

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Firearms trafficking is a global phenomenon with strong variations between countries

UNODC has carried out its most comprehensive collection of data on firearms trafficking to date, gathering details from survey responses and other sources in 81 countries for 2016-17. These data give a unique insight into the patterns of trafficking globally, regionally and nationally, providing a vital resource for law enforcement, policymakers and public bodies seeking to reduce the damage caused by the illicit circulation of firearms.

Based on these sources, a total of 550,000 firearms were seized during each of 2016 and 2017. The data showed wide variations among countries in terms of quantities seized, which ranged from less than 10 to more than 300,000. The nature of seizures reported also varied dramatically.

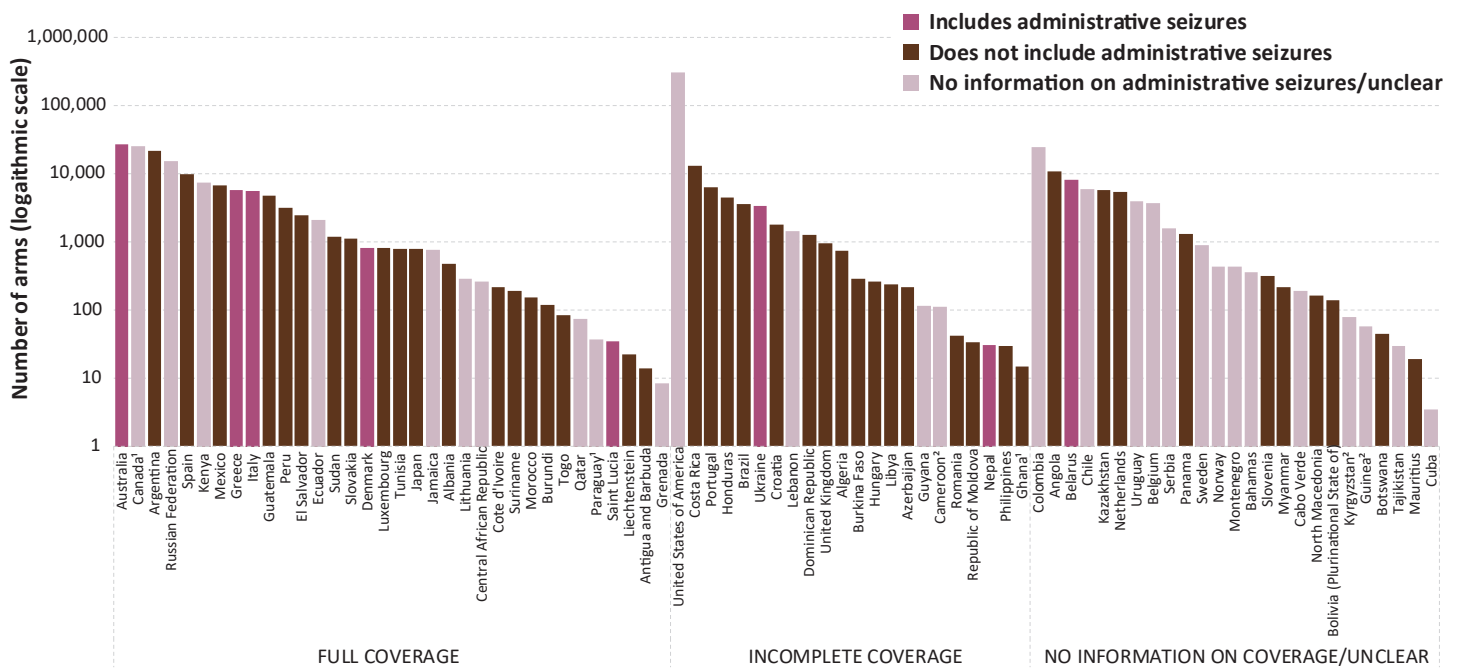
The real global figure for seizures is much higher than 550,000, as some of the countries covered by this study underreported their seizures for administrative reasons, and the quality of data varied significantly between countries. Also, many countries have not provided any information, including some of the world's most populous nations. Nonetheless, the coverage for this attempt at global data collection is good and likely to improve in the coming years, as data collection is streamlined and embedded in national institutions.

