

# Briefing Paper

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## ESTIMATING GLOBAL LAW ENFORCEMENT FIREARMS NUMBERS

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## Front cover photo

A police officer stands guard outside Parliament House in Canberra, Australia, March, 2017.  
Source: David Gray/Reuters



**Australian Government**

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## Overview

Available sources indicate that as of 2017 there was a global total of at least 22.7 million known or estimated law enforcement firearms, equal to roughly 2.2 per cent of all firearms identified by the Small Arms Survey around the world. Worldwide, 4.8 million law enforcement firearms have been reported to the Small Arms Survey or documented from other sources. An additional 17.9 million or so firearms owned by law enforcement agencies can be estimated with reasonable confidence. The global estimate is slightly lower than the previous Small Arms Survey global estimate for 2006, the result of methodological changes and a decision not to estimate the holdings for many specialized or smaller law enforcement agencies. There are several reasons to assume that the total of 22.7 million law enforcement firearms given in this Briefing Paper is an underestimate. The state of research on law enforcement armament makes it hard to say whether global law enforcement weapons inventories are increasing or decreasing. But the types of firearms used by law enforcement agencies appear to be changing more rapidly than those of military services, also becoming more alike to military armament.

## Key findings

- As of the end of 2017 there was a global total of at least 22.7 million known or estimated law enforcement firearms.
- Law enforcement firearms made up roughly 2.2 per cent of all firearms identified by the Small Arms Survey.
- Official reports account for 4.8 million law enforcement firearms, or 21 per cent of the estimated law enforcement total.
- The average ratio for the 28 countries reporting official data is 1.7 firearms per sworn law enforcement officer.

## Introduction

Law enforcement small arms present a contradiction of visibility and obscurity. In most parts of the world, law enforcement weapons are the most commonly seen of all small arms. But what is easily observed individually can be opaque collectively. Few law enforcement agencies have a tradition of transparency on this issue: official data on weapons inventories and often on total personnel numbers is often not available to the public. When data is scarce, estimation becomes the basic approach to establishing law enforcement small arms totals. While law enforcement firearms are frequently observed, they represent a small fraction of global firearms holdings.

Available sources indicate that as of 2017 there was a global total of at least 22.7 million known or estimated law enforcement firearms, equal to roughly 2.2 per cent of all firearms identified by the Small Arms Survey around the world.<sup>1</sup> Worldwide, 4.8 million law enforcement firearms have been reported to the Small Arms Survey or documented from other sources. An additional 18 million or so firearms owned by law enforcement agencies can be estimated with reasonable confidence.

This analysis includes law enforcement agencies responsible for domestic security, especially police, gendarmes, and official paramilitaries. With approximately 18.6 million sworn law enforcement officers identified in this Briefing Paper and another 830,000 estimated, the global law enforcement firearms average is roughly 1.2 firearms per officer worldwide for 230 countries and territories covered in this Briefing Paper, including those for which police firearms totals have been estimated.<sup>2</sup>

The global estimate of 22.7 million law enforcement firearms at the end of 2017 is lower than the previous Small Arms Survey global estimate of 25 million for 2006. The main reason for this decline is methodological; that is, as the result of changes to the multipliers used and the decision not to estimate holdings for many specialized or smaller law enforcement agencies such as customs, wildlife management, and prison authorities. The latter were included for some countries in the previous estimate, but have not been included this time due to lack of adequate global data coverage.

More generally, there are three key reasons to assume that the total of 22.7 million law enforcement firearms is an underestimate. Firstly, the total of 18.6 million sworn officers identified here

(19.4 million if we include estimated countries) is an underestimate, because smaller or specialized law enforcement agencies that are routinely armed have not been included. Secondly, few governments are fully transparent about their security services, nor are many of these services readily researched, making truly comprehensive law enforcement totals elusive at this time. Thirdly, recent law enforcement arms procurement may be missing in the estimated country totals, especially when new weapons are acquired without disposing of older firearms. While recent procurement is sometimes publicly announced, reporting tends to be uneven and rarely mentions what is done with older equipment.

As with other forms of firearms possession, law enforcement firearms appear to be heavily concentrated in the most populous countries. Almost 13 million firearms, or 58 per cent of the reported and estimated global total, belong to law enforcement agencies in 12 countries. While large countries generally have large numbers of law enforcement weapons, the actual rate of arming varies greatly among them (see Table 1).

