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85% of world's 1bn firearms held by civilians, study shows

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As many as 85 percent of the world's one billion legal and illicit firearms are held by civilians – far exceeding the number of those held by modern armed forces and law enforcement agencies, a Swiss-based think tank revealed.

There are roughly one billion firearms in the world, and the vast majority of them are in civilian – not military – hands, according to a [new study](#) by a think tank in Switzerland.

The Small Arms Survey, which provides research and expertise on weapons proliferation and armed violence, examined the ownership of automatic pistols and revolvers, rifles, carbines, assault rifles and sub- and light-machine guns, held by civilian, military and law enforcement entities.

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A total of 857 million firearms, both legal and illicit, are estimated to be held by civilians, including individuals, private security companies, non-state armed groups and gangs. The US topped the list of heaviest-armed nations, with its citizens possessing 393 million weapons. The figure means that there are roughly 121 guns for every 100 Americans.

Trailing far behind their American counterparts are Indians, who own 71 million guns, and the Chinese, who possess over 49 million firearms.

*"The key to the United States, of course, is its unique gun culture,"* said Aaron Karp, the author of the study. Americans, the study notes, are inclined to own arms converted from military variants.

*"As of 2016, 42.3 percent of hunters and shooters were reported owning at least one AR15 platform (M16-style rifle) or semi-automatic assault weapon such as AR15- or Kalashnikov-style rifle,"* it says.

Discussions about gun control, mental health, and law enforcement powers have dominated public discourse in the US from time to time, quickly becoming relevant in light of mass shootings or gun-related violence. Some observers raised concerns over easy access to civilian-issue weapons in the United States.

*"It's insane, and you know, we license cars. You can't just get in a car and drive it,"* Dave Lindorff, an investigative journalist, told RT. *"But you can get a gun and shoot it. You don't need any training, you don't need any licensing,"* he added, referring to the *"nuttness"* of some state legislation allowing concealed carry.

Interestingly, the number of guns in military arsenals is far less impressive, the paper [shows](#). Stockpiles belonging to armed forces in 177 countries contained at least 133 million firearms. Russia, China, North Korea, Ukraine and the US combined have the largest stockpiles of small arms.

The Russian military possessed the largest military firearms arsenal (30.3 million), but announced the disposal of over 10 million weapons back in 2010, including four million Kalashnikov assault rifles, the Small Arms Survey stressed.

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Many military-owned firearms had made their way to non-state – and often illicit – markets, the researchers warned. Collapse of state authority, like the one that happened after the US-led 2003 invasion in Iraq, saw terrorist groupings seizing weapons from government arsenals.

Another 22.7 million firearms were held by law enforcement agencies worldwide, making up a tiny [two percent](#) of all small arms in the world. Whereas the US was dominant in civilian-gun ownership, the report said that the country was only fifth in law enforcement holdings, behind Russia, China, India and Egypt.

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