Pistols emerge as most seized firearms globally

Pistols are the world's most seized type of firearm. However, this pattern is driven to a large extent by the Americas, the region that reported the most seized firearms overall. Pistols constituted more than 50 per cent of the total firearms seized in the region during the reporting period.

In Africa and Asia, shotguns were the most prominent type. Rifles were the main type of firearm seized in Oceania, and in Europe the distribution was more equal between pistols, rifles and shotguns.

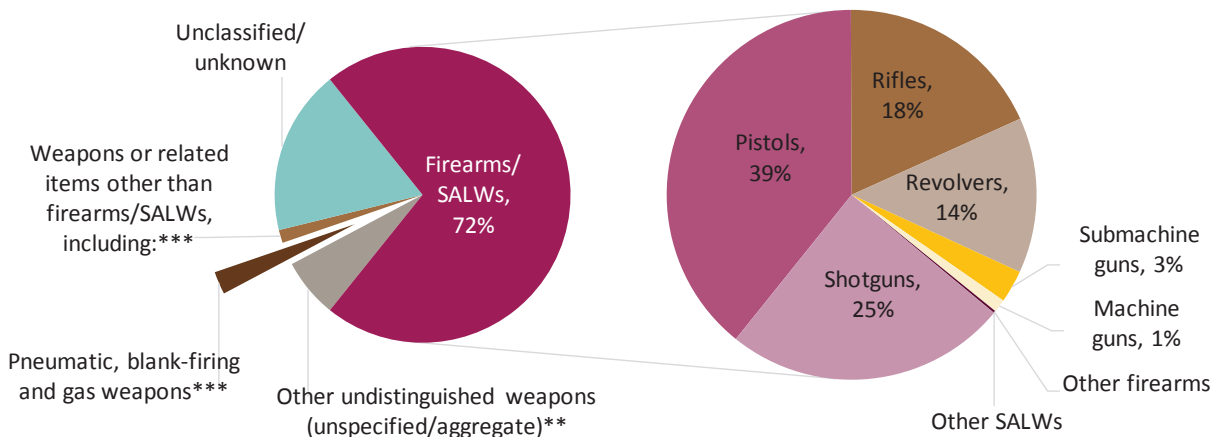
FIG. 2 Total number of arms seized, by country and type of coverage, 2016-17 (average)



¹ For Canada, Ghana and Paraguay data were available for 2016 only.
² For Cameroon, Guinea and Kyrgyzstan data were available for 2017 only.

Sources: UNODC IAFQ and other official sources.

FIG. 1 Typical distribution* of reported seized arms, by type, 2016-17



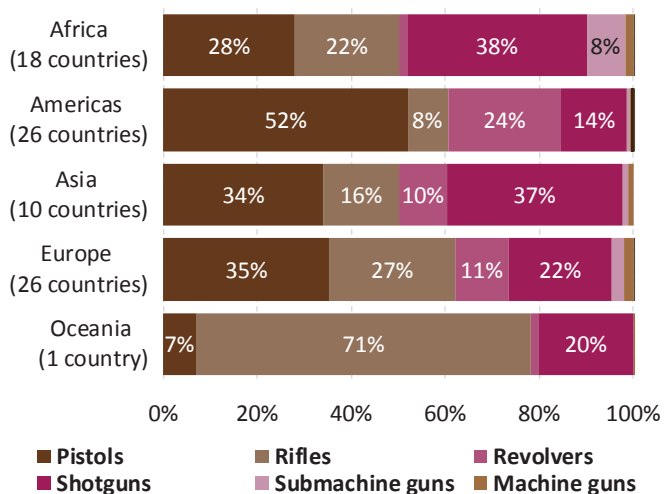
* Simple average based on data for 81 countries.
 ** Includes weapons reported under "Other" without sufficient information to allow further classification; some of these weapons may be firearms or small arms and light weapons (SALWs).
 *** For some countries, the reported seizure data included weapons other than firearms/SALWs; however data on such weapons were not explicitly requested by the questionnaire. Hence the share of such weapons is subject to variations in the reporting practice across countries.