### Box 1 Global breakdown of firearms numbers

At the end of 2017 there were approximately 1,013 million firearms in the 230 countries and autonomous territories of the world, 84.6 per cent of which were held by civilians, 13.1 per cent by state militaries, and 2.2 per cent by law enforcement agencies (see Figure 2).

The 2017 combined global total of 1,013 million firearms is higher than the previously published Small Arms Survey global total of 875 million firearms in 2006, an increase of 15.7 per cent for all identified firearms. Much of this change is due to an increase of 32 per cent in the estimated civilian-held firearms total. Reported global totals for the law enforcement and military categories show net decreases, mostly due to changes in estimating procedures.

While the global total for 2017 is significantly higher than that in 2006, not all changes at the country level are due to a growth of civilian firearms holdings. Some variations since 2006 are also affected by the availability of more complete reporting or more comprehensive estimates.

Every effort has been made to ensure the reliability of Small Arms Survey data, but not all entries are equally complete. In some areas—especially law enforcement and the military—some government agencies and stockpiles may have been missed. The Survey methodology counts all firearms equally, although they can vary greatly in capability, reliability, and durability.

Figure 1 Global firearms ownership estimates, 2017

● Civilians (857 million)  
● Law enforcement (22.7 million)  
● Military (133 million)

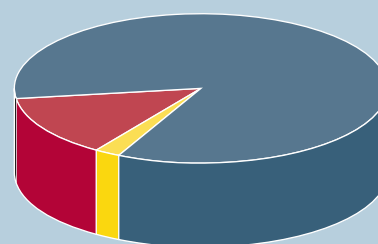


Table 1 Estimated law enforcement firearms in selected countries

Country	Population, 2017	Sworn officers	Ratio of firearms per sworn officer	Estimated firearms	Police firearms/100 population
Russian Federation	143,400,000	1,280,000	1.9	2,432,000	1.70
China	1,388,000,000	2,893,000	0.7	1,971,000	0.14
India	1,343,000,000	2,464,000	0.7	1,700,000	0.13
Egypt	95,220,000	1,275,000	1.2	1,530,000	1.61
United States	326,500,000	653,000	1.6	1,016,000	0.31
Pakistan	196,700,000	630,000	1.5	944,000	0.48
Brazil	211,200,000	688,000	1.2	803,000	0.38
Turkey	80,420,000	414,000	1.5	620,000	0.77
Mexico	130,200,000	455,000	1.3	591,000	0.45
France	64,940,000	261,000	1.9	497,000	0.77
Germany	80,640,000	245,000	1.9	466,000	0.58
Indonesia	263,500,000	429,000	1.0	429,000	0.16
All others	3,195,000,000	7,627,000	–	9,735,000	–
<b>Global</b>	<b>7,519,000,000</b>	<b>19,314,000</b>	<b>1.18</b>	<b>22,734,000</b>	<b>0.30</b>

Notes: The number of sworn officers and firearms given is for the most recent year available. The populations of China and the United States do not include those of autonomous territories or Taiwan. Totals may not agree due to rounding.

Source: Small Arms Survey (2018)

### Methods: a hierarchy of sources

The country totals given in this Briefing Paper come from several kinds of sources (see Table 2). The method for estimating law enforcement firearms holdings relies on a hierarchy of sources, in order of reliability: official reports, research reports, media reports, estimates based on a regional average multiplier, or estimates based on a global average multiplier.

Reporting on law enforcement firearms usually reconciles a tension between being reliable and being comprehensive. Reliable data on law enforcement firearms is always preferable, but official reports are rare and often incomplete. In all, they account for 4.8 million law enforcement firearms, or 21 per cent of the estimated law enforcement total of 22.7 million. When official reports are lacking, more comprehensive data from research or media reports is used, when possible.

