

Global Deaths from Firearms: Searching for Plausible Estimates

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Abstract: Activists and academics supportive of restrictive firearms laws often claim that half a million deaths worldwide annually are caused by firearms, or by small arms and light weapons. Although widely repeated, the factoid has no empirical basis. Annual wartimes deaths from firearms in war are closer to 100,000 than to the asserted 300,000. Annual non-war deaths are closer to 50,000 than to the asserted 200,000. Simplistic repetition of the 500,000 factoid obscures important policy issues, including the legitimacy of using firearms to resist lone criminals or criminal governments.

Advocates of firearms prohibition and other restrictive laws often state that every year around the world, five hundred thousand people are killed by small arms and light weapons (SALW)^[1] – most of which are owned by civilians. According to Jayantha Dhanapala, U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, “Small arms are responsible for over half a million deaths per year, including 300,000 in armed conflicts and 200,000 more from homicides and suicides.” Indeed, the figure is ubiquitous in the public statements of international activists.^[2] For example, Neil Arya, president of Physicians for Global Survival, repeated this claim in pronouncing his prescription for a safer world: “Whole classes of weapons could be banned from civilian possession,” and we must promote “international norms that stigmatise the possession of guns.”^[3]

The statistic of half a million people killed by “firearms” or by SALW is perhaps the most widely-cited statistic by advocates of international weapons control. Such advocates promise that disarming civilians will dramatically reduce these deaths, whereas government-owned weapons are not a concern; according to Aaron Karp, it “seems clear that state-owned small arms -- those of the armed forces, police, and other government agencies -- are neither the most numerous nor the ones most likely to be used.”^[4] Thus, Sami Faltas of the Bonn International Center for Conversion, Germany argues that “it is the exclusive responsibility of the government to control the supply of small arms.”^[5]

When one carefully examines the data behind the “500,000” factoid, however, the issue appears more complex. First of all, as we detail below, the data simply do not support the “half a million” factoid. The factoid has gained strength through repetition, but following the factoid to its origin leads to the same observation that Gertrude Stein reportedly made about Oakland: “There’s no there there.”

Moreover, the simplistic agglomeration of all SALW into a single total, with all deaths in that total presumed to be caused by overabundance of firearms in civilian hands, serves to short-circuit consideration of some essential policy issues on firearms control. For example, how many deaths from “armed conflicts” are the result of aggression against civilians by governments and government agents? How many of these deaths result from resistance to government abuse by innocent citizens fighting to protect their human rights? How many of the (supposedly) 200,000

deaths from homicides and suicides in “peaceful”^[6] countries would have been prevented if civilian access to small arms could be reduced, or even eliminated?

I. The Statistics of Armed Conflict

A. How Many Deaths Annually?

Obtaining an accurate assessment of the number of deaths from armed conflicts is a difficult task. Monty Marshall, the compiler of “Major Episodes of Political Violence: 1946-1999,”^[7] acknowledged: “The numbers listed here reflect the median or mean of often widely disparate estimates listed in the various sources and are provided solely as a referent point.”

It is often claimed that, in the decade of the 1990s, in excess of 300,000 deaths resulted each year from “armed conflicts” around the world.^{[8].[9].[10]} What is the source of this statistic?

According to *Human Development Report 2002*, published for the United Nations Development Programme,^[11] “Nearly 3.6 million people were killed in wars within states in the 1990s.”^[12] Marshall^[13] is cited as the source reference, with calculations on Marshall’s data performed by the Human Development Report Office.

Our examination of Marshall’s data reveals approximately 1.5 million deaths from conflicts that started in the 1990s. Marshall does not provide annual estimates; instead, he reports only the total estimate of war deaths for each conflict. The remaining 2.1 million that comprise the 3.6 million figure are presumed to represent deaths from conflicts that began earlier than 1990, but continued into the decade.

The problem of deriving accurate annual mortality data for those earlier conflicts is complicated by the fact that the number of deaths from any particular conflict is not evenly distributed; one cannot simply pro-rate the deaths of any single conflict equally throughout the duration of that conflict.