Source: UNODC IAFQ and other official sources.

However, many countries in Africa and Asia appear to have a lower capacity to intercept and report trafficked firearms, which may lead to underreporting of some types of firearms. Moreover, the total figures reported by countries include seizures which are not directly connected to trafficking. Based on customs seizures at borders, rifles emerge at par with pistols. This suggests that firearms such as rifles may play a bigger role in global trafficking patterns than what is reflected in the currently available data.

Looking more closely, links emerge between trafficking patterns and broader regional contexts. For example, countries with higher levels of violent deaths and homicide, particularly in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, tend to seize a higher percentage of firearms connected to violent crime. Similarly, in countries with higher levels of drug trafficking, more arms are seized linked to that activity.

FIG. 3 Typical distributions* of seized firearms/SALWs by type, according to region, 2016-17



* Simple averages, adjusted for any firearms/SALWs which could not be classified and quantified into the respective category and weapons other than firearms/SALWs.

Source: UNODC IAFQ and other official sources.

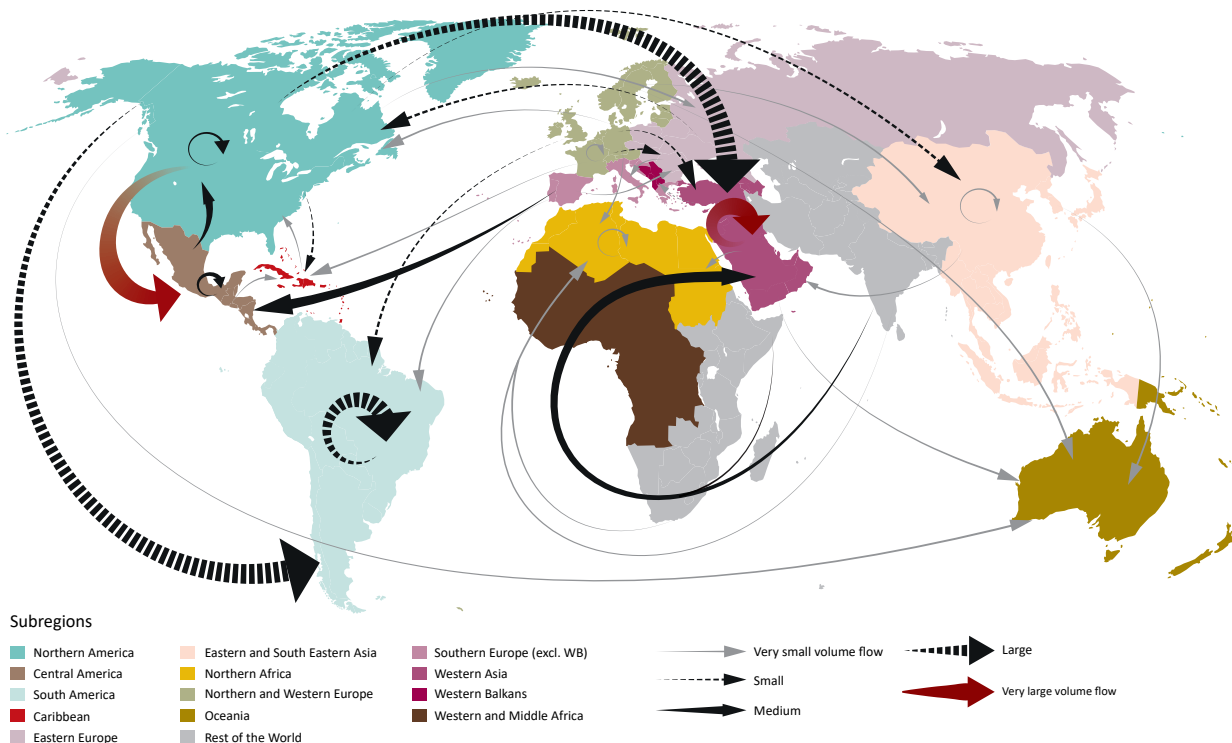
Transnational trafficking exists alongside domestic diversion and illicit manufacture

Most firearms seizures are made within national territories; seizures at borders on average account for less than 10 per cent of all interceptions. Seized weapons are overwhelmingly manufactured outside the country of seizure, but it is likely that the sourcing of firearms found in illicit markets has an important domestic component, such as firearms diverted from licit channels in the country of seizure.