When more reliable sources are unavailable or highly incomplete, estimation becomes unavoidable. Estimates in this Briefing Paper are based on averages for each region, or worldwide averages when regional data is lacking. Estimates sometimes can be adjusted for specific law enforcement agencies if there are compelling reports, such as in China, where ‘police posts will have one gun for

**Table 2** Sources of primary data

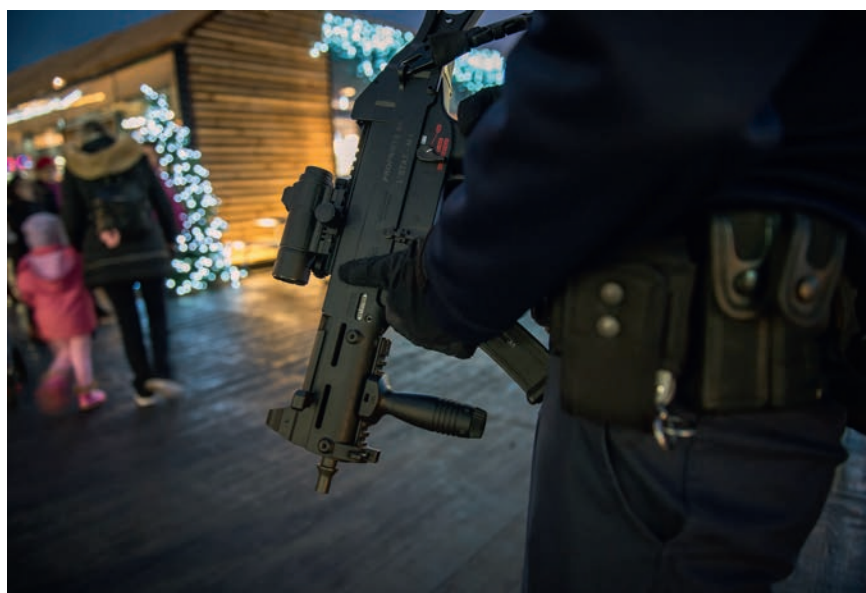
Sources	No. of countries/territories
Official reports	25
Reported in research or media	24
Estimated from regional average	169
Estimated from global average	28

Note: The total does not equal the number of countries and territories covered due to the use of multiple sources.

every two officers, and traffic police will have one gun for every three officers' (Wong, 2012, p. 343).

## Reported law enforcement firearms

Documenting the number of law enforcement officers and their firearms from original sources is the preferred method. The total number of law enforcement firearms is known from reports for major national agencies in at least 28 countries or territories (Small Arms Survey, 2018). Some have volunteered this data in reports to the Small Arms Survey and government reports, or disclosures to the news media and researchers. In some other cases,



A French gendarme on patrol holds an HK UMP sub-machine gun, Tours, France, December 2016. Source: Guillaume Souvant/AFP Photo

like England and Wales or India, the total was deduced from various official reports (Small Arms Survey, 2018).

Regional and national data reveals the diversity in law enforcement arsenals. The average ratio for these 28 countries and territories is 1.7 firearms per sworn officer (Small Arms Survey, 2018).<sup>3</sup> Reports from official sources or disclosures by officials show that law enforcement firearms holdings range from a highest

reported national total of 5.1 firearms per sworn officer in Estonia to the lowest reported total of 0.4 firearms per sworn officer in Tuvalu (see Table 3). Comparable variations can be found between different agencies in countries (see Table 6).

Higher rates may exist among the 202 countries and territories for which reported data is lacking, and among specific agencies within those countries and territories for which more information is

**Table 3** Examples of reported law enforcement firearms

Country	Organization	Year	Sworn officers	Firearms	Ratio of firearms/officer
Andorra	Police Corps of Andorra	2012	242	942	3.9
Austria	Federal Police	2012	27,709	37,900	1.4
Estonia	Estonian Police	2012	3,069	15,500	5.1
Ethiopia	Ethiopian Federal Police	2011	20,000	20,000	1.0
Iceland	State Police	2015	656	590	0.9
Kenya	Kenya Police Service	2015/10	43,921	42,027	0.9
Malawi	Malawi Police Service	2013	6,000	8,400	1.4
Malta	Malta Police Force	2012	1,924	1,637	0.9
Nigeria	All agencies	2017	318,158	362,400	1.1
Norway	Norwegian Police Service	2012	8,500	13,000	1.5
Philippines	National Police	2012	140,000	139,043	1.0
South Africa	South African Police Service	2016	151,077	258,066	1.7
Spain	All agencies	2014	169,821	264,196	1.6
Tanzania	Tanzania Police Force	2015	45,487	37,000	0.8
Tuvalu	Tuvalu Police Force	2010	74	26	0.4

Source: Small Arms Survey (2018)

available. Lower rates also occur and sometimes can be pieced together. In England and Wales, where rates can be extrapolated from reports from particular sub-national constabularies, the ratio of firearms for all police is famously low, roughly 0.23 firearms per sworn officer. However, even this low average exaggerates the proportion of police in England and Wales who carry firearms, because only officially designated ‘armed officers’ are authorized to carry firearms, which is fewer than one officer in 20. The national average might appear higher than one would expect because there is an average of approximately five firearms for each ‘armed officer’ (Small Arms Survey, 2018).

