NOVEMBER 2024

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Firearms Trafficking in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Christopher Hernandez-Roy

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A Report of the CSIS Americas Program

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Executive Summary

Although only 8 percent of the world lives in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), the region accounts for a third of all homicides worldwide.[1] LAC cities consistently top international rankings as some of the most violent locales outside of active conflict zones. Behind this insecurity are powerful and deeply-entrenched transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) trafficking drugs and other illegal commodities, who in turn rely on a seemingly endless flow of illicit firearms to carry out their campaigns of violence and intimidation on the Western Hemisphere's inhabitants. Arms trafficking goes well beyond a law enforcement challenge; the proliferation of semi- and fully-automatic rifles, grenade launchers, and various high-caliber weapons are increasingly used by TCOs to hold at risk the very sovereignty of LAC governments. Stories from Mexico, Haiti, Ecuador, and beyond all underscore how the scourge of illicit weapons, and the groups who wield them, can plunge communities, and even whole countries, into violence.

Arms trafficking in LAC is also deeply intertwined with the United States. Most notably, the robust U.S. gun market and firearms industry has faced criticism and now direct legal challenges for allegedly helping to enable crime in LAC thanks to the "iron river" of weapons which flows across the U.S.-Mexico border illegally each year. In the Caribbean, some countries show that more than 90 percent of the weapons seized by local authorities and submitted to the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) for tracing are revealed to have been sourced from the United States. Washington also confronts the second-order effects of illicit firearms in the form of political instability within its shared neighborhood and a northbound flow of illicit narcotics, including deadly synthetic drugs like fentanyl. Regrettably, the United States and LAC governments

often end up talking past one another rather than focusing on tightening law enforcement collaboration and intelligence sharing to trace and prevent arms trafficking in the first place.

Firearms trafficking does not adhere to any one standard pattern throughout all of LAC. Like other forms of illicit commerce, TCOs are constantly evolving their methods and modalities for obtaining weapons, typically pursuing the path of least resistance. As authorities crack down on one form of arms smuggling, for instance, by banning legal weapon imports, criminal groups turn toward other sources, such as pilfering government stockpiles or building their own improvised firearms. To offer a more granular window into the specific manifestations and challenges of arms trafficking, this report takes an in-depth look at the challenge across four subregions: Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean.

Leveraging new data sources, this report examines the prevalence and patterns of arms trafficking within and between each of the four subregions. Recognizing the nature of the threat arms trafficking presents to the Western Hemisphere at large, the report seeks to define the contours of a new strategy to combat illegal guns, concluding with recommendations for the United States, Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean to pursue. The report does not question the rights of citizens under the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

United States: Existing evidence suggests that the majority of crime guns employed in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, as well as a substantial number in South America, are being trafficked from the United States. In light of this reality, there are a number of steps the United States can take to reduce the incidence of arms trafficking to LAC:

1. Increase the number of investigations into "bad apple" Federal Firearms Licensees who repeatedly violate federal gun laws.
2. Modernize and reform the U.S. firearms recordkeeping system.
3. Reassess those provisions of the Tiahrt Amendments that affect the ability to research, investigate, and prosecute arms trafficking.
4. Implement the 13 recommendations issued by the Office of the Inspector General to strengthen the ATF's compliance inspection activities and oversight.
5. Upgrade programs such as the National Tracing Program and National Integrated Ballistic Information Network to help process trace requests from law enforcement agencies more efficiently.
6. Strengthen interstate intelligence cooperation on arms trafficking, as well as coordination between U.S. states and the federal government.

Mexico: A civil suit brought by the Mexican government against certain gun manufacturers and dealers, if successful, could reduce the flow of illegal guns to the country, especially by forcing "bad apple" dealers to strictly adhere to their licensing requirements. However, there are other efforts that Mexico can make on its side of the border:

1. Establish a specialized and professional civil institution that could look at the issue of firearms in all its dimensions, such as illicit trafficking, legal possession, control, and their impact on society.
2. Increase cooperation and exchange of information with countries of origin for trafficked firearms.
3. Redouble border security investments to detect and confiscate trafficked firearms as they come over the border and before they make it into the hands of criminals.
4. Ensure all crime guns recovered in the country, not only those held by federal authorities, are traced by the ATF and processed through the eTrace system.
5. Update the 1972 Federal Law of Firearms and Explosives to reflect the current severity of the arms-trafficking challenge.