So how did U.N. statisticians arrived at their figure of 3.6 million deaths for the decade of the 1990s? We inquired of the U.N.’s Development Programme Office for clarification of the methods used in their statistical analysis, but have not yet received their promised report.

The second figure presented to us comes from the *World Report on Violence and Health* (a publication of the World Health Organization). That is an annual figure of 310,000 deaths per year, the “Estimated mortality caused by war-related injuries.”^[14] Since equally pro-rating the 3.6 million deaths would yield an annual figure of 360,000 deaths, rather than the figure of 310,000 deaths, some statistical weighting appears to have been given to deaths that occurred earlier in the decade. But the *Report* does not disclose the methods used, and we believe that the figure arrived at for the end of the decade appears to be an overestimate.

In Marshall's tabulation of political violence, he identified 61 armed conflicts that commenced between 1990 and 1999; these resulted in 1,542,500 deaths. Examination of the data by 5-year intervals reveals that 38 armed conflicts commenced between 1990 and 1994. These resulted in 1,273,500 deaths, and accounted for 82.6% of the total deaths that occurred in the 1990s from armed conflicts that commenced during that decade.

In the latter half of the decade (1995-1999), only 23 armed conflicts commenced, resulting in an additional 269,000 deaths. Thus, only 37.7% of armed conflicts occurred during the last 5 years of the decade, and these conflicts accounted for only about 17.4% of the total deaths that occurred in the 1990s from armed conflicts that commenced during that decade. (Admittedly, not all deaths from these armed conflicts would have been tallied by the time Marshall's paper was published, making it likely that the total would be a little higher.)

Other researchers have noted a dramatic decline in the number and magnitude of armed conflicts in the late 1990s.^[15] A statistical analysis that does not take this trend into account will result in a gross overestimation of annual deaths, when applied to the current decade. Gurr predicted a continuation of this decline,^[16] suggesting a shift away from confrontation and toward accommodation: "the trends are there: a sharp decline in new ethnic wars, the settlement of many old ones, and proactive efforts by states and international organizations to recognize group rights."

We take note of the fact that the U.N. lowered its total figure in 2001 for "estimated mortality caused by war-related injuries" to 229,598,^[17] down from the earlier figure of 310,000 attributed to the year 2000.^[18] But we believe this to be still an inflated figure.^[19]

B. Are All War Deaths Caused by Firearms?

Anyone with even a little knowledge of military history knows that wartime deaths come from many different causes, including bombers, fighter planes, tanks, heavy land-based artillery, and naval vessels. To state the obvious, none of the aforesaid sources of casualties are "small arms and light weapons." Tanks, destroyers, aircraft, and so on are anything but "small" or "light." Yet astonishingly, the U.N. claims that *all* the 300,000 annual deaths from armed conflict are due to small arms and light weapons.^[20]

This preposterous claim has important policy implications. Recall the assertions of firearms prohibitionists, cited at the beginning of this paper, that SALW deaths are mostly caused by the fact that firearms are possessed by people other than the government. But heavy weaponry and other non-SALW weapons (e.g., heavy artillery, naval vessels with immense cannons, air force bombers and fighters, chemical warfare agents) are owned almost exclusively by governments. It is entirely illogical to attribute to "firearms" or SALW the huge number of casualties caused by government possession and use of bombers, battleships, and chemical weapons.

Cukier noted that "the deaths in armed conflicts are not differentiated according to the instrument of death as they are in other contexts."^[21] Even so, there is no defensible reason for assuming

that SALW (or, according to some advocates, “firearms”) are the only cause of wartime death. Conflicts for which records data exist plainly show that much less than 100 percent of war deaths are caused by bullets.

