Chapter 1

THE PRIMARY EVIDENCE BASE: OVERVIEW OF SEIZURES

Chapter overview

This first chapter provides an overview of the available data on firearms seizures across the world, focusing particularly on the magnitude and location of seizures, as well as the types of firearms that are most frequently seized. It also analyses the typical sizes of seizure events according to type of firearm.

Data on total arms seized were available for 81 countries (including IAFQ responses as well as other official sources), amounting to roughly 550,000 arms in each of 2016 and 2017. This absolute figure is however dominated by the Americas, due to very large quantities seized by some countries in this region. This region was also relatively well represented in terms of the number of countries with available data. On the other hand, there were significant gaps in data availability in Africa, Asia and Europe, including missing data from relatively large countries. Moreover, in some cases there were clear shortfalls arising from incomplete coverage within a single country. For these reasons the analysis often focuses on averages representative of a typical country rather than global totals.

Based on the available seizure data, pistols are the most frequently seized firearm type. This is driven to a large extent, however, by the pattern in the Americas. The regional patterns vary considerably. While in the Americas, the main types of seized firearms are handguns (pistols and revolvers), in Africa and Asia, shotguns are most frequently seized. In Europe, seizures are relatively evenly distributed between pistols, rifles and shotguns, whereas in Oceania, rifles appear to be the most seized type, although this is based on data from only one country, Australia.

Considering the regional heterogeneity, the seizures patterns may also reflect trafficking patterns, with pistols and revolvers being the most trafficked firearms in the Americas and – to a lesser extent - in Europe. It is not clear, however, how the global pattern of seized firearms reflects global trafficking as there may be less capacity in countries in Africa and Asia to intercept and report illicit shipments of firearms, as indicated by the considerable data gaps in these regions. It could be that the type of firearm dominating seizures in Africa and Asia – shotguns – is more significant in global trafficking flows than what can be gleaned from available seizure data.

Firearms seizure events vary in size, although the vast majority of seizures involve one or a few firearms. The average number of firearms seized per case is 1.4 but in terms of number of seized firearms, about half were seized in large quantities. Most seizure events were small, but a few cases with large quantities of firearms – notably rifles, shotguns or pistols – were seized in a single instance. This suggests that firearms can also be trafficked in large quantities. While small scale trafficking is possible and present
in some regions (see section on ant trafficking in Chapter 3), it is likely that very small seizure cases (such as a single firearm on its own) are frequently connected to other scenarios that might give rise to seizures, such as administrative violations, illicit possession, perpetration or threats of violence, endangering public safety, unauthorized manufacture, or firearms held by criminals which come to light in the context of investigations unrelated to firearms (independently of whether they had been trafficked at an earlier point in time).

Data on seizures reflect both the patterns of the actual firearms trafficking that is taking place and the efforts of national law enforcement and other relevant authorities in tackling it. As such, the data cannot be taken at face value to accurately depict firearms trafficking flows. Moreover, the data should be interpreted cautiously, particularly in terms of cross-country comparability. Some countries have provided partial data that do not include seizures made in certain geographical parts or by some government entities. Countries have also made different choices regarding the reporting of administrative and criminal seizures; some reported separately, some jointly, and some were not in a position to distinguish. These differences should be taken into account in comparative analyses.

How much is seized

Seizures of firearms occur when agencies such as police, customs or other law enforcement entities detect firearms in circumstances which indicate or suggest a violation of the law or applicable regulations. Seizures made by such agencies may occur in the course of, inter alia, routine inspections (including at border control points), targeted operations, investigations into crimes and responses to reported violations.

Thus, seizures reflect the primary point of contact between the illicit phenomenon and the efforts of the state to counter it. Seizure data are influenced by, and therefore reflect, precious complementary information that help contextualize and interpret seizure data for the analysis of illicit flows, and questions on such aspects have hence been included in the Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire. Unfortunately, in many countries data at such a level of disaggregation is not collected by frontline officers. The challenge relates to the different sources of information for seizures and their circumstances. Seize data are typically compiled by law enforcement authorities, while circumstances may be recorded or revised by other criminal justice institutions (prosecution and conviction institutions for example). The disaggregation of seizures data is accurate if they come from the same primary source.

Diverted (stolen or lost) firearms. Data on diverted (stolen or lost) firearms are directly linked to the illicit circulation of firearms and are therefore supported by some scholars** as a possible primary indicator to understand firearm trafficking. The challenge with this indicator is that it does not cover all trafficked firearms and does not measure the share of firearms illicitly crossing borders. Data on diverted firearms may also not have the same level of reporting requirements as seizures.