Central America: A fragmented political landscape magnifies Central America's challenges from illicit firearms. While many of the countries in the region are firm U.S. partners, the presence of a consolidated dictatorship in the form of Nicaragua has the potential to snarl meaningful cooperation on arms trafficking. The United States and Central American governments can cooperate in the following priority areas to enhance the capabilities of regional customs, police, and other security forces in order to counter arms trafficking:

1. Enhance stockpile management in the region through more frequent inspections and the development of specific security plans to address the vulnerabilities of individual arsenals.
2. Adopt a digital platform to log weapons and ammunition inventories, and improve recordkeeping of all usage of these weapons in the case of active police and military armories.
3. Improve cooperation with the United States to acquire specialized equipment for destroying surplus arms, and facilitate information exchange on stockpile management best practices.

South America: While the security challenges South America faces may be grave, the subregion may hold some of the greatest potential for increased cooperation with the United States on combating firearms trafficking. Accordingly, there are several areas where U.S. technical assistance, along with greater intraregional cooperation, could have a pronounced effect on arms-trafficking dynamics:

1. Improve cross-border collaboration between police and customs officials to challenge the freedom of movement TCOs enjoy when using unofficial border crossings to traffic illegal guns.
2. In the case of countries seeking to expand access to guns for citizens, pair these efforts with a regulatory regime capable of accommodating and tracking the influx of weapons to ensure these do not find their way into the hands of criminal organizations.
3. All South American countries, and Ecuador in particular, should consider signing and ratifying the Arms Trade Treaty.
4. Enhance subregional cooperation through mechanisms such as the MERCOSUR Security Information Exchange System to facilitate the exchange of information on trafficking routes across national borders.

The Caribbean: While initiatives such as the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) have done well to showcase political will from Washington to help the region tackle its security challenges, the Caribbean remains a region in which the United States has historically underinvested. The United States, alongside allies and partners, can demonstrate renewed commitment to curbing the challenge of arms trafficking in the Caribbean through the following lines of effort:

1. Build up capacity in the Caribbean's ports and coast guards to improve maritime domain awareness.
2. Expand the authorities of the U.S. Joint Interagency Task Force South to grant it an explicit authorization to target arms smuggling in addition to narcotics, recognizing that the two activities often go hand in hand.
3. Enhance intelligence sharing between Caribbean, European, and U.S. law enforcement agencies to leverage one another's capabilities to make up for shortfalls in situational awareness.
4. In the case of Haiti, use the window of opportunity created by the arrival of the Multinational Security Support Mission to push for capacity-building assistance to the country in order to develop long-term solutions to arms trafficking and the violent cycles it fuels.

1

Introduction

Leaving a campaign rally, a political hopeful is gunned down in a hail of bullets. Elsewhere, a bus driver is murdered in cold blood. His crime? The failure of his employer to make the protection payments demanded by a local gang. Still elsewhere a young woman on her daily commute is struck by a stray round as shots ring out across the street.[2] These individual tragedies play out a thousand times over throughout Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). They also share a common thread: the role of an illicit firearm as the instrument of choice to cut short countless lives.

LAC is home to roughly 8 percent of the world's population, but it accounts for nearly one-third of global homicides.[3] A majority of these killings involve the use of guns, which remain plentiful and easily accessible by criminal elements throughout the Western Hemisphere. This has remained the case even as governments within the region have experimented with a variety of legal and regulatory schemes aimed at deterring gun crime. Mexico, for instance, has implemented harsh penalties for bringing weapons across the border and a highly centralized system for registering and purchasing guns through its Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA).[4] Brazil, on the other hand, under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, took steps to liberalize firearms possession laws, making it easier for citizens to obtain their own guns for self-defense.[5] Both countries nevertheless account for the highest absolute numbers of firearms-related killings in LAC.

Firearms trafficking has also proven a significant pain point in U.S.-LAC relations. The nearly $100 billion U.S. firearms industry churns out weapons at a rapid pace. Some find their way into the hands of criminals within LAC, whether as a consequence of overt smuggling or legal arms sales that

are later diverted for illicit purposes.[6] The so-called iron river of U.S. firearms, which winds from the border with Mexico to the tip of Patagonia, is inseparable from any understanding of the illegal arms trade in the hemisphere.[7] At the same time, while the United States' role cannot be understated, firearms trafficking in the region is a multi-headed hydra. From unguarded stockpiles of war relics leftover from Central American civil wars to artisanal and 3D-printed guns manufactured in illicit workshops across South America, effectively limiting criminal access to firearms is a challenge beyond the ability of any one country to control.[8] Lack of appreciation for this often means that U.S. and regional officials are talking at cross-purposes when it comes to efforts to stem the flow of illicit firearms.

For this reason, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) embarked on a comprehensive study of firearms trafficking within LAC. Leveraging data, expert interviews, and a literature review, this report traces common features in country and local-level dynamics in an effort to provide a full accounting of how firearms trafficking affects Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. In doing so, it seeks to integrate and harmonize a literature that, while extensive, often grapples with firearms trafficking either in miniature or in macro, either as a subregional or local challenge or as a global phenomenon. By contrast, this study analyzes firearms trafficking at the regional level, surveying LAC as a whole but providing added granularity to tease out country-specific trends where relevant. It concludes by attempting to sketch a path forward for the United States to better partner with its allies in the region to address the pernicious threat of illicit firearms.

Firearms Trafficking as a Threat to Sovereignty

Perhaps the most significant threat to LAC countries' security and sovereignty is that posed by transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). While these groups differ significantly across the hemisphere in size, sophistication, and tactics, they all threaten civilian safety, corrode public institutions, and undermine governments' control within their territory. Under the right conditions, these groups can metastasize into legitimate threats to a country's sovereignty and stability. Over the course of six months in Ecuador, criminal gangs took over prisons, assassinated a presidential candidate, and stormed a television station to broadcast their message of intimidation to a bewildered populace. The decision of Ecuadorean president Daniel Noboa to designate some 22 different criminal groups as terrorist organizations and announce the beginning of an "internal armed conflict" against them, while fiercely debated by outside observers, nevertheless showcases the severity with which Ecuador perceives the threat to its security from the gangs.[9] In Haiti, criminal groups have effectively overwhelmed the state's ability to contain them, resulting in a widespread breakdown of governance and a dire humanitarian emergency in the country.[10] Even the international initiative to provide a semblance of security through the Kenyan-led Multinational Security Support Mission (MSS) has found itself on unsteady footing as the gangs showcase their vast arsenals of fully and semiautomatic rifles and indicate that they are ready and willing to fight the police forces to preserve their criminal empires.

Guns seized by the Mexican Army, National Guard, and State Police are displayed before being destroyed at the 2nd Military Zone headquarters in Tijuana, Baja California State, Mexico, on August 8, 2024.

Photo: Guillermo Arias/Getty Images

For TCOs to effectively contend with the state, they need weapons. In particular, groups need fully and semiautomatic rifles, explosives, anti-materiel weapons, grenades, and rocket launchers to overwhelm state security forces. In Mexico, cartels showcase their extensive arsenals as part of propaganda and recruitment efforts while also putting these weapons to deadly use in ambushes against police and army units.[11] While semiautomatic handguns tend to be the most numerous guns seized by authorities, some of the weapons most sought after by criminal groups in the hemisphere include the Colt AR-15 and its numerous clones and variants.[12]

In this way, firearms trafficking is not merely a public safety risk, it is an essential link in the criminal logistics chain that allows these criminal groups to gather strength and challenge the sovereignty of governments in LAC. Notably, this challenge does not need to rise to extreme criminal consolidation and state failure, as observed in Haiti. Costa Rica has seen its murder rate increase consistently since 2019, as well as the emergence of armed criminal groups that can overwhelm local police forces.[13] Without a standing army, the government in San José finds itself hard-pressed to find effective recourse to these groups now empowered by illicit arms and ammunition. The trafficking of rifles, explosives, machine guns, and other equipment should be viewed not merely as a law enforcement challenge but as an issue with the potential to seriously destabilize governance in LAC and imperil the region's most vulnerable populations at the same time.

Firearms and Femicides

The influx of illegal firearms into Latin America has had a disproportionate effect on populations already facing high levels of violence. In particular, while violence against women and girls in both public and private spheres has historically been prevalent within LAC, illicit guns make these attacks even deadlier. Firearms, which are present in the home, have been identified as a tool of power and control, used to instill fear and perpetuate physical, psychological, and sexual violence. In LAC, violence affects one in three women throughout their life. The region experienced at least 4,050 femicides—a gender-based murder of a woman or girl by a man—in 2022, and the likelihood of this crime increases significantly when aggressors have access to firearms.[14]

Due to the estimated 13.5–15.5 million unregistered firearms in circulation in the country and the presence of powerful criminal organizations, Mexico ranks among the countries with the highest risks for women.[15] Approximately 10 women were murdered every day in Mexico in 2022.[16] Between 2018

and 2021, 1,028 femicides were committed with a firearm in the country, an average of 20 per month.[17] In the early 2000s, 3 in 10 women were killed with a firearm in Mexico; as of 2021, it was 6 out of 10.[18]

The murder of women per capita is even worse in Central America, with Honduras leading the region with the highest rate, at 6 femicides per 100,000 people in 2022.[19] Belize and El Salvador are also among the top seven worst countries in the region for this type of crime. In 2021, firearms were used in 68 percent of femicides in Honduras, where most cases were a result of the settling of personal scores.[20] Of these crimes, 41 percent were committed by organized criminal groups, 18.8 percent by gangs, and 11.5 percent by a family member or domestic partner.[21] This trend is abetted by the high prevalence of firearms in Honduras, which is attributable to trafficking from the United States as well as leftovers from the Central American conflicts of the Cold War era.[22]

Although women represent a small percentage of fatalities from violence in the Caribbean, a report by CARICOM IMPACS and Small Arms Survey says that women living in Caribbean Community (CARICOM) areas are more likely to be victims of firearm killings than women worldwide, outside of Central America.[23] The case of Haiti is particularly grim, where the outward flow of drugs and inward flow of illicit firearms has contributed to alarming levels of violence against women, including sexual violence. The absence of a functioning government and widespread insecurity has led to heavily armed gangs controlling over 80 percent of the capital of Port-au-Prince and large parts of the countryside at the time of writing.[24] The Haitian national police is outgunned and outmanned by the gangs.[25] The United Nations has warned that sexual violence has reached alarming levels, with gangs using sexual violence systematically as a tool for territorial control, intimidation, and humiliation of rivals. Haiti's Single Health Information System reported that 16,470 cases of gender-based violence (GBV) had occurred in 2022; the actual number is surely higher. GBV is chronically underreported, and the state lacks the capacity to collect data in many territories, particularly as the overall security situation deteriorates.[26]

In South America, Brazil accounts for the highest total number of femicides, with 1,437 cases reported in 2022, while according to one study, a woman is raped in the country every 10 minutes.[27] A 2014 UN study shows that Brazil had the most deaths caused by stray bullets in LAC between 2009 and 2013, with women disproportionately affected.[28] Between 2012 and 2022, firearms were the instrument used in the deaths of more than half the women who were murdered in the country.[29] More recently, in its third report on the role of firearms in violence against women, the Instituto Sou da Paz, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) working to reduce levels of violence in Brazil, reported that firearms were involved in 66 percent of the killings of women and girls aged between 15 and 19 in 2022, and in 62 percent of the deaths of women between the ages of 20 and 29.[30] The study also exposed the high vulnerability of Afro-Brazilian women, showing that 68 percent of women murdered with a firearm were Afro-descendants.

The Arms Trade Treaty (which the United States has signed but not ratified) seeks to promote responsibility in the international sale of conventional arms and explicitly recognizes that conventional arms can be used to commit or facilitate serious acts of GBV or serious acts of violence against women.[31] In addition, a study coordinated by the NGO Intersecta determined that as the number of guns in Mexico has increased, more violence against women has occurred in the country,

including femicides. A similar pattern is likely playing out in many parts of LAC that are plagued by firearms trafficking or the easy availability of guns.[32]

The Role of the United States

As previously discussed, the United States occupies an uncomfortable position in conversations around arms trafficking in LAC. On the one hand, as the preeminent security partner for the region, Washington has a vested interest in countering efforts by TCOs to obtain the weaponry needed to hold governments across the region hostage. At the same time, as one of the largest sources of illegal firearms for most countries in the Western Hemisphere, the United States finds itself on the defensive more often than not when it seeks to engage partners on the issue of trafficking.

Indeed, regional experts interviewed for this report continually stressed the United States' pivotal, potentially decisive role in fueling the illegal arms trade. The sheer number of weapons produced by the United States provides some indication of the scope of this challenge. According to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, a firearms industry association, the U.S. gun industry produces an average of 5.4 million firearms per year, while between 2014 and 2018, it exported a yearly average of 700,000 guns worldwide.[33]

However, there remains ample room for the United States to align with its regional allies and partners on a strategy for counteracting firearms trafficking. In particular, practical steps to enhance monitoring and interagency cooperation on end-user reports may be welcomed to ensure that firearms sold to the region stay with their intended recipients and are not diverted toward criminal ends. Furthermore, elevating the prevention of firearms trafficking as a strategic priority for U.S. missions in the region can help bolster the resolve and political will to go after firearms trafficking. There is good reason to do so as well: the flow of illicit weapons into the hands of TCOs empowers these groups to grow their operations, contributing especially to a deadly narcotrafficking epidemic which has ravaged communities and directly undermines U.S. national security.

Just as the United States can do more to prevent the unlawful diversion of firearms from its domestic market, the region will also need to make good-faith efforts to enhance stockpile security, intelligence gathering, and arms seizures to take illicit firearms already in the region out of circulation. With the correct approach, firearms trafficking could be an area for cooperation rather than finger-pointing between LAC countries and the United States.

A Note on Data

While the scope of the problem is undeniably vast, properly quantifying firearms trafficking in LAC remains an elusive endeavor. To begin with, measuring instances of trafficking itself is a difficult undertaking. Firearms seizures can serve as a proxy to an extent, but seized weapons are not necessarily trafficked weapons. Indeed, seizures could be the result of improper documentation, illegal modification, or the use of a legal and fully registered firearm in the commission of a crime. Even so, reliable and current information on firearms seizures is challenging to obtain at a regional scale. CSIS reviewed publicly available records for 33 countries in the Western Hemisphere, in doing

so noting major differences in how seizures were recorded (if at all), the agencies responsible for publishing statistics, and the level of granularity possible. In the case of Colombia, data on firearms seizures by type and disaggregated to the municipality level was readily available through 2023. On the other hand, in the case of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, comprehensive information on firearms seizures was not available for at least the past four years.

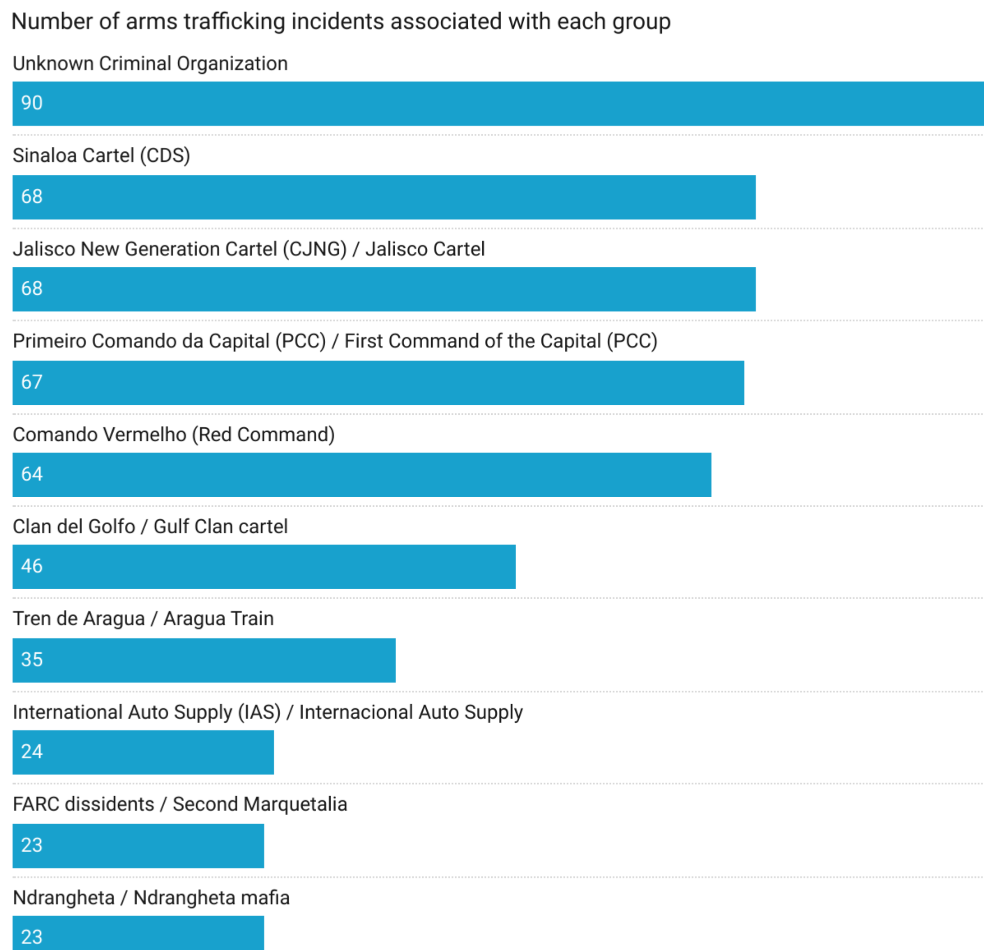
To provide a regional perspective, the CSIS research team analyzed two datasets. The first of these, the Small Arms, Light Weapons (SALW) Dashboard, hosted on Florida International University (FIU)'s Security Research Hub, is a repository of open-source reporting on firearms events in LAC.[34] It captures only events which can be visually confirmed and includes a high degree of precision with respect to the location of the event and the type(s) of arms and ammunition involved. The advantage of this dataset is its regional scope and inclusion of a variety of incident categories beyond seizure. However, while the requirement for publicly available and visually verifiable incidents helps ensure reliability and a high degree of confidence in the data, this elevated standard means that the data only captures a fraction of the estimated total firearms incidents taking place within the hemisphere.

Figure 1: Number of Arms Seizure Incidents by Country, 2023

Source: "Small Arms, Light Weapons Dashboard 2.0," Florida International University, Security Research Hub, https://salw-dashboard.electrifai.net/analytics/main.

The second dataset reviewed by CSIS is a private database compiled by Orion Integrated Biosciences.[35] They use a sophisticated system with advanced natural-language processing, large language models, and machine learning techniques to detect, classify, disambiguate, and contextualize open-source data streams into distinct crime categories, including identifying events associated with arms trafficking. The system can also extract the names of suspected criminal organizations, geolocate their activities, and discern patterns and trends in arms trafficking, among other capabilities. As with the FIU dataset, users must keep certain limitations in mind, including bias and selectivity (news reports often spotlight high-profile incidents while overlooking less-sensational yet significant events), inconsistent reporting (the detail and accuracy of news reports can vary greatly across organizations and countries), timeliness (news articles might not continually be updated with new information), geographical coverage (media coverage is uneven, with some regions underreporting, particularly in areas with limited press freedom or low media presence), verification challenges (information might be deliberately manipulated), and event duplication (multiple news outlets may report the same event with conflicting details). Both datasets attempt to address these challenges to the extent possible.

Figure 2: Major Actors Involved in Arms Trafficking, 2014-2024



Source: Orion Integrated Biosciences.

Other data sources employed throughout this report include records from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) firearms trace data and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) data on firearms-trafficking sources from individual country reports. Finally, the CSIS research team leveraged country reports on firearms seizures when available.

Subsequent sections provide overviews of the scope, methods, and consequences of firearms trafficking across four subregional categories: Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean.

2

Firearms Trafficking to and within Mexico

Mexico and the United States are friends and neighbors who have one of the largest bilateral trading relationships on Earth. At the same time, they are caught in a deadly embrace. U.S.-manufactured and imported firearms are being trafficked to Mexico by TCOs and individuals working for them or selling to them, contributing to hundreds of thousands of deaths in Mexico while at the same time facilitating drug trafficking from Mexico to the United States, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths from overdoses, particularly fentanyl, in the United States.[36] Illicit firearms trafficked from the United States have substantially reduced the life expectancy of Mexican citizens and cost the government billions of dollars a year, while profits from narcotrafficking empower criminal networks and foment further instability in the country.[37] On the U.S. side of the border, not only has the surge of fentanyl produced profound human tragedy, but it also represents a clear economic and security threat to the United States. Drug overdoses are estimated to cost the U.S. economy more than $1 trillion each year.[38]

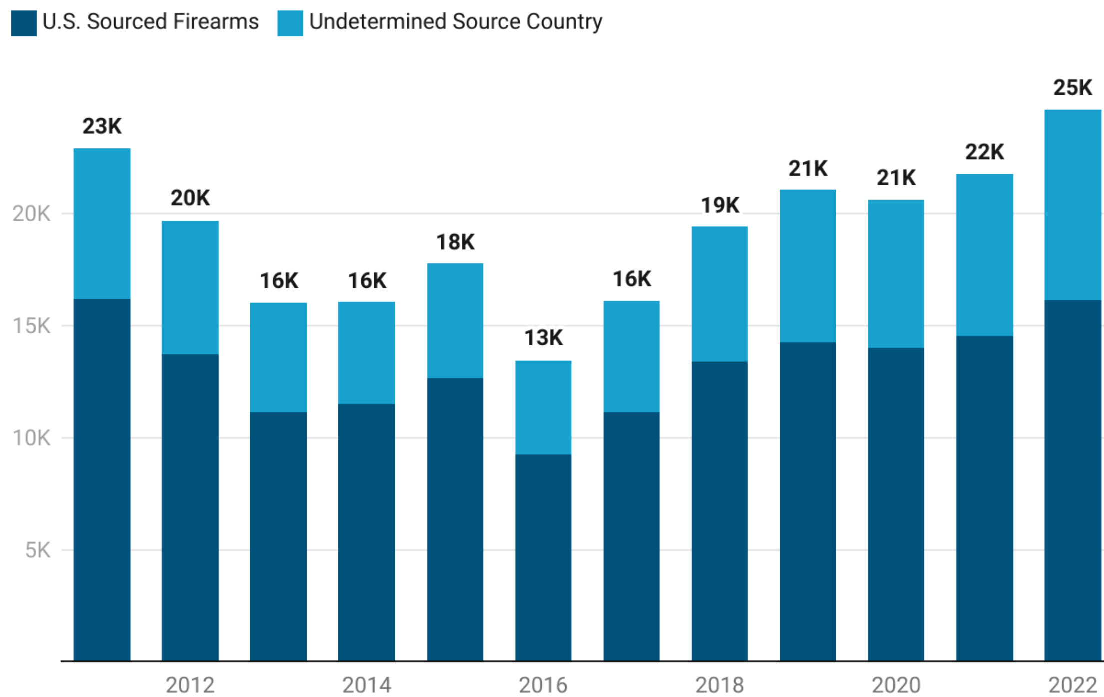
Scope of the Arms-Trafficking Problem

NUMBER OF GUNS TRAFFICKED

Mexico has been experiencing a surge in gun-related violence. Yet, the country does not make small arms, light weapons, or ammunition in any sizable quantity, aside from one model of rifle for the army. The country also has some of the most restrictive gun laws in the world, with sales confined to one store in the entire country owned and operated by the military, which issues fewer than 50 gun permits a year.[39] Most of the illegal guns being trafficked into Mexico come from the United

States, and the supply of high-caliber and semiautomatic weapons has greatly expanded since the expiration of the U.S. federal assault weapons ban in 2004.[40] The surge in violence, and the accompanying increase in arms trafficking, coincided with the Mexican government's declaration of war against criminal organizations in 2006 when then president Felipe Calderon launched an initiative to combat cartels using military force.[41]

Figure 3: Firearms Recovered in Mexico and Submitted to ATF for Tracing, 2011–2022



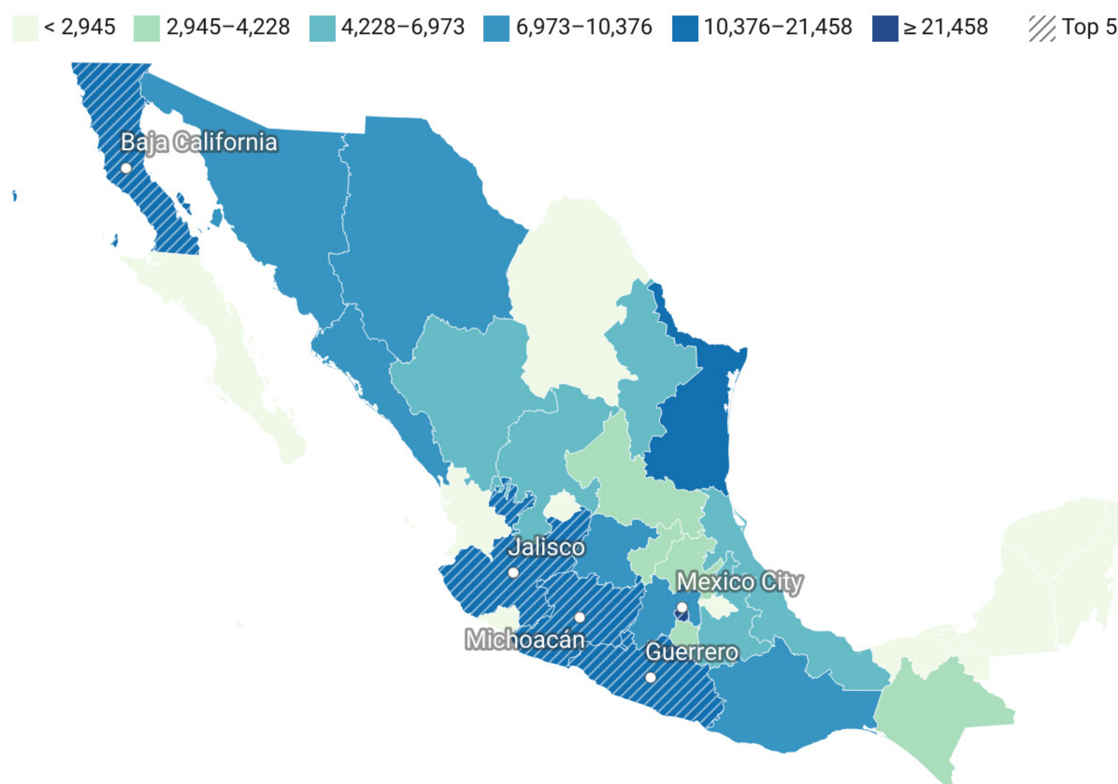
Source: "Data & Statistics," Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), U.S. Department of Justice, https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/data-statistics.

Trying to understand firearms trafficking from the United States begins with trying to comprehend the scale of the problem. What concrete numbers exist for U.S.-manufactured weapons trafficked to Mexico come from the ATF. Publicly released data from its eTrace system, an internet-based application that is used to track the purchase information or use history of firearms used in violent crimes, provides the number of crime guns that Mexican federal authorities have seized and for which they have requested trace information.[42] The ATF's data, while extremely useful, is far from a complete picture of the crime guns seized in Mexico, as the bureau only receives requests for tracing from Mexico's federal Attorney General's Office and does not receive tracing requests for firearms recovered by some other federal authorities or law enforcement in individual Mexican states.[43] Furthermore, only a subset of those weapons submitted for tracing can be linked back to their last known retail sale or legal import.

An ATF report from January 2023 revealed that Mexico made the most tracing requests of any foreign country using the eTrace system between 2017 and 2021.[44] Mexico also had the largest number of

guns traced to an original U.S. source between 2017 and 2022, numbering 83,560.[45] These guns were purchased at a retail outlet in the United States and were subsequently trafficked out of the country where they were later recovered following a crime in Mexico and submitted for tracing. The ATF also found that 70 percent of firearms reported to have been recovered in Mexico from 2014 through 2018 and submitted for tracing by Mexican authorities were U.S. sourced.[46] While few in absolute numbers (212), Mexico also had the highest total percentage (61 percent) of international crime gun traces associated with reported thefts, losses, or theft of interstate shipments of firearms within the United States.[47] It also had the highest number of crime guns of any country that were traced to a sale from a licensed dealer at a gun show in the United States; however, the number of guns is relatively low (947). In those cases when a trace request did not yield the identity of the original purchaser, the most frequent reasons were that the firearm was manufactured outside of the United States and not imported into the country, there was incomplete or invalid information provided by the requesting organization, or the firearm was legally exported from the United States and traced to a foreign dealer. In this latter category, trace requests revealed that 1,646 crime guns recovered in Mexico were associated with firearms lawfully exported from the United States.[48]

Figure 4: Arms Seized by Mexican Federal Authorities, 2007–2024



Data as of March 2024

Source: Prosecutor General of the Republic data provided in Daniela Wachauf, "Decomisa México 184 mil 411 armas en tres sexenios" [Mexico decomissioned 184,411 across three administrations], El Universal, August 1, 2024, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/decomisa-mexico-184-mil-411-armas-en-tres-sexenios/.

A recent major leak of Mexican military intelligence by a hacking organization called Guacamaya–shared with news outlets by the transparency organization Distributed Denial of Secrets and analyzed by USA Today–indicates that Mexican authorities recovered 78,000 firearms between 2018 and 2020 that were traced to U.S. sources.[49] This number is at odds with ATF data showing considerably fewer U.S.-sourced guns over a longer period.

While ATF data shows that at least 83,560 guns were trafficked from the United States to Mexico from 2017 to 2022, it is clearly only a small part of the universe of guns coming illegally across the border. The exact number is impossible to quantify, but a range of estimates have nevertheless been promulgated from all corners. One study from the University of San Diego and the Igarapé Institute in Brazil, for instance, used a Geographic Information System-generated dataset of U.S. Federal Firearms Licensees (FFLs) to estimate the percentage of firearms sales in the United States that can be attributed to demand for guns emanating south of the border. Based on this model, the researchers estimate that 253,000 firearms may have been purchased annually with the intent to be trafficked into Mexico from 2010 to 2012.[50]

In August 2021, the Mexican government brought a landmark court case against six U.S.-based gun manufacturers whose firearms are most often recovered in Mexico–Smith & Wesson, Beretta, Century Arms, Colt, Glock, and Ruger–for allegedly actively facilitating the unlawful trafficking of their guns to drug cartels and other criminals in Mexico.[51] The government claimed in the lawsuit that the defendants produce more than 68 percent of the U.S. guns trafficked into Mexico, which comes out to "between 342,000 and 597,000" guns each year. The Mexican government did not explain the methodology for calculating those figures in its complaint. Yet the figure of 500,000 guns being trafficked from the United States to Mexico is regularly used by politicians in the United States calling for action to stem the deadly flow of guns.[52]