For example, deaths for those killed in action from small arms during World War II have been estimated to be 31.9 percent; the corresponding estimate from the Korean War is 33.0 percent.^[22] In Vietnam, “gun-shot or small arms fire” resulted in 31.8 percent of the casualties.^[23] This is confirmed by statistics from the International Committee of the Red Cross.^[24] Military scholar James Dunnigan suggests that firearms casualty rates in some modern conflicts in Africa or the Kashmir may be as high as fifty percent.^[25]

Using the highest estimate available (Dunnigan’s fifty percent) in conjunction with the latest WHO estimates of annual war deaths (230,000) leads to about 115,000 annual deaths from firearms in war, worldwide. This is quite different from the oft-quoted figure of 300,000.

II. Does Disarming Civilians Empower Murderous Governments?

Would world-wide civilian disarmament prevent the approximately 115,000 (not 300,000) deaths which are caused by firearms? We suggest just the opposite: disarming civilians may not only fail to reduce violence, but may place vulnerable populations at even greater risk of death and injury.

A. Genocide

In *Why Genocide?*, Mazian states: “Genocide is so massive in scope that it cannot be accomplished without a high level of advanced planning and organization.”^[26] Thus, civilians by themselves can very rarely perpetrate genocide; a strong central authority (i.e. government) is required to provide the structure that Mazian deems essential. Harff and Gurr concur: “By our definition, genocides and politicides are the promotion and execution of policies by a *state or its agents* which result in the deaths of a substantial portion of a group.”^[27]

However, Rwanda’s genocide has been used as a dramatic example of the misuse of firearms by civilians. For example, in *Small Arms Survey 2001*, the authors declare: “It is not only the availability of arms -- it is the arms themselves that condition violence.”^[28] The authors implicate the vast number of small arms and other weapons sold to the Rwandan government as the cause of the genocide there, noting: “just before the killing began, peacekeepers estimated that 85 tons of weapons . . . [were] distributed throughout the country.”^[29]

The insinuation was that mobs of armed civilians were crazed by their proximity to edged weapons, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, assault rifles, sub-machine guns, and millions of rounds of ammunition, and commenced killing each other. But such a scenario perversely redefines the events that occurred. The reality in Rwanda was that firearms and other weapons

were not evenly available to all segments of the population. The victim segment was defenseless and weaponless -- previously disarmed by laws enacted in 1964 and 1979. The firearms and machetes were purchased by the government, and issued by the government only to the police, the army, and "trusted civilians."^[30] Had the victims been better armed -- for the price of a chicken^[31] or a goat^[32] -- a village (and all its women and children) might have been saved. The genocide in Rwanda might have been averted, or at least the magnitude of the violence might have been mitigated.

Between 1991-1994, at least 200,000 people died in Eastern Europe, the result of political violence after the breakup of the former Republic of Yugoslavia. With the Serb military possessing most of the weapons, and the Serb leaders now on trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia at The Hague,^[33] the assumption is more reasonable that those deaths were committed by the warring armies, and not by individual civilians.^[34] Again, the U.N. classified the calamity as a genocide,^[35] and this statistic comprises part of the deaths attributed to "armed conflicts."

It is misleading to include genocide statistics in the category of armed conflict, especially if the effect is to shift the blame for these deaths to armed civilians. Genocide -- almost exclusively a creature of government--certainly does not prove the case that civilians need to be disarmed. To the contrary, almost every genocide in the last century was carried out by armed governments against disarmed civilian populations. The actual behavior of governments over the last century suggests that an armed populace may be an important deterrent to genocide.^[36]

B. Armed Resistance to Kleptocracy

One of the risk factors enumerated by the World Health Organization for "collective violence" is "the ready availability of small arms or other weapons in the general population."^[37] But often, it has been government abuse that has precipitated insurgences. We regret the many deaths that resulted from the American Revolution, which would not have been possible without widespread possession of arms by American civilians. However, as the Declaration of Independence explains, the Americans had a right to attempt an armed revolution, after all attempts to redress their grievances peacefully had failed. Likewise, the Greeks had a right to revolt against the Ottoman Empire, and other freedom-seeking peoples throughout the centuries have had a right to fight for their own freedom. To classify the deaths from legitimate wars of national liberation (against tyrants, foreign or domestic) as one of the problems caused by small arms, and as a problem which should be eliminated by more stringent international weapons laws, is to say that no tyrant should ever again be overthrown by an armed populace.