There is often little connection to the country of manufacture – a significant proportion of arms seized on incoming shipments have not been transported directly from where they were produced. This suggests that vulnerability to firearms trafficking is mostly to be found in countries where firearms are diverted from legal holdings rather than where they are manufactured.

Northern America is the principal subregion of departure for seized firearms, according to the available data. On a smaller scale, Europe and Western Asia are also major

MAP 1 Main transnational firearms trafficking flows (as defined by routes of seized firearms), 2016-17



The breakdown into subregional groupings is based on the standard UN classification (M49), adapted to take into account the availability of data and regions of special interest of the study. Please see Methodological Annex for details.

Arrows represent flows between subregions (not specific countries).

Source: UNODC elaboration of data from Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire and World Customs Organization.

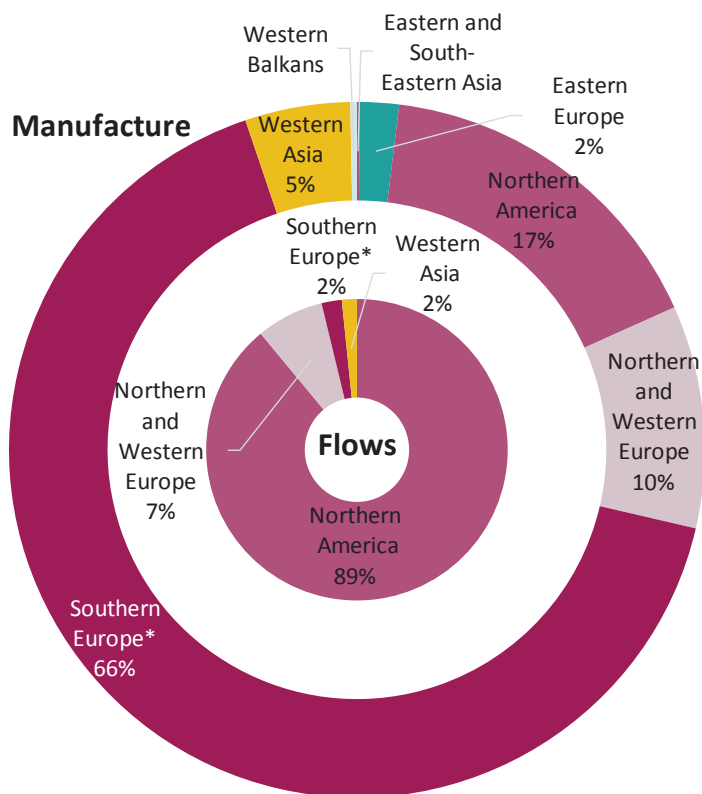
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

departure points for illicit flows. However, illicit flows within subregions often account for significant proportions of firearms entering the market, notably in South America, Northern and Western Europe and Western Asia.

Transnational trafficking is concentrated within continents

Based on the routes of seized firearms, transnational trafficking flows seem to be mostly concentrated within continents. Northern America plays a significant role as departing subregion for other subregions, particularly South and Central America, as well as Western Asia. Northern America, Europe and Western Asia together accounted for almost all departure points of trafficking in 2016-17. In contrast with other parts of the world, outgoing flows from countries in Europe were predominantly intended for trafficking across continents.

FIG. 4 ... Distribution of subregions identified as origin of incoming illicit flows^a (inner circle) and manufacture^a (external circle) for seizures made in South America, 2016-17



*Excluding Western Balkans.

^aThe largest share of transnational illicit flows affecting countries in South America occurs between countries within South America. Similarly, countries in South America itself account for the largest share of manufacture of weapons seized in South America (including weapons seized in the country of manufacture). These shares are not shown in the above figure.