## Methods for estimating country totals

In most countries, quantitative data on law enforcement firearms is unavailable. The closest proxy is the number of law enforcement personnel. Used with national indicators of the typical number of law enforcement firearms per sworn officer, or, when this is lacking, with regional or global ratios for typical firearms levels, this provides a basis for systematic estimation (see Table 4).

Country law enforcement firearms totals for the countries with the largest law enforcement firearms holdings—illustrated in Table 1—are based at least partially on estimation. For most, the total number of sworn officers is known, and reports are usually available about the typical number of firearms per sworn officer. Countries with the largest police forces typically appear to have one to two firearms per sworn officer. But there are

**Table 4** Average police officers per 100,000 people, by region

Africa	186.8
Americas: Canada and USA	207.5
Americas: Latin America and Caribbean	283.9
Asia: Central	326.6
Asia: East and South-east	299.1
Asia: Near and Middle East	435.5
Asia: South	202.0
Europe: East and South-east	389.7
Europe: West and Central	311.5
Oceania	187.0

Source: Harrendorf and Smit (2010, p. 115)

**Table 5** Average regional and global police firearms ratios, based on official data from 28 countries

Region	Countries reporting	Average firearms/officer
Africa	8	1.2
Americas	4	1.3
Asia	2	1.0
Europe	10	1.9
Oceania	4	0.8
<b>Global</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>1.5</b>

Notes: Based on reports for major national law enforcement agencies from 28 countries in Small Arms Survey (2018). The global average is calculated by country, not by region. ‘Americas’ includes Latin America and the Caribbean only.

Source: Small Arms Survey (2018)

exceptions, such as China and India, estimated in this Briefing Paper at 0.7 firearms per sworn officer (Karp and Rajagopalan, 2014, p. 9; Wong, 2012, p. 343).

The best estimates require accurate law enforcement personnel totals and reports of typical armament practices, such as procurement reports or, sometimes, street observation. Only when no information is available about typical police armament are regional or global averages used.

Estimation based on numbers of officers stresses the most specific breakdowns of numbers available. Where possible, individual agency totals are used. More typically, however, the numbers for only a few agencies—typically the largest—are known in sufficient detail. For these and other countries where no specific agency totals are available, only the total for all law enforcement officers is used. When there is sufficiently detailed information on gun ratios for specific agencies, this is used to calculate the number of guns. In the United States, for example, the officer/firearms ratios of eight federal law enforcement agencies are known (US GAO, 2003).

In the worst cases, where no data on total law enforcement officers is available, the number of law enforcement officers is estimated from the averaged multiplier for the region in which the country is located. This is multiplied by the average number of firearms per sworn officer in that region, based on known examples, or when necessary, as in the case of most Asian countries, the global average for known firearms per officer (see Table 4).

This estimation procedure improves comprehensiveness, but not accuracy. The use of regional or global averages obscures national peculiarities. As shown in Table 4, regional averages conceal

significant differences among countries in a particular region. For several regions, moreover, the regional sample in Table 5 is small, reducing confidence in the resulting estimates. Where the sample is too small to give confidence in a regional average, such as for most of Asia, the global reported average of 1.5 firearms per officer is used.

Because solid firearms data, or the number of law enforcement personnel, or an approximate firearms ratio is known for most countries, not everything has to be estimated. In the most elusive cases, though, both the number of law enforcement personnel and their approximate firearms ratio are unknown. In these circumstances there is no option but to extrapolate entirely from averaged regional and/or global proxy values. Most of these cases are small states. The largest exceptions, for which personnel and armament totals are unknown, are Burkina Faso, Kyrgyzstan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. Figures for Yemen are also unknown, but the country was not included due to uncertainty as to whether it has a functioning police force as of this writing.