Let us consider a few examples of some of the kleptocracies which amount to little more than well-organized gangs of robbers^[38]; these gangs steal far more from "their" people than George III or the Caliphate took from the Americans and the Greeks.

On the island of Bougainville in the South Pacific, the government of Papua New Guinea appropriated territory containing a valuable deposit of copper.^[39] In that conflict, 1,000 people

died^[40] as a direct result of war. (The PNG government instituted a military blockade of the island, and it is estimated that 15,000- 20,000 Bougainvilleans -- 10% of the population -- died as a direct result of the blockade.^[41])

It is noteworthy that the Bougainvillean insurgents were armed only with knives and spear-guns when the rebellion began, and had no access to the world's black market; they were not "awash" in guns. It was neither civilian possession of firearms, nor "proliferation" of firearms via the black market, that initiated and fueled this conflict; the precipitating factor was outrage against kleptocracy.

In the Indonesian province of Aceh, violence from rebellion against the Indonesian government has lasted 26 years. Again, the root cause of the conflict has not been the presence of firearms, but instead, the government theft of the resources of the people.^[42] To date, an estimated ten thousand civilians have died as a result. A BBC reporter interviewed Indonesian Brigadier General Djali Yusaf in April 2002, and asked him: "Does the military intend to kill every last Acehnese?" The general's reply was, "Not every last Acehnese. But we will do what we have to do."^[43] Of significance is the fact that civilian deaths have dropped sharply since Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri decided to allow the local Aceh government to retain 70 percent of the province's oil and gas revenues.^[44]

Thirty years ago in Sri Lanka, government oppression of the minority Tamil group prompted peaceful sit-ins. When government responded with violence, civilians had no choice but to arm and rebel. The civil war that ensued has claimed sixty-thousand casualties on both sides of the conflict.^[45]

Ten years ago, fighting broke out in Sudan. Government theft of petroleum resources has been the major cause of a conflict that has directly killed an estimated 100,000 people, with 2 million dead from all causes.^[46] Peace remains elusive; it was recently reported that "government soldiers and militia forces had launched surprise attacks on the rebel-held town of Tam" in violation of a peace agreement signed earlier.

In Ivory Coast, the cause of the latest rebellion against government there might outwardly appear to be the "proliferation of firearms," leading to armed gangs of poor youths following local warlords. But the cause is much more mundane: laws enacted by the government of Ivory Coast have disenfranchised 30 percent of the populace, creating a pool of fear and resentment with no outlet short of violent rebellion.^[47]

What would *you* do if you saw your own children being marginalized and their freedom plundered? Would you rise up in "armed conflict" with no guarantee of prevailing, knowing that you and your own children might die? Or, would you surrender your weapons and trust to government not to kill them? Is violence in defense of one's children a reasonable and moral option? The implicit answer of the organizations who want to eliminate small arms so as to eliminate resistance to tyranny is "no." We suggest that this answer is fundamentally incompatible with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and with the fact that many of the world's current "governments" are merely kleptocracies lacking popular consent or any other legitimate authority to govern.

As the Declaration of Independence observed, people do not readily rise up against their government. But if we are going to look for the causes of lives lost as a result of resistance to government, we need to recognize that the root cause is government tyranny, rather than civilian possession of the means of resistance.

III. Firearm Deaths in “Peaceful Countries”

A. No Data Support a Claim of 200,000 Non-war Firearms Deaths

We are told that, each year, there are over 200,000 deaths in “peaceful countries” from small arms and light weapons, but we are never given the raw data to substantiate the claim. Not only has this figure been incorrectly subdivided into homicide and suicide, but the exact percentages of each are not known and estimates vary widely. According to the *World Report on Violence and Health* (2002), the most current data available (tabulated from 45 countries, with almost all of the data taken from the very late 1990s) show an annual number of firearm-related homicides of 44,862.^[48]