Note: The shares of flows and of manufacture are based on different kinds of data which require different methodologies. Therefore, the comparison should be made with caution. In both cases, the calculations adjust for the share which is not classified or reported as unknown.

Source: UNODC IAFQ and other official sources.

Central and South America together with Western Asia accounted for more than 80 per cent of trafficking destinations. These main destination areas are known for high levels of criminal violence or conflict and show the links between firearms trafficking and violent deaths.

Manufacturing country often unconnected to illicit flow

Illicit firearms flows are complex and do not necessarily follow licit flows. The country of manufacture of firearms and the country where diversions (when firearms leave the licit circuit and enter the illicit one) and seizures take place often do not overlap. This is clearly seen in the contrast between countries that are identified either as manufacturing countries or as the point where the illicit flow starts. While Europe emerges as the main manufacturing region in seizures made across the world, the most prominent subregion of illicit origin is Northern America. Firearms are durable goods and their circulation before and after diversion to the black market often involves several transfers.

Cross-border seizures are most common at land crossings, but sea shipments are bigger

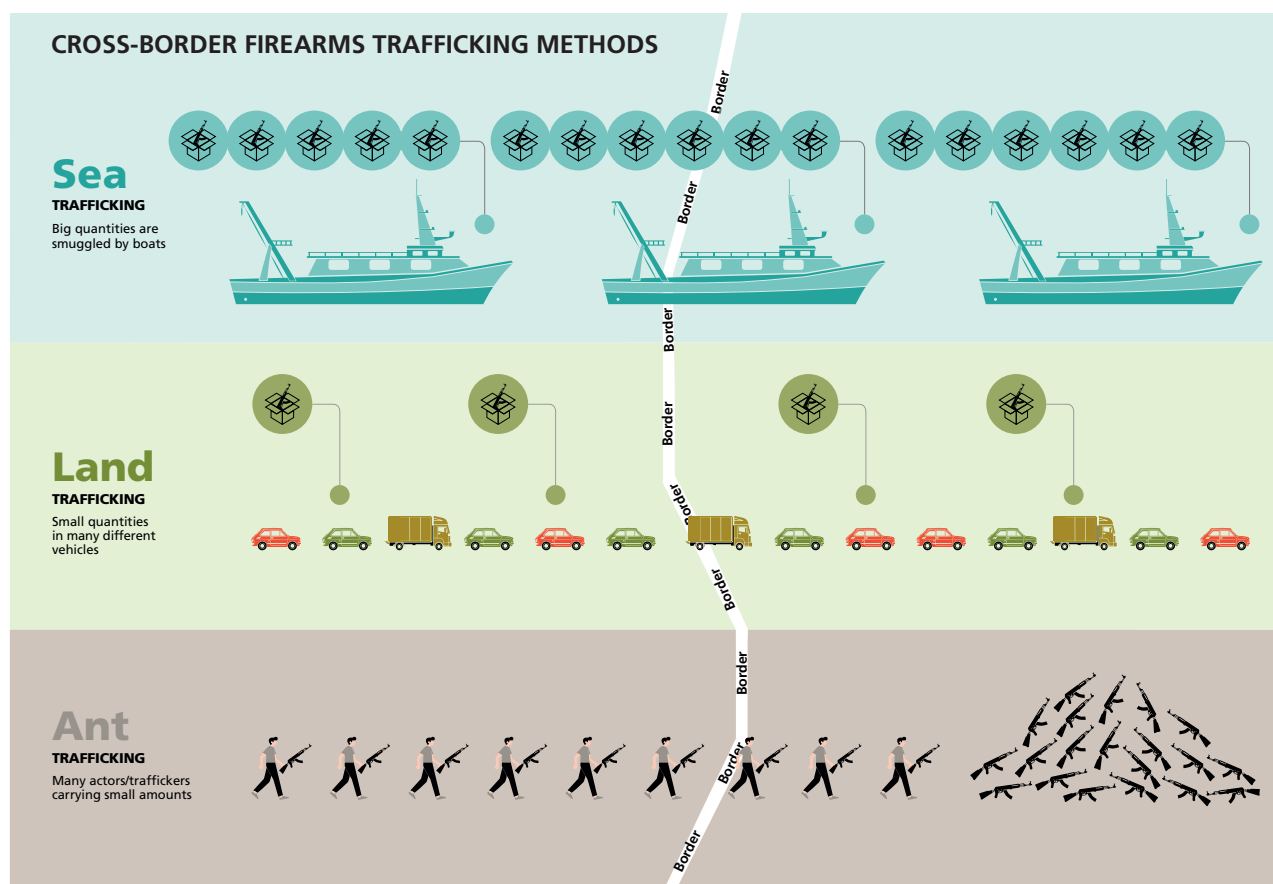
Traffickers tend to use sea transport for large shipments. Cases of seizures from vessels involved more than five times the number of firearms typically intercepted from other types of transportation. This suggests that law enforcement could get a better return on their investment if they focused on transportation by sea.