## Issues affecting the process of estimating law enforcement agencies firearms totals

The creation and arming of law enforcement agencies can be idiosyncratic, reflecting particular national experiences and priorities. As a result, even seemingly consistent data, like the total number of sworn officers, may not be completely comparable between any two countries. Major differences to consider when



Pakistani members of the police force, 'Eagle Squad', on patrol in Quetta, Pakistan, May 2018. Source: Banaras Khan/AFP Photo

evaluating country totals or comparing law enforcement agencies include the following:

- the types of agencies classified as law enforcement agencies;
- the number of sworn officers compared to the overall number of law enforcement personnel;
- different levels of armament, including differences in a country in terms of levels of armament for different law enforcement agencies; and
- law enforcement agencies' weapons procurement doctrine and preferences regarding quantities and types.

## Which agencies?

There is no global definitional agreement on which agencies are law enforcement agencies or police, as opposed to voluntary militias, the military, or sometimes even private security services. This study covers local, provincial, and national police, gendarmes, and official paramilitaries, with the latter being generally the largest law enforcement agencies. In most countries, the police and gendarmeries appear to hold most law enforcement

firearms. However, in some countries, numbers for paramilitaries with policing responsibilities are high: India has roughly 1.6 million paramilitaries and Pakistan some 282,000 (IISS, 2018, pp. 260, 291). There is no universal rule for whether paramilitaries should be included as law enforcement agencies or regarded as military. The Small Arms Survey tries to follow the general practice for each country, as revealed in published reports and studies.

There can be significant—even exponential—differences among published sources on numbers of law enforcement personnel. In Iraq, there are officially 275,584 police personnel (UNODC, 2018), but one study concludes that only 37,000 are available (Knights, 2016, p. 23). More typically, such differences appear to be due to which agencies are included. This is why one source lists Mexico as having 11,795 officers (UNODC, 2008), while another says 454,574 (Sabet, 2012). It is not always that easy to tell which is the correct figure. Smaller law enforcement agencies may be easiest to overlook, but many data sources omit even gendarmeries or regional and city police.

The law enforcement category could include specialized agencies such as treasury or investigative police; border security; customs authorities' domestic

intelligence services; protective services; prisons; fisheries protection; and wildlife management. In some countries, such as Bulgaria, firemen are armed (Rynn, Gounev, and Jackson, 2005, p. 13). The exclusion of many of these agencies has important implications for the global estimate provided above. For example, in South Sudan, the police number some 36,000 officers, while the total number of sworn personnel for all law enforcement agencies totals 66,000, or 83 per cent more (King, 2014, p. 5). Comparable data is lacking for most countries, making estimation too unreliable and leading to estimates for only major law enforcement agencies.

## How many sworn officers?

Any estimate of firearms numbers based on personnel must be careful to discount law enforcement employees who do not carry weapons. Only sworn officers are empowered to make arrests and carry weapons. In the United States, for example, there were 933,142 law enforcement employees in 2016, but only 652,936 were sworn officers (FBI, 2017). In many cases not all sworn officers are routinely armed, although weapons appear to be widely available (such as in China and



Armed police protect the vehicle carrying Honduran president Manuel Zelaya, Las Manos, Nicaragua, July 2009. Source: Orlando Sierra/AFP Photo

India). In a few countries and territories, only select officers can be armed (for example, England and Wales).

The proportion of sworn officers in a population varies dramatically. The highest recorded is Christmas Island, with one officer for every 30 residents (Gordon, 2011; ABS, 2011). Egypt is relatively close, with 1.3 million police employees for 95 million people, or 1 for every 73 residents (Bradley, 2011). One of the lowest rates recorded is that of Niger, with some 8,700 police and gendarmes for 21.6 million residents; that is, 1 officer for every 2,482 people (Small Arms Survey, 2018). Table 1 shows the number of sworn officers in a population for the 12 countries with the estimated largest law enforcement firearms holdings.

## How are they armed?

Law enforcement firearms holdings vary enormously from country to country (see Table 3). Available data tends to reveal average figures at the national level, which often does not reflect the reality that different law enforcement agencies within countries are usually equipped with significantly different types and quantities of weaponry. Specialized agencies can

be very heavily equipped. Examples for the United States illustrate the range of variation (see Table 6). Even within an agency, select groups may be more heavily armed than ordinary sworn officers. Generally, police appear to be arming more heavily (see Box 2). The present research revealed no examples of major national law enforcement agencies reducing the quantity or capabilities of their weaponry.