Total Annual Firearm-related Deaths: 44,862

Total Suicides 25,632

Total Homicides 16,607

Total Firearm Suicides + Homicides 42,239

Firearm Deaths from other causes 2,623

This leaves 155,138 firearm deaths, worldwide, unaccounted for, annually. Where do they come from? If they come from all the countries not included in the list of 45 designated in the *World Report*, where are the data from these other countries? If they are available, why do they not appear in the *World Report*? If the sources from which these missing data were significant, would not the figures be published? According to Kara McGee of the WHO^[49] “In terms of firearms mortality, I believe the most recent data is what is in the World Report on Violence and Health.”^[50]

There is a second source of data that WHO has used in the past.^[51] That WHO report contained fully aggregated data from a 52-country dataset, and contradicted information in the 2002 *World Report*. When we asked for a comment on this contradiction, no response was forthcoming from Dr. Kenji Shibuya of the Global Programme on Evidence for Health Policy at the World Health Organization, who is the lead researcher for much of this information.

We asked WHO for an account of the methodology used to estimate the global annual figure they state as 200,000 homicides and suicides, based on the known total of annual firearm-related

deaths of 44,862, given in Table A.10 of the 2002 *World Report*. But no answer to that question was forthcoming, either.

However, Dr. Shibuya^[52] did state: “the WHO’s estimate was solely based on the limited data from 45 countries where good vital registration records were available for ‘intentional and unintentional injuries (including homicides and suicides) caused by fire arms’ . . . the estimate is very conservative and there is certainly an underestimation of mortality due to fire arms globally (i.e., we are missing the data in other 147 member states).”

In view of the persistent and unanswered questions about the sources of cited data and the methodology used in their analyses, it is impossible to assess the credibility of those data and the validity of the conclusions drawn from them. Accordingly, using these data to extrapolate to a figure of 200,000 non-war firearms deaths seems to be scientifically questionable. The 200,000 figure appears to be almost a pure guesstimate, and not an especially reliable one.

B. Extrapolation from Existing Data Cannot Support a Claim of 200,000

It would be ideal if the WHO would explain – either in its own publications, or in response to questions from researchers -- how the leap is made from about 45,000 non-war firearms deaths in 45 countries to about 200,000 such deaths world-wide. In the absence of such an explanation from WHO, we offer some data suggesting that an extrapolation of this magnitude is quite implausible.

According to *Small Arms Survey 2002*, there are an estimated 638,900,000 firearms globally.^[53] There are more than 250,000,000 guns in America,^[54] with about 98 percent of these in private hands.^[55] The *Small Arms Survey* estimates that globally, civilians possess about 378 million arms. Thus, the U.S. possesses about 2/3 of the total global supply of civilian firearms.

According to Table A.10 of WHO’s *World Report*, the U.S. accounts for 68.7% non-war firearm fatalities. The remaining 32.2% of the known firearm fatalities come from the other 44 countries listed. Considering that many of the other countries listed are prosperous countries with relatively high rates of gun ownership (e.g., Canada, Australia, France, Italy), it seems clear that the 45 countries in Table A.10 account for an overwhelming share of the world’s civilian gun ownership. Table A.10 does not include Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia—three countries with very high rates of firearms homicide, and very restrictive gun laws. But it seems implausible to claim that countries which hold only a tiny fraction of the world’s civilian firearms account for *over three times* as many non-war firearms deaths as do the countries possessing the vast majority of civilian guns.

On the other hand, if evidence were presented that a very few countries with a small percentage of the world’s total gun supply account for a grossly disproportionate share of firearms homicides, the result would suggest that firearms *per se* are not a problem; rather, social conditions in a few unusual countries would be the root cause.

Nowhere have we found a justification for the factoid of 200,000 firearms deaths in “peaceful” countries. It is a fiction without foundation, and no responsible scholar or policy advocate should use it.

C. Suicides

Non-war deaths from firearms in peaceful countries amount to more than 45,000 annually, and very likely to fewer than 100,000. To what extent would the prohibition policies favored by some scholars and advocates save these lives? Let us consider the various major forms of firearms mortality.