However, trafficking by land remains the most common type of cross-border case, accounting for roughly two-thirds of the total. Interceptions from vessels accounted for only around 6 per cent of all customs cases, but 33 per cent of the total number of firearms seized by customs.

Size of seizure case can reflect the intended use of the firearm

It appears that the vast majority of seizure cases entail law enforcement officers intercepting a single firearm or a very small number, according to available data. However, in terms of quantities of firearms seized, the big cases may account for a significant share. For example, among customs seizures carried out at national borders, roughly three quarters of cases involved one firearm, but around one half of firearms were seized in instances that involved 18 or more firearms.

Seizures of small consignments of one or two firearms may be linked to individual use, where the firearm is taken from the end user. These cases most commonly involved handguns. For example, more than 80 per cent of revolvers were captured in cases involving just a single firearm.



This type of case often entails a violation of possession regulations, but can also involve strategic “ant trafficking”, whereby many people transport weapons in small consignments to meet large-scale demand and reduce the risk of disruption by law enforcement. This type of trafficking does not fully explain global arms trafficking, but there is evidence¹ that it is utilized to transport firearms from the United States to Mexico.

At the other end of this continuum, countries reported large seizures that seemed to respond to big instances of demand, for example conflict. Seizures of rifles, shotguns and pistols suggest that firearms of these types can be trafficked in consignments of hundreds and thousands. High-powered firearms such as machine guns and submachine guns are not often captured, but these rare seizure events generally involve larger quantities. Around one fifth of all customs seizure cases that included machine guns and submachine guns involved such firearms in batches of four or more; on the other hand, such hauls of revolvers, for example, were exceptional.

These big seizure cases were far more likely than smaller consignments to be linked to firearms trafficking offences.

Illicit sellers can compete with licit markets on price

The cost of buying firearms in the illicit market is usually significantly higher than in the licit sphere, reflecting the extra risks and profiteering involved in the black market. However, there are exceptions. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, illicit prices were lower than the licit price for handguns. This suggests ample availability of handguns in the illicit market.

Price data from Europe point to the Western Balkans as a potential illicit source of firearms, notably assault rifles. Such weapons were far less expensive in the Western Balkans than in the rest of Europe.

