

peacekeepers to police slums distract these forces from fulfilling their mandates.

The dangers posed by small arms are well known. The UN describes these weapons as posing a "serious threat to peace."³⁸ Yet they remain disturbingly accessible: an estimated one in five schoolboys in the Caribbean carries a gun and belongs to a gang.³⁹ Major international efforts have sought to reduce the quantity of these weapons in circulation, control illicit transfers, and address demand to prevent their acquisition, particularly by children. Many initiatives have emerged to redress violence caused by small arms – broad-based NGO advocacy campaigns, International Gun Destruction Day (July 9), and performances by hip hop musicians whose lyrics cry out against gun use, to name a few. At all levels, from multilateral commitments right down to voluntary, community-based weapons collections, disarmament programs need to be deepened, strengthened, and strongly supported.

Kids: Nothing to do and nothing to lose

In some countries – including those that are not at war, such as Guatemala – the most common cause of death among youth is by firearms.⁴⁰ For children involved in organized armed gangs, the use of weaponry, the types of confrontations with state forces or rival groups, and the death tolls, are shockingly similar to those associated with war-affected countries. Children growing up in crowded households (a common feature of slums) spend more time on the streets, making them easy targets for gang recruitment. And, with nothing to do and nothing to lose, youth often perceive organized criminal gangs as appealing economic and social opportunities.

The average age for recruitment into urban gangs is between 11 and 14 years old. Every year, younger and younger children are recruited into gangs, provided with weapons, and paid to undertake violent criminal activities, often earning more than their parents. In many gangs, children make up a significant minority, or even a majority of the membership. In Medellín, an estimated 60% to 70% of gang members are children.⁴¹

The flourishing of lucrative drug trafficking in the past three decades has enabled gangs to become highly organized, expansive, and financially self-reliant entities. As such, they are better able to recruit more and more

³⁸ UN Programme of Action on the Illicit Trade of Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects (2001).

³⁹ USAID (2002).

⁴⁰ Winton (2004), p.86.

⁴¹ Dowdney (2003), p.182.