Advantages and disadvantages of other data sources related to seizures

The evidence provided in this study relies on seizures data together with other information that help to interpret them in understanding firearms trafficking. There are other data not considered in the study linked to Government responses which could potentially be used with or as an alternative to seizures, but they are either not available systematically across countries or they carry similar challenges to seizures.

Confiscations. While seizures represent a temporary measure that can occur on various legal grounds and usually signify the starting point of an investigation, a confiscation is a permanent deprivation of property that occurs at the end of a judicial proceeding when factual circumstances are established.* While confiscated firearms could provide more reliable information on trafficking of firearms, there are several limitations. The representativeness of confiscations data leans more than seizures towards measuring the effectiveness of the criminal justice system rather than illicit flows. Judicial confiscation orders also may not exclusively relate to illicitly sourced and trafficked firearms. Furthermore, data on confiscations are not as readily available as data on seizures, as judicial proceedings may take a long time and the information may remain in individual files with no aggregation at national or sub-national level.

Circumstances of the seizure. Data on the circumstances of a seizure, such as its suspected criminal context and its geographical occurrence, represent

* For legal definitions of “seizure” and “confiscation”, see Article 2 of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

two parallel aspects: the extent of the illicit phenomenon as well as the extent of a certain, targeted form of response on the part of the authorities.

Moreover, seizures can be made on various grounds, not all of which are necessarily linked to illicit trafficking. For example, depending on the national context, firearms may be seized for minor offences deemed in some countries to be of an administrative nature - usually violations of regulations pertaining to aspects such as the renewal of licences, proper storage, restrictions on the carrying of firearms, etc. Firearms may also be seized in the context of the commission of other crimes such as homicide and robbery, which, although serious, may not necessarily be committed with illicitly sourced firearms. Moreover, certain serious offences may also be related to the illicit nature of firearms but still not directly to trafficking, such as the unauthorized manufacture of firearms in a workshop, or the removal or alteration of markings whose purpose is to enable identification, accountable weapons management and tracing.

For these reasons, the use of seizure data to understand the nature of firearms trafficking needs careful consideration. Seizure data alone can be difficult to interpret and can potentially lead to misleading conclusions when taken in isolation, because they reflect priority and capacity of law enforcement as much as supply. This challenge can be overcome by taking into account other, independent sources of information. Another aspect to consider when analysing seizures is the quality of the data which can relate, for example, to the extent of coverage of data reported by a given country. In cases of incomplete coverage, the comparability of total aggregates across countries is limited, but this challenge can be partially overcome by expressing the corresponding figures in relative terms (shares of a total). When historical data are available, a comparison of trends across countries may still be meaningful even if the absolute values present issues of comparability.

Seizure data, including different disaggregations of seized items as well as the criminal context of seizures, are the primary evidence base for this study. This section begins by giving an overview of the seizure data available to UNODC.

Through the Illicit Arms Flow Questionnaire, countries were requested to provide data on the total number of seized arms, their parts and components, and ammunition. Overall UNODC was able to compile data on the number of arms seized in 2016 or 2017 for a total of 81 countries. The total number of such arms amounted to around 550,000 in each of 2016 and 2017. However, this figure varied greatly from country to country and the comparability across countries is subject to a number of factors.

One factor affecting comparability relates to coverage. Five countries reported that their data set did not cover the entire national territory (as opposed to 57 countries which confirmed that the entire geographical territory was covered), while 17 countries reported that the data did not cover the operations of all authorities in charge of seizing firearms (as opposed to 43 countries which confirmed that all relevant institutions were covered). 1 Incomplete coverage was also related to the nature of the seizure cases. Some countries, for example, submitted only the seizures made by the national authorities in charge of tracing.

Another important element in analysing seizures across countries is the distinction between administrative and criminal seizures. While the aim of the UNODC data collection was to focus primarily on seizures made in a criminal context, countries could not always make this distinction or clearly characterize the nature of the seizures that they reported to UNODC. Sixteen countries clearly distinguished between criminal and administrative seizures and provided separate statistics. 2 In some other cases, countries informed that administrative seizures were not included, as seizures based on purely administrative grounds were reportedly not possible in the national context; however, there were also 8 countries for which the data did include administrative seizures, but they could not be distinguished from criminal seizures.

Thirdly, some countries reported figures that may have included firearms which were recovered in ways other than seizures, for example found and surrendered firearms.

For these reasons, the absolute value of the total number of seized weapons, and especially comparisons among countries on this basis, need to be interpreted with caution.

Seizures in national seizure aggregates can be contextualized by taking into account the population of the country. This approach does not address the comparability issues

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1 An additional level of uncertainty was due to the fact that not all countries which provided the data also provided information on the extent of geographical or institutional coverage.