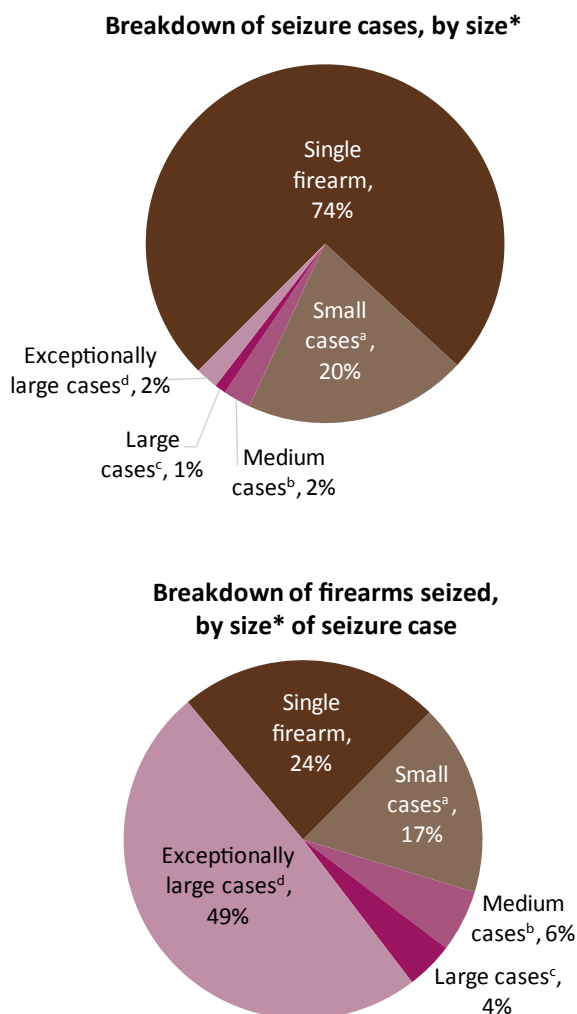
Traffickers supply those seeking to assemble or convert weapons

Seizures of parts and components are relatively rare compared with seizures of firearms: on average, only 5 per cent of the number of firearms. However, a different picture emerges in countries where firearms in non-factory condition were seized in relatively high numbers (including artisanal or craft production), particularly in Africa and parts of Asia. Countries in these areas tend to report relatively high levels of seizures of parts and components.

Illicit manufacturing, conversion, reactivation and assembly of firearms is also present in some European countries,

1 See Section on “Ant trafficking” in Chapter 3.

FIG. 5 Breakdowns of customs seizures, by size* of seizure case, 2016-17



* The size of a seizure case refers to the number of firearms seized in that particular instance.

^a A case is considered "small" if between 2 and 5 firearms were seized in that particular instance.

^b A case is considered "medium" if between 6 and 10 firearms were seized in that particular instance.

^c A case is considered "large" if between 11 and 17 firearms were seized in that particular instance.

^d A case is considered "exceptionally large" if at least 18 firearms were seized in that particular instance.

Source: World Customs Organization.

possibly reflecting national control mechanisms that make firearms hard to access legally. Modification of weapons may also serve the needs of the criminals to use smaller or more powerful weapons.

Firearms tracing remains insufficient and countries risk missing SDG target

Countries are committed to "significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows" under SDG Target 16.4. One of the indicators for this target is that the proportion of firearms traced to their illicit origins must be measured. Data from 14 countries in 2016-2017 suggest that, on

average, this illicit origin or illicit context was established for just 28 per cent of the relevant category of firearms.

The countries that registered very high success rates in tracing firearms reported relatively low seizure levels, perhaps because tracing requires a lot of resources. On the other hand, some countries with high levels of seizures registered a low success rate, which may also be linked to firearms seized in connection with less serious offences and perhaps not prioritised in tracing.

Criminal justice responses tend to underplay the significance of firearms trafficking

Countries on average seized around two-thirds of firearms on the grounds of illicit possession, according to the legal justifications given by national authorities. Trafficking was, on average, named as the legal justification in only around 9 per cent of cases.

However, it is likely that the offence of illicit possession provides an easier and quicker way for law enforcement to justify stopping shipments and seizing firearms, and trafficking emerges as the actual offence only after further investigations – this is known as the "criminal context" of the seizure.

When the criminal context is factored in, the proportion of seized weapons that could be connected to trafficking more than doubles to roughly 19 per cent. The real proportion is likely to be even higher, once potential under-reporting of firearms trafficking is considered.

The evidence suggests that the criminal justice system focuses on firearms trafficking only in a relatively small percentage of the cases where it would be warranted – meaning firearms trafficking is a largely hidden phenomenon, only part of which comes to the surface.