In Small Arms Survey research in 2006 police were assumed to be armed at a rate of 1.3 firearms per officer, enough to provide a single firearm per officer, spares, and a limited number of special weapons (Small Arms Survey, 2006, p. 42). The average ratio as of 2017 for all 28 countries that reported for their principal national law enforcement agencies is 1.7 firearms per officer, after outliers were removed. The ratio rises when

**Table 6** Armament of selected US law enforcement agencies

Agency	Sworn personnel (year)	Total firearms (year)	Approximate firearms/officer
State and local police	548,000 (2017)	822,000 (2017)*	1.5
Federal Bureau of Investigation	11,523 (2000)	49,600 (2002)	4.3
Drug Enforcement Administration	4,161 (2000)	14,921 (2001)	3.6
Federal Fish & Wildlife	888 (2000)	5,234 (2001)	5.9

\* Small Arms Survey estimate. Totals here do not match those in Small Arms Survey (2018) due to the addition of different agencies and base years.

Sources: State and local police's sworn personnel from FBI (2017); state and local police firearms estimated using the global estimator (Table 5); other agencies from US GAO (2003, pp. 3, 31)



averaged for all individually reported law enforcement agencies, including smaller mission-specific agencies, increasing to 1.8 firearms per officer, reflecting the tendency for smaller law enforcement agencies to be more heavily armed (Small Arms Survey, 2018).

Higher levels of armament are also associated with heavily armed regular police or gendarmes, who are typically

# “ Law enforcement agencies appear to re-equip more rapidly than militaries.”

## Box 2 Not all firearms are the same

Because their deadly capabilities vary greatly, specific types of armament matter at least as much as—and sometimes arguably even more than—simple quantities of firearms. With types of firearms in police service changing in many countries, law enforcement fire power also appears to be escalating. The Small Arms Survey global estimate of law enforcement firearms does not systematically distinguish weapons by type, but the importance of this aspect is too important to overlook.

A major shift in policing came in the 1980s, when law enforcement agencies that had not done so before began to switch from revolvers to pistols. In the 1990s police increasingly invested in high-calibre weapons (Gobinet, 2011, p. 74; Small Arms Survey, 2004, p. 57): semi- and fully automatic rifles, previously reserved for special units, began to appear among local police in larger numbers in this period (Wagner, 2008).

Assault rifles and sub-machine guns are no longer exceptional police armament; instead they are part of a global trend of police militarization (Wood, 2014). The process is partially documented in the United States, where the US Department of Defense transferred 90,365 weapons—mostly assault rifles—to local police forces in recent years (Harris et al., 2017, p. 295). US local police forces are also buying heavier weapons on their own (Iannelli, 2016). Other examples can be found around the world. In Germany, for example, city police forces are replacing sub-machine guns (which use pistol ammunition) with higher-calibre semi-automatic assault rifles (Moss, 2018). In Nicaragua, police reported in 2006 they had 4,795 pistols and 3,795 shotguns and rifles, the latter mostly North Korean Type 68 AKM assault rifles (Montes, 2011, p. 61).

responsible for law enforcement in the countryside. Gendarmes are often armed like light infantry, with machine guns and light armoured vehicles (Gobinet, 2008). A gendarmerie rate of 1.8 small arms per sworn officer is reasonable unless otherwise documented.

A great many police forces have considerably fewer firearms. Lower levels of police arming often reflect limited financial resources, but can also be a matter of choice. The best-known example is England and Wales, where less than 5 per cent of police are armed; that is, 5,647 out of 124,066 police officers in 2015 (Gov.uk, 2016).

There is a great deal of confusion in public discussions about the 19 countries and territories sometimes said to have ‘unarmed police officers’ or which ‘do not routinely arm their police forces’, such as Fiji, Ireland, Malawi, Norway, and Scotland (Fox, 2017; McCarthy, 2017). While most police in these 19 countries and territories normally do not carry firearms, nearly all these countries and territories stock firearms for police use or maintain specialized armed units (Small Arms Survey, 2018).

Unarmed policing appears to be becoming rarer, apparently in response to the need to match more powerful firearms in criminal hands and to counter terrorism. For example, the Solomon Islands and American Samoa began to acquire police firearms in 2013 and 2014, respectively (ABC, 2013; RNZ, 2014). China is the largest example of a country where police, most of whom previously kept firearms stored for emergencies, have begun to patrol with them as well (Associated Press, 2014).