2 The requested data on administrative seizures was limited to the total number of arms seized.

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**TABLE 1 ... Availability of seizure data,* by region, 2016-17 (number of countries)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2016/2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
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<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>Asia</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>78</strong></td>
<td><strong>78</strong></td>
<td><strong>81</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Total number of arms seized.
related to coverage and the inclusion of administrative seizures, but it provides a better indication of the intensity of seizures and the possible impact they may have in single countries. The variability in the resulting prorated figures is significantly reduced from the variability of simple totals, but it is still very high, with the values typically ranging between 0.5 and 69 arms per 100,000 persons. Some small countries emerge among the ones with the lowest values, but they are the exception rather than the rule.
The Primary Evidence Base: Overview Of Seizures

MAP 1. Total number of arms seized, by country, 2017

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Dashed lines represent undetermined boundaries. The dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. The final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

Sources: UNODC IAFQ and other official sources.

highest numbers of arms seized per capita. For some other countries, the adjusted per capita metric confirms that the extreme high or low levels are not attributable to their size only.

In addition to the total number of arms seized, some countries provided also information on the number of cases (instances or incidents) in which the arms were seized. Using this information, it is possible to construct the typical number of arms seized in a given case providing additional insight into the nature of the offence. Nineteen countries provided this kind of information, corresponding to a total of 136,362 arms seized in 97,320 cases, and overall average of 1.4 arms seized per case. Considering all of these together, this implies that at least 60 per cent (probably more) of these cases involved only one arm, and at most 20 per cent (probably less) involved 3 arms or more. Only two countries (Paraguay and Hungary) registered an average of more than 4 arms per case.

Countries were also asked to report information of significant seizures on a case-by-case basis. The suggested criteria for a seizure case to qualify as “significant” were any of the following: more than 5 arms seized; involvement of organized crime groups; or the context of transnational trafficking of arms. Independently of the reason for qualifying a seizure as “significant”, the information collected on a case-by-case basis included the types and number of arms seized (along with other specifics such as modus operandi, other items seized together with the firearms and information on provenance).

Information of this kind was provided by 32 countries, which collectively reported 357 cases. Not surprisingly, significant seizure cases were typically much larger than the average seizure cases in general. For example, Brazil reported 10 significant cases averaging 26 arms per case, compared with an average of 1.3 arms seized per case considering the total number of seized arms and total number of cases.

Based on significant cases only, a greater variability (in comparison with cases overall) across countries could be observed in the typical number of arms seized per case, with 7 countries reporting an average of 30 or more arms seized in a handful of significant cases (3 or fewer), and at the other extreme, 6 countries reporting less than 5 arms seized per significant seizure (on average). Once more, this is not surprising in view of the fact that significant seizures constitute a small exceptional subset of a bigger universe.

Overall, among all significant seizure cases, about a third consisted of seizures of 5 arms or less (in addition to ammunition and other items) and another third of seizures of 5-10 arms, with the remaining cases ranging between 11 and more than 6,000 arms. Seizures of a single arm were the most frequent, accounting for more than a fifth
MAP 2 .... Total number of arms seized per 100,000 population, by country, 2017

Sources: UNODC IaFQ and other official sources.
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Dashed lines represent undetermined boundaries. The dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. The final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

FIG. 3 .... Average number of arms seized per seizure case, based on total seizures and based on significant seizures by country, 2016-17

* In addition, Croatia reported a third case involving only explosives.
Note: Number in brackets indicates the number of seizure cases.
Source: UNODC IaFQ.
of cases (see Figure 4). It should be noted that the spike in the number of cases of seizures of 6 or 7 arms is likely driven by the fact that the presence of more than 5 arms was a suggested criterion (among others in the questionnaire) for the designation of a seizure case as “significant”.

Criteria other than the mere number of seized arms were also taken into account by countries. For example, all the significant cases reported by Japan were linked to organized crime groups (Boryokudan). Albania included the considerable value in the black market of illicit items among the characteristics defining a “significant” case (along with the involvement of organized crime groups and the international trafficking of arms). Other criteria which were explicitly mentioned for considering seizures as significant included the international dimension and the nature of the arms involved.

### Types of firearms seized

For most countries where any seizure data were available, a breakdown of the seizures by type was also available. The distribution by type yields insights into the nature of the illicit firearms market as well as firearms used for criminal purposes in the corresponding countries. Combined with additional complementary data such as crime statistics or homicide data, the information on firearms seizures by type of firearms can provide meaningful insights on the criminological context of the seizures and represent a valuable investigative lead for law enforcement authorities to better gear and prioritize their actions.