According to the *World Report on Violence and Health*, 57.1 percent of the 44,862 firearm-related deaths result from suicides. How many suicides would actually be prevented through civilian disarmament?

Many researchers have concluded that total suicide rates remain the same regardless of which lethal instruments are accessible. An editorial in the 1999 *British Medical Journal* reiterated this, noting that “systematic reviews have found that no interventions have reliably been shown to prevent suicide.”^[56]

In contrast, the WHO argues that no substitution occurs when one lethal means of suicide is removed. Among the studies cited is a 1972 article from the *British Journal of Preventive and Social Medicine*; the *World Report* authors state: “In England, suicides from poisoning with domestic gas began to decline soon after carbon monoxide was removed from domestic gas.”^[57] However, in 1989, David Lester (a researcher WHO cites extensively but selectively) noted: “it now appears that the rate of suicide using car exhaust fumes eventually began to rise, suggesting that those who might have used domestic gas now use car exhaust for suicide.”^[58]

According to WHO, “fencing in high bridges” and “limiting access to the roofs and high exteriors of tall buildings”^[59] will reduce total suicide deaths.^[60] Also according to WHO, reducing access to firearms will reduce total suicide mortality. Yet as Lester noted in 2000 (another finding ignored by WHO), “as firearms became less common in Canada from 1970 to 1995, possibly as a result of the passage of a strict firearm control law in 1977, the use of firearms for suicide and homicide became less common, while the use of other methods became more commonplace. This might indicate that people switched methods for suicide and homicide.”^[61]

In 2001, Killias^[62] used international data to examine the question of substitution. He concluded: “The results show very strong correlations between the presence of guns in the home and suicide committed with a gun . . . [however] no significant correlations with total suicide or homicide rates were found, leaving open the question of possible substitution effects.” Kleck’s extensive analysis of U.S. and international data comes to the same conclusion.^[63]

Despite the findings of Lester, Killias, and Kleck, some scholars might argue that—at least in some marginal cases—removal of one means of suicide might result in a net saving of lives. It hardly seems plausible, however, for WHO to claim that eliminating firearms would eliminate *all* firearms suicides. The best evidence seems to suggest that total firearms prohibition would have, at most, a marginal effect on the total number of lives lost through the main form of non-war firearms deaths.

D. Criminal Homicide

According to the *World Report on Violence and Health*, 37.0 percent of the 44,862 firearm-related deaths are the result of homicide. Undoubtedly, some homicides which are currently perpetrated with firearms would, in the absence of firearms, be perpetrated with edged weapons, clubs, bare hands, and so on. It is reasonable to suggest that at least some firearms homicides might not be replaced with other homicides, if firearms were not available. The scenario is especially plausible when the homicide is perpetrated by a physically weak person who would not be able to overcome his adversary in hand-to-hand combat (e.g., a scrawny 15-year-old who shoots a store owner during a robbery).

Just as a relatively small number of criminal governments (e.g., Stalin's USSR, Mao's China, Hitler's Germany, and some others) are responsible for almost all genocide deaths, a small number of criminal civilians are responsible for most firearms homicides. It would be illogical and unfair to disarm every government because a few depraved governments used their weapons to perpetrate genocide. It would be equally inappropriate to disarm every civilian because a tiny fraction of hardened criminals use firearms to perpetrate homicide.

Although homicides are occasionally committed by people who have no prior criminal record, the criminological literature is replete with evidence that, overwhelmingly, the most accurate predictor of violent behavior is previous major violent behavior.^[64] The promise of reduced murder rates through disarming the non-violent segment of society is a false one, because, while it is possible to disarm the law-abiding, it is much more difficult to disarm criminals – particularly criminals with access to the black market.

The prohibition of firearms would, at least in the United States, raise enforcement issues and social conflicts at least as profound as those resulting from drug prohibition. An examination of the failures of drug prohibition underscores the challenge of gun prohibition, and also offers an alternative strategy for reducing homicide.

