,908 registered civilian firearms in 2009. Previously reported registration figures are lower, but reveal an unexpected drop, from 96,614 in 2001 falling to 65,436 registered guns in 2006, before doubling three years later.[[82]](#endnote-82) The totals appear erratic at best, hard to understand regardless, and should be regarded with suspicion rather than reliability. Possibly sensitive to this variability, Panama overhauled its gun legislation in 2010, greatly strengthening penalties for illegal gun possession.[[83]](#endnote-83)

Panama is not often blamed for supplying illicit military weaponry into regional arms markets. The point is especially important because the country had a military with over 12,000 active duty personnel in the late 1980s. With its military eliminated following the 1989 American invasion and overthrow of President Noriega, all the remaining equipment became surplus. Maybe this gear was destroyed or removed following the invasion, a possible explanation why it does not appear in regional illicit markets.

**Paraguay**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 6,500,000 | 1,000,000 | 26,000 | 0 | 194,000 | 220,000 | 1,220,000 |

Several countries have witnessed a decline in the number of registered civilian firearms during the years covered by this review. In Paraguay the total rose from 300,906 in 2003 to 330,000 reported in 2006. The total then fell below the 2003 figure to just 288,887 in 2010.[[84]](#endnote-84) The up and down dynamic is hard to understand, suggesting the conditions of gun registration in Paraguay are obscure or idiosyncratic. Total civilian firearms ownership is estimated here at 1,000,000 firearms, registered and unregistered.

The estimated Paraguayan military stockpiles of firearms presented here at 194,000, are much higher than my previously published estimate of just 40,000.[[85]](#endnote-85) This reflects differences in estimating procedures, especially counting the country’s extraordinary reserve components, with a titular strength of 164,500 personnel. The substance behind these remarkable reserve enrollments cannot be gauged without more help from the Paraguayan Army, but the numbers have been published repeatedly and are treated seriously here, albeit with a low level of armament.

**Peru**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 29,500,000 | 750,000 | 170,000 | 8,000 | 360,000 | 538,000 | 1,288,000 |

In Peru the total number of guns registered with public authorities dropped from 245,000 in 2006 to 214,815 in 2010. An even lower figure of 200,000 appeared in the Peruvian media the following year.[[86]](#endnote-86)

There is no evidence that guns were recalled or confiscated by authorities. Instead the decline is more likely explained by failure of gun owners to re-register weapons that remain in their control. The total number of civilian firearms in Peru probably equals at least 750,000, when all unregistered guns, including those never registered, are included.

The estimated Peruvian military stockpile of firearms presented here is 360,000, significantly higher than my previously published estimate of 201,000.[[87]](#endnote-87) This reflects differences in estimating procedures, especially counting the country’s reserve components, with a titular strength of 188,000 personnel. That number has been published repeatedly and is treated seriously here, albeit with a low level of armament.

**Puerto Rico**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 4,000,000 | 800,000 | 24,000 | 0 | 12,000 | 36,000 | 836,000 |

If Puerto Ricans owned as many guns as other citizens of the United States, there would be roughly 4 million civilian firearms on the island today. But ownership is much more regulated in Puerto Rica than most of the country, with licensing and registration requirements.

A 2001 survey showed just 6.7 percent of households in Puerto Rico acknowledged gun ownership compared to a national average of 41 percent, suggesting total firearms ownership there is approximately one-fifth the American average.[[88]](#endnote-88) Assuming the number of guns per owning household is continuous, that equals total ownership of approximately 600,000 guns. Handguns are licensed. To allow for increased rates of ownership since 2001, this is inflated here to 800,000 guns.

**Suriname**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 524,000 | 75,000 | 2,000 | 0 | 8,000 | 10,000 | 85,000 |

Gun ownership in Surinam is poorly understood. A previous estimate—based on correlation alone—of 30,000 registered and 75,000 total civilian firearms has won some acceptance, but should be treated cautiously.[[89]](#endnote-89)

**Trinidad & Tobago**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 1,340,000 | 30,000 | 9,000 | 0 | 6,500 | 15,500 | 45,500 |

The problems of seemingly incomparable data are exposed with a touch of irony by Trinidad and Tobago, where the number of licensed owners is 10,555.[[90]](#endnote-90) This appears to surpass the number of registered guns, at 7,801.[[91]](#endnote-91) The obvious inconsistency is partially explained by the ten year gap between the two figures. But the inconsistency is greater than it initially appears, since licensed owners in most parts of the world typically own 2 to 4 registered firearms. The implication of the number of licensees is total gun ownership must be much higher than indicated here, possibly on the order of 20,000 to 40,000 registered guns alone.