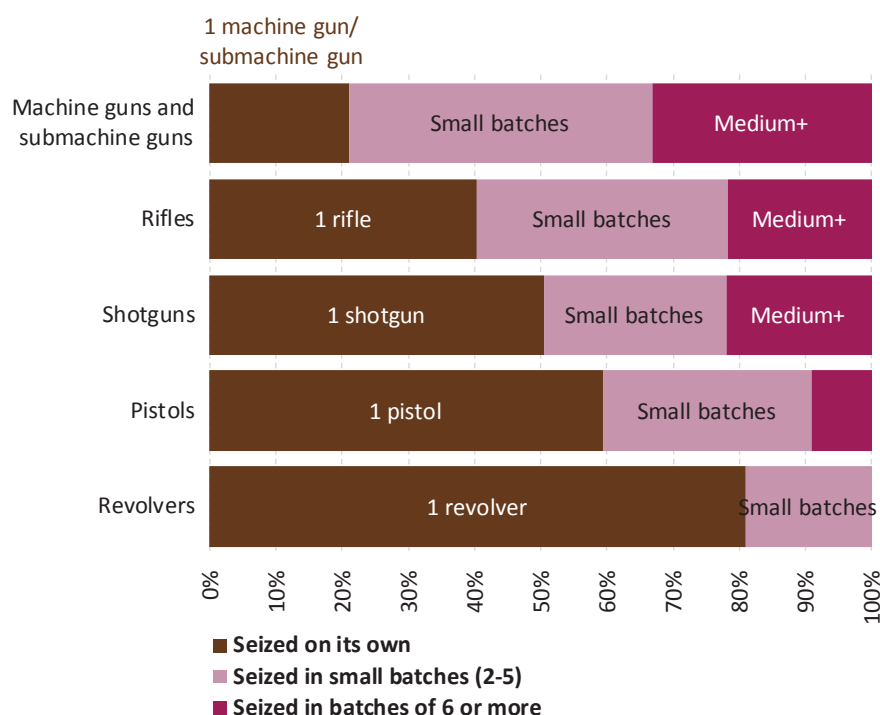
Violent crime and drug trafficking are frequently linked with seizures

Other than arms offences, the criminal conduct most commonly linked with firearms seizures was violent crime, particularly in Latin America and Africa. In Europe, drug trafficking was the biggest category.

On average, a larger share of firearms is seized in the context of violent crime in countries with high homicide rates. The same link is shown with drug seizures. In addition, drugs emerge as the most common commodity intercepted in the same seizures as firearms, followed by counterfeit goods, cultural property and natural resources

Unpicking the link between firearms trafficking and the broader criminal context in which seizures occur is difficult. Some exceptionally large individual seizure cases appear to be connected to areas with recent or ongoing

FIG. 6 Firearms seized in typical^a customs seizure cases, by size^b of seizure case (excluding cases with atypical very large number of firearms), 2016-17



^a Isolated cases of a very large size were excluded; these were defined as cases with a size above the 98th percentile for the corresponding specific type of firearm.

^b Size is measured as the number of firearms of the given specific type seized in the corresponding case.

Source: World Customs Organization.

conflicts, or countries with high levels of violence linked to organized crime. But several large hauls were reported that were apparently unconnected to conflict areas or organized crime.

Some countries may face specific problems related to conflict. Weapons feed conflict while it is going on, then stockpiles can proliferate in the aftermath, causing multiple difficulties for the authorities.

More than 50 per cent of homicides globally are carried out using firearms

Overall, more than 50 per cent of homicides globally each year are carried out with a firearm. The availability of firearms is linked to the homicide rate: a rise in the rate of firearms possession in a country often goes together with an increase in the homicide rate.

However, the significance of firearms varies depending on the context of the homicide. For example, firearms are by far the most significant method in homicides related to gangs or organized crime, but far less prominent when the homicide involves intimate partners and family members.

There is also a gender factor involved in the use of firearms in homicide. Most homicide victims and perpetrators globally are men, and this tends to be even more pronounced among firearms homicides. When considering homicides of intimate partners and family members, in which most victims are women, men were more likely than women to use a firearm when killing their female partners, while women were more likely than men to resort to a sharp object.

Overall, seizure data tended to suggest a relationship between the level of interception and the rate of homicide. Countries with higher levels of firearms seizures relative to firearms homicides tend to have lower levels of homicide, which might reflect an established and strong rule of law situation.