Even if reported seizures capture only a small subset of seized arms, they represent a cross-section of all seized arms. Hence, breakdowns of reported seizures by type of arm (expressed as percentages for each type) may still capture the distribution of arms seized overall in the given country to the extent the subset is representative of the whole. Moreover, such distributions are not subject to the variability in the magnitude of seized quantities across countries, which is influenced by many factors, including comprehensiveness of coverage but also the size of reporting country. Thus such breakdowns provide meaningful insight into the universe of seized arms and also lend them-

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4 Some of the items seized by Albania, alongside firearms, included large quantities of cannabis, vehicles and cash.
Rifles
Machine guns
Revolvers
Submachine guns

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(26 countries)

(10 countries)

(26 countries)

(18 countries)

* Simple averages, adjusted for any firearms/SALWs which could not be classified and quantified into the respective category (including weapons whose type was unknown, not reported, or reported under “Other” without sufficient information to allow further classification) and weapons other than firearms/SALWs.

** Only cases in which at least one firearm of the respective type were seized arms by type.

Sources: UNODC IAFQ and other official sources.

FIG. 6 Average distributions* of seized firearms/SALWs by type, according to region, 2016-17

Africa
(18 countries)

America
(26 countries)

Asia
(10 countries)

Europe
(26 countries)

Oceania
(1 country)

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Pistols
Rifles
Shotguns
Submachine guns
Revolvers
Machine guns

22%
24%

27%
11%
8%
20%

16%
8%
37%

38%
8%
35%
71%

28%
52%
34%

7%
35%

10%

22%
27%
14%

Europe

were subject to conversion and turned into firearm, the study nonetheless reflects these types of arms and analyses the received data.

In single countries, pistols tend to be, on average, the most widely seized type of firearm. This pattern is most pronounced in the Americas, where handguns generally (pistols and revolvers) are conspicuous (see Figure 6). Shotguns emerge most prominently in Africa and in Asia, while rifles consistently made up a non-negligible share of seizures in all regions. The types of arms seized in Europe were relatively diversified, including a significant proportion of weapons other than firearms or SALWs, in particular pneumatic, blank-firing and gas weapons. This may be indicative of the relative importance in this region of conversion of such weapons into illicit firearms.

Some of these regional patterns are brought into focus by an examination of the highest proportions of specific types of firearm reported as seized at country level (based on data for 2016-17). This confirms the prominence of handguns in the Americas, with some Caribbean countries registering unusually high proportions of pistols, and other countries in Latin America registering high proportions of revolvers. Some countries in Southern Europe (Albania, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia) seized high proportions of rifles, while some Eastern European countries (Hungary, Ukraine), Northern European countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden), Croatia and the Netherlands stood out in terms of the proportions of machine or submachine guns.

Shotguns were most conspicuous in African countries (Algeria, Burkina Faso, Togo, Tunisia); in addition, a high proportion of shotguns was registered in Greece, driven by a single seizure of 6,404 shotguns intended for the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Moreover, high proportions of high-powered arms could also be observed, albeit in a sporadic fashion, in some African countries, such as rifles in Kenya and Libya and machine guns in Tunisia.

When considering instances of a pronounced presence of a specific type of firearm among seizures in a given country, it is also useful to bear in mind the different kinds of

FIG. 7 Average number of firearms of a given type typically seized* by customs in a single case** (excluding cases with atypical very large numbers of firearms), according to specific type of firearm, 2016-17

Number of firearms per case

Revolvers
Pistols
Shotguns
Rifles
Submachine guns
Machine guns

* Given that some isolated seizures of large numbers of firearms were recorded, extreme values were excluded in the computation of the averages. These values are more representative of seizures usually made on a regular basis. The extreme values were determined on the basis of cases between the 2nd and 98th percentile (trimmed means).

** Only cases in which at least one firearm of the respective type were seizing were considered.

Source: World Customs Organization.

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5 See Regional Annex.

6 While the main focus of the study is on firearms/ SALWs, some countries also reported on other categories of arms, such as pneumatic, blank-firing and gas weapons. It largely depends on national legislation whether these items are considered as firearms or not. However, for the purpose of the study, only weapons falling under the definition of the UN Firearms Protocol and the 1997 UN Panel of Governmental Expert on Small Arms were considered as firearms/SALWs. Given that there are documented cases where some of these other weapons were subject to conversion and turned into firearm, the study nonetheless reflects these types of arms and analyses the received data.

7 These proportions were notable in comparison with other countries; however in each of the mentioned countries the proportion of machine guns or submachine guns (separately) did not exceed 16 per cent of the total arms seized in that country over 2016-17.