Total private gun ownership is estimated here conservatively, based on the number licensees in 2008. This procedure leads to a very low estimate for gun ownership on the islands. Assuming roughly 2 illegal guns for every registered example, there would be at least 30,000 firearms on the islands. Knowing the number of licensees, however, the actual total number of registered guns could be higher than that. A clear understanding of gun ownership in Trinidad and Tobago requires greater study.

**Uruguay**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 3,370,000 | 1,100,000 | 11,000 | 15,000 | 77,000 | 103,000 | 1,203,000 |

With an estimated public ownership rate of 32.6 guns per 100 residents, Uruguay is the most heavily armed country in all Latin America, second only to the United States on the hemisphere, and one of the most heavily armed on the planet. In Latin America, only the American territory of Puerto Rico approaches Uruguayan gun ownership, with just two-thirds the level of arming (20/100).

While Uruguayan gun ownership is high, its homicide rates are closer to those of Canada and Europe than other countries in the region. Indeed, the contrast with Puerto Rico on this point is especially intriguing. Puerto Rico, Latin America’s second most armed place, has a firearms homicide rate 5 times higher than Uruguay (18 versus 3.6 per 100,000 residents).

The potential dangers of Uruguay’s large civilian arsenal appear to be tamed at least in part through a well-respected registration system, which is enforced much more rigorously than most systems in the region.[[92]](#endnote-92) This shows in the high proportion of civilian firearms registered and low proportion believed to be outside the system. While the data is not extremely recent, as of 2008 the country had 600,000 registered and 500,000 to 600,000 believed to exist unregistered.[[93]](#endnote-93) A more recent source puts registration at 450,000.[[94]](#endnote-94)

The estimated Uruguayan military stockpiles of firearms presented here at 77,000, are significantly higher than my previously published estimate of 60,800.[[95]](#endnote-95) This reflects differences in estimating procedures, especially counting the country’s reserve components, with a titular strength of almost 32,000 personnel in the 1980s. While Uruguay’s military reserves have declined by one-third since, there is no reason to think equipment levels changed too.

**Venezuela**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***population 2010*** | ***civilian small arms*** | ***law enforcement small arms*** | ***paramilitary small arms*** | ***military small arms*** | ***combined state small arms*** | ***national small arms total*** |
| 29,000,000 | 3,250,000 | 150,000 | 100,000 | 170,000 | 390,000 | 3,670,000 |

The danger of estimation is especially clear in Venezuela, where estimation inflation became a serious problem. Similar phenomena have been seen elsewhere; in Mozambique in the 1990s and Egypt after the 2011 Libyan revolution. Estimation inflation seems to be a sign of politicization, as leaders use civilian gun estimates to draw attention to other issues, above all to a feeling of lost control over society. Estimation inflation is a trope for social chaos, and claims are a form of quest for public recognition. As such, exact numbers do not matter much. Rather, huge numbers become intrinsically valuable, fueling estimation inflation. This problem is separate from the tendency for gun rights advocates to see very large public inventories, a phenomenon seen in gun policy debates in Canada and Switzerland. This appears to derive from a separate impulse to show the widespread acceptance of gun ownership in the society. A third variety of the phenomena is outright bragging, a form of exaggeration often associated with gun ownership discussions in Yemen. There may be shadows of the latter in Venezuela too, but that would take a careful textual analysis to assess.

Venezuela appears to have a tradition of widespread public gun ownership. Previous estimates by the Survey found estimates of 1.5 to 5 million guns in public hands.[[96]](#endnote-96) In this report, a middle-level figure based on this range is still accepted. Further substantiation of this range comes from a study which estimated there are a total of 600,000 guns in Caracas alone.[[97]](#endnote-97)

Other observers believe the total is higher. In 2009 the 5 million figure, previously regarded as exaggerated, began to get more attention.[[98]](#endnote-98) Outright inflation came from Deputy Juan Jose Mendoza, president of the Security Commission of the National Assembly, who reported that Venezuela has between 9 and 15 million handguns alone, legal and illegal.[[99]](#endnote-99)

Partial but inclusive substantiation for larger numbers comes from police seizures of crime guns; guns owned illegally or recovered from crime scenes. Venezuelan authorities reported destroying 251,652 during the years 2003 to 2011. Of that total, 117,145 were destroyed in the first eight months of 2011 alone.[[100]](#endnote-100)

The best answer to the problems of estimation is large sample surveying. Public surveys are the most valuable tool for accurately apprising civilian ownership. Surveys are not perfect—much depends on the exact wording of questions, sampling and survey techniques—but they remain better at comprehensive assessment than any other known technique. In Venezuela, the *Comisión Presidencial para el Control de Armas* (Presidential Commission for the Control of Firearms, Ammunition and Disarmament) has started what may be an important survey effort.[[101]](#endnote-101) In the highly politicized atmosphere of the country, the success of this approach is hard to anticipate, but the approach itself is sound.