A 1999 U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) report notes that most of the violent crime and firearm-related homicides occur in small, circumscribed areas called “hotspots,” often limited to just “a small number of city blocks.”^[65] The DOJ explains that “The risk of being killed is 60 times greater among young gang members than in the general population and in some cities, far higher.” For example, in a small area in St. Louis, Missouri, researchers reported that the youth gang homicide rate is 1,000 times higher than the U.S. homicide rate.^[66]

Rather focusing (as Cukier and others urge) on disarming the non-criminal segment of society, perhaps we should more closely examine these relatively few inner-city blocks. Most of the victims and perpetrators in these hotspots resemble each other: young, urban males involved in gangs and in the black market drug trade. Blumstein suggested that they carry firearms for protection and to resolve territorial disputes.^[67] Miron explained: “In a black market, participants cannot resolve commercial disputes using lawsuits or battle over market share using advertising; they are thus likely to use violence instead. This means that the prohibition of drugs potentially causes increased levels of violence, even if prohibition reduces drug use and drug use itself causes violence.”^[68]

Blumstein^[69] describes 18,600 “excess murders” (the increase in the number of homicides committed between 1986 and 1992 by youths in the age group 15-22) resulting from introduction of crack cocaine and the increasingly vigorous enforcement of drug laws. He demonstrated how we can drive the homicide rate up or down in stating that “the increase in the juvenile homicide rate is a direct consequence of the operation of drug markets and their criminalization.”

How would the elimination of the “war on drugs” -- or even the elimination of drug prohibition laws entirely -- affect the homicide rate? We know that fear of violation of the law is a deterrent that may prevent some drug use, but we also know that illegal drugs are available from the middle school years and up. If we re-legalize drugs, and remove the legal deterrent effect against drug use, would we see an increase of drug overdose deaths that would more than balance the decrease we could expect in Blumstein’s “excess murders?” Is it moral for a government to protect potential drug abusers from their own folly, at the price of the lives of some people who do not abuse drugs? The end of alcohol prohibition in the United States substantially lowered the homicide rate, while allowing an increase in deaths to alcohol abuse, such as from liver cirrhosis. If the United States made the right choice with respect to alcohol prohibition, would the same choice be right with respect to drug prohibition?

Alternatively, homicide reduction via gun prohibition faces several serious obstacles. First, as noted above, some but not all firearms homicides would be replaced by other homicides. Second, as discussed above, the general disarmament of the vast majority of the civilian population does little to reduce firearms homicide, because it does not touch the tiny percentage of hard-core criminals in the population who perpetrate most firearms homicides. Third, near-total gun prohibition in Jamaica and elsewhere has been an abject and counterproductive failure – and is likely to remain so as long as governments possess firearms (which can re-supply the black markets) and civilians possess workshop tools (which can also re-supply firearms to willing buyers).^[70]

E. Justifiable Firearm Deaths

Is there a moral or social value distinction between the following two acts?

- ?? Two robbers take the money being carried by a pair of children, and then kill the children so as to eliminate witnesses;

?? A policeman sees the above robbery-murder taking place, and shoots the two robbers just before the children would have been killed.

In both cases, there are two homicide victims. According to the law of every civilized country, the first scenario is a criminal homicide, while the second scenario is a justifiable homicide. The homicides in the second scenario were net gains for society; it was better for the two robber-murderers to die than for the two innocent children to die.

The “200,000 firearm death” factoid, however, fails to distinguish justifiable homicides from criminal ones. This is a distinction of large importance in the United States, where, by some estimates, 5-13% of total homicides are legal defensive homicides by civilians—about four times higher than the rate of lawful defensive homicides by police.^[71]

Homicide data for the United States are quite detailed compared to data from most other countries, so it is understandable that there are transnational statistics for justifiable homicides by civilians or police. However, the failure of firearms prohibition advocates to acknowledge that a non-insignificant number of firearms homicides are the result of justifiable defense of self or others (by civilians or by police) suggests a hostility to such lawful defensive measures. The public, however, cannot be well-informed when given statistics which put drive-by shootings in the same category as resistance to gang rape.