8 See Regional Annex for illustrations of the national distributions of seized arms by type.
The Primary Evidence Base: Overview Of Seizures

More detailed breakdowns confirm these differences across types of firearms and the general progression from handguns on the one hand to machine guns and submachine guns on the other. In terms of the number of instances, for example, only 11 per cent of seizure cases of revolvers—on one extreme—involved more than one such firearm at a time, compared with 21 per cent in the case of shotguns and—at the other extreme—almost one half in the case of machine guns and submachine guns. This pattern is amplified in terms of the number of firearms seized (see Figure 8).

Assuming that seizures reflect the pattern of underlying trafficking, these data suggest that while machine guns and submachine guns may be involved in a small percentage of trafficking cases, they are more likely to be subject to cross-border, well organized and larger trafficking operations. At the same time, handguns may be more likely to be carried for personal use (licit or illicit). 

Some cross-border cases of seizures of rifles were exceptionally large, indicating that the transnational trafficking of rifles may involve few cases but of very large quantities, much larger than other types of arms. Given that rifles may be used in conflict situations, the exceptionally large seizures may indicate rifle trafficking linked to conflict areas.

### Parts and components and ammunition

Parts and components of firearms are also subject to international control; not only can they be used to replace elements of firearms, but also to (illegally) modify weapons and even to assemble firearms in their entirety. Parts and components can also be trafficked and hence seized.

The United Nations Firearms Protocol defines parts and components as “any element or replacement element specifically designed for a firearm and essential to its operation, including a barrel, frame or receiver, slide or cylinder, bolt or breech block, and any device designed or adapted to diminish the sound caused by firing a firearm”.

Parts and components, being smaller than firearms, may be easier to traffic and conceal. Moreover, there are frequently discrepancies across countries in terms of the legislation regulating parts and components; in particular, …

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9 In many countries, machine guns, submachine guns and certain types of rifles are not available in the legal market for civilian use. Hence, seizures of such arms (whether domestic or of a cross-border nature) are in general less likely to be seized from their legitimate owner and more likely to be linked to criminal offences, including illicit possession and illicit firearms trafficking – independently of the number of arms seized.
some parts and components may be subject to restrictions in one country but not another. This leads to the potential for “grey trafficking” whereby a legal purchase in one country can be used to illegally supply parts and components in another, with a reduced risk of drawing the attention of law enforcement, including through the use of parcel deliveries and international online purchases.

Data on total seizures of parts and components for 2016 or 2017 (or both years) were available for 33 countries, amounting to approximately 19,000 parts and components in 2016 and 15,000 parts and components in 2017. In order to place these figures in perspective, it is useful to relate them to the number of arms seized in the corresponding country. For most countries which provided these data, far fewer parts and components were seized than entire arms - typically around 5 per cent of the number of arms seized.

The data on parts and components corroborate, to a certain degree, an overall link between the prevalence of parts and components and their use in assembling, adapting or otherwise manufacturing firearms. Data from countries that reported on both parts and components and on the condition of seized arms, show that some of the highest levels of seizures of parts and components (relative to the numbers of arms seized) can go along with significant levels of illicit manufacture— including illicit “craft” manufacture (e.g. in Nepal) and assembly— displayed by lower proportions of arms seized in “factory condition”.

In other words, it appears that in countries with a relatively high incidence of illicit manufacture or adaptation, parts and components are more frequently seized.

The United Nations Firearms Protocol defines “ammunition” as “the complete round or its components, including cartridge cases, primers, propellant powder, bullets or projectiles, that are used in a firearm, provided that those

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components are themselves subject to authorization in the respective State Party”.

The international control measures on ammunition are generally weaker than the ones applicable to firearms. However, while firearms are durable goods, ammunition is expendable and hence, in a sense, more prone to trafficking, as its ongoing use immediately creates a need for it to be replaced.

Data on seizures of ammunition in 2016 or 2017 (or both years) were available for 45 countries, amounting to a total of 3.0 million rounds in 2016 and 7.9 million rounds in 2017. For a single country, the number of rounds of ammunition recovered in 2017 ranged from less than 10 to more than 5 million, but typically stood at around 23 rounds of ammunition per arm seized (see Figure 11).
Data from the World Customs Organization enable a comparison of the extent of illicit movements of ammunition as opposed to firearms. Among all Customs seizure cases made in 2016-17 involving weapons or related items, and recorded in the Customs Enforcement Network database, 54 per cent involved ammunition or parts thereof, while 43 per cent involved firearms/SALWs and 14 per cent involved parts and components. Some seizures involved more than one element.