Given the scale of Venezuelan civilian ownership, the expansion of state arsenals looks discrete by comparison. It is much more impressive in absolute terms. Acquisition of Russian AK-103 rifles in particular has allowed modernization of the armed forces and cascading of older FAL rifles to the rapidly expanding paramilitary organizations, the Armadas de Cooperacion, and the newly created federal police agencies, the Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminálisticas, and the Dirección de los Servicios de Inteligencia y Prevención.[[102]](#endnote-102)

Despite Bolivarian enthusiasms, the estimated Venezuelan military stockpiles of firearms, presented here at 170,000, remain significantly lower than my previously published estimate of 281,000.[[103]](#endnote-103) This reflects differences in estimating procedures, especially new multiplying rules for reserve elements, and the apparent cascading of older weapons—especially 60,000 FAL rifles—to the equip the nation’s paramilitary forces.

**Endnotes**

1. Daniel Santini e Natalia Viana, “Em cinco anos, 4,3 milhões de armas nas ruas”, *Publica*, 27 January 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. « En septiembre de 2009, Mendoza (Deputy Juan Jose Mendoza, President of the Security Commission of the National Assembly) admitió que en Venezuela existen entre 9 y 15 millones de armas legales e ilegales, en manos de la población civil." Laura Davila Truelo , "En cuatro años se triplicó el número de armas en la calle", *El Universal* (Caracas),  20 junio 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jorge Ramos, ““¡No más armas!”, exige FCH a EU en la frontera “, *El Universal* (Mexico), 17 February 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. David Kopel, “Calderon misfires on U.S. gun control,” *Washington Times*, 12 April 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
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7. Sandro Calvani, Pablo Casas Dupuy, and Stefan Liller, Violencia, *Crimen y Trafico Ilegal de Armes en Colombia* (Bogota: Naciones Unidas Oficina contra la Droga y el Delito, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d. 2006?) pp. 50-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Global Burden of Armed Violence 2011: Lethal Encounters*, Geneva Declaration Secretariat. And Cambridge University Press. October 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
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10. Elisabeth Gilgen, “A fatal relationship: guns and deaths in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *Small Arms Survey 2012*,ch. 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Henry Christian, ‘Possession and Homicide Data 2010.’ Royal Police Force Headquarters of Antigua and Barbuda. St John's: Office of Deputy Commissioner of Police Operations. 5 April 2011 (cited in Gun Policy). A higher figure of 1,671 registered for 2010 appears in *Report on Citizen Security in the Americas 2011*, Washington, D.C.: Organization of American States, January 2011, p. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Colin Barraclough, “In Argentina, fear feeds gun sales,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 22 April 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Gabriel Conte, “Argentines delivered more than a hundred thousand weapons during the disarmament campaign”, *Comunidad Segura*, March 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. “Se lanzó la segunda etapa del canje voluntario de armas“, *Rafaela*, 10 de Agosto de 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Mateo Estreme, “Preparatory Committee for Review Conference” General Assembly, DC/3328, United Nations, 21 March 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Marcela Valente, “Disarmament Argentina: gun swap takes aim at violence,” *InterPress Service*, 15 June 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Aline Gatto Boueri, “Argentina Turns in Its Firearms”, Translated by Danielle Renwick, *Comunidade Segura*, 3 March 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Krystel Rolle, ‘Study Estimates High Percentage of Illegal Gun Possession.’ *Guardian*. (Nassau) 4 November 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. 3,000 registered in “Police open campaign to uncover unlicensed guns,” *The Nation* (Bridgetown), 6 February 1984, p. 10-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
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23. Pablo Dreyfus, Benjamin Lessing, Marcelo de Sousa Nascimento, and Júlio Cesar Purcena, *Small Arms in. Brazil: Production, Trade, and Holdings*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, September 2010, pp. 102, 131-132. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. “Brasil retiró 570.000 armas de fuego de circulación desde 2004,” (Brazil withdrew 570,000 firearms in circulation since 2004) *AFP*, 1 November 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Lis Horta Moriconi, “Campaigns for a Disarmed World,” *Comunidad Segura*, 3 November 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
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32. Pablo Dreyfus, et al., *Small Arms Control in Mercosur* (London: International Alert, June 2003), p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. “Chile faces a domestic arms race with rise in gun ownership”, *UPI*, 13 April 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Chile,” *Small Arms Survey 2006: Unfinished Business* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Ch.3, pp. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Aaron Karp, *Surplus Arms in South America: a Survey*, Working Paper 7. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
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