Firearms prohibition advocates tend to see few problems with guns in government hands, and to ascribe firearms misuse to non-government guns. In the context of homicide data, this position is doubly wrong. First, it ignores the fact that in many countries, a very large fraction of the homicides are perpetrated by the police or the government. Second, in some of these countries, many of the police or government homicides may be murders, rather than legitimate law enforcement. For both reasons, it is incorrect to include such homicides in the “200,000” firearms deaths which would supposedly be prevented by disarming civilians in “peaceful” countries.

For example, in 1995, the *New York Times* reported that the Nigerian military had been involved in what amounted to a war against its own people who happened to live atop oil reserves in the Niger River Delta.^[72] The peaceful community had become angered and politically active because of environmental degradation and pollution of their land, stemming from careless oil recovery by Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria, in contract with the Nigerian government. The landowners who were not compensated had nevertheless refrained from violence. The *New York Times* described “repeated attacks on Ogoni villagers, gang rapes of women and burning of homes”. One Nigerian soldier stated: “When we arrived, they told us to shoot everyone who crossed our path . . . I followed my orders . . .” More recently, soldiers attacked a village in Benue State and killed more than 200 unarmed civilians.^[73] In Nigeria’s capital city of Lagos in the year 2000, as many as 387 people were killed by police.^[74]

Jamaica's rate of lethal police shootings of civilians is among the highest in the world. At 5.38 per 100,000 population, the homicide-by-police rate is higher than *the overall homicide rate* in many American states, and in most European nations.^[75]

“Up to 90% of people shot dead in Kenya last year were victims of police” reported the BBC News.^[76] The story noted that during the last five years, Kenyan police have killed more people than private criminals have killed victims.

Extrajudicial killings have been reported in countries as diverse as India^[77] and Nepal.^[78] In Papua New Guinea, “paramilitary police fired automatic weapons at protesters.”^[79] In the Dominican Republic, hundreds of people are killed by security forces each year,^[80] just as they are in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.^[81]

We do not know how many of these were really criminals, or how many were mistaken for criminals, or how many were victims of police vendettas. In any case, a policy of prohibiting civilian guns while ignoring government guns is ill-suited to reducing the significant number of firearms deaths caused by governments in “peaceful” countries.

Conclusion

People around the world rely on the United Nations and the World Health Organization for reliable data about health issues. By extensively publicizing a figure of 500,000 annual deaths due to SALW/firearms, the UN and the WHO have not lived up to their responsibility to supply the public with reliable data. Gun prohibition advocates and supportive academics have been complicit in the dissemination of a factoid which is not in any way empirically supportable. The underlying data on which the UN/WHO 500,000 factoid is constructed suggest that the actual number of annual worldwide firearms deaths is perhaps 200,000 or less.

Responsible researchers share their data with other researchers, and explain the procedures they use to process those data. Only with such transparency can conclusions and policy implications be debated in a rational, objective manner. Unfortunately, WHO's violence data^[82] are quite opaque. They are not broken down country-by-country, or by instrumentality. No other details are accessible.

Many governments of U.N. members have been affected by armed conflict.^[83] Many of those involved rebellion by civilians. It is easy to understand why the non-democratic governments which comprise a majority of the General Assembly might wish to prevent forceful challenges to incumbent governments. Yet as Zwi points: “there are occasions when such conflicts yield desirable social change, such as the anti-colonial struggles, or where they are necessary for protecting the victims of inequitable social and political processes.” The incessant repetition of the “500,000” factoid by the UN/WHO and their allied NGOs and academics ignores this essential moral point – a point which is crucial to resistance to tyranny, to deterrence of genocide, and to reduction of murder-by-police.

Small arms in the hands of civilians do not cause 500,000 “needless” deaths each year. Firearms prohibition would prevent only a small fraction of deaths caused by civilian-owned firearms. Firearms prohibition would worsen the balance of power between oppressive governments and victim populations.