## Whose weapons?

In some countries and territories, police buy their own weapons. Ecuador was—and still may be—an example of a country where the state provides some weapons—apparently heavier equipment like sub-machine guns and automatic rifles—while individual officers can be responsible for acquiring their own personal

weapons (Karp, 2009). Officers in many countries routinely carry a back-up gun, such as a small pistol; such weapons tend to be their personal property and are not counted in this Briefing Paper. As private property that their owners are free to keep or sell, these firearms are legally civilian guns, but confusion on this point is hard to avoid.

Law enforcement agencies also may maintain significant inventories of *evidentiary weapons* that have been seized by police and are kept for judicial purposes (Karp, 2015, p. 99). While such weapons are not part of active arsenals, they might be counted in agency totals, although they usually should not be considered together with active service weapons.

## Accounting for procurement

Law enforcement agencies appear to re-equip more rapidly than militaries. Because their weapons are carried continuously, they are exposed to greater stress and typically do not last as long as military or privately owned firearms. An automatic rifle in military use can last for several generations, but police often replace handguns every ten to 15 years. In 2012, for example, the Philippines National Police allocated PHP 1.2 billion (approximately USD 24 million) to purchase 60,000 Glock pistols, to be followed by a second purchase of 26,000 in 2017 (GMA News Online, 2012).

All law enforcement firearms totals are snapshots, accurate when they were reported at best. Changes—usually expansion—can come quickly and require careful monitoring. The effect is especially clear when new forces are created. A few years after it was established, in 2009 the South Sudan Police Service averaged 0.3 small arms per police officer: 8,400 firearms shared among a force of 28,000 officers (Small Arms Survey, 2009, p. 8). This rose in 2012, the most recent year for which figures are available, to 50,000 firearms for 46,427 personnel, a ratio of 1.08 guns per officer (King, 2014, pp. 2, 5; Small Arms Survey, 2012).



Police officer on duty during protests in Nairobi, Kenya, January 2008. Source: Roberto Schmidt/AFP Photo

## Conclusion: the imperative to update

The state of research on law enforcement armament makes it hard to say whether global police weapons inventories are increasing or decreasing. The quantity of weapons and type of armament of law enforcement agencies change continuously. While it is typically assumed that the number of officers increases as national population and wealth grow, the number of police can drop in times of austerity, as shown by the example of England and Wales (BBC, 2016). Whether declining personnel totals are accompanied by corresponding reductions in firearm numbers is less clear.

As the country totals and research methods reviewed here show, great progress has been made since the last time this exercise was undertaken. Reported firearms totals make up more of the overall picture; estimates less. Greater willingness by governments to report their law enforcement firearms totals makes possible innovations like the reported regional averages given in Table 4. Where estimates are unavoidable, every effort has been made to rest them on stronger foundations.

Further reducing the role of estimation requires greater transparency by governments and careful research. Lack of data on the armament of smaller law enforcement agencies is a problem everywhere. Some regions also remain opaque. Little is known, for example, about domestic security agencies in much of Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Even in other regions where the agencies and their sizes are known, their armament levels must still often be estimated. While it is tempting for research to concentrate on easy cases, when researching law enforcement firearms these elusive cases deserve no less attention—and possibly more. ●

## Notes

- 1 This Briefing Paper defines firearms in accordance with the list of ‘small arms’ contained in the International Tracing Instrument (UNGA, 2005, para. 4(a)). Therefore, certain light weapons falling outside this definition of a firearm, such as heavy machine guns and grenade launchers, are not included systematically in the global or country totals for law enforcement firearms. However, due to idiosyncratic national reporting procedures and definitions, firearms that are

classified as light weapons under the International Tracing Instrument might be included in some country totals. Further, the term ‘firearms’ does not include the following due to a lack of reliable data: sniper rifles; light weapons; major weapons systems like armoured personnel carriers; and less-lethal weapons like batons, riot control gas, smoke grenades, water cannon, and Tasers.

- 2 Each of the three Small Arms Survey firearms data sets covers a different number of states and territories, depending on the unit of analysis and data availability. Civilian data covers 230 states and autonomous territories. Law enforcement data was available for 230 states and autonomous territories. Military firearms are presented for 177 states with formal military forces.
- 3 Only 15 of these examples are shown in Table 3 of this Briefing Paper. All 28 are shown in Small Arms Survey (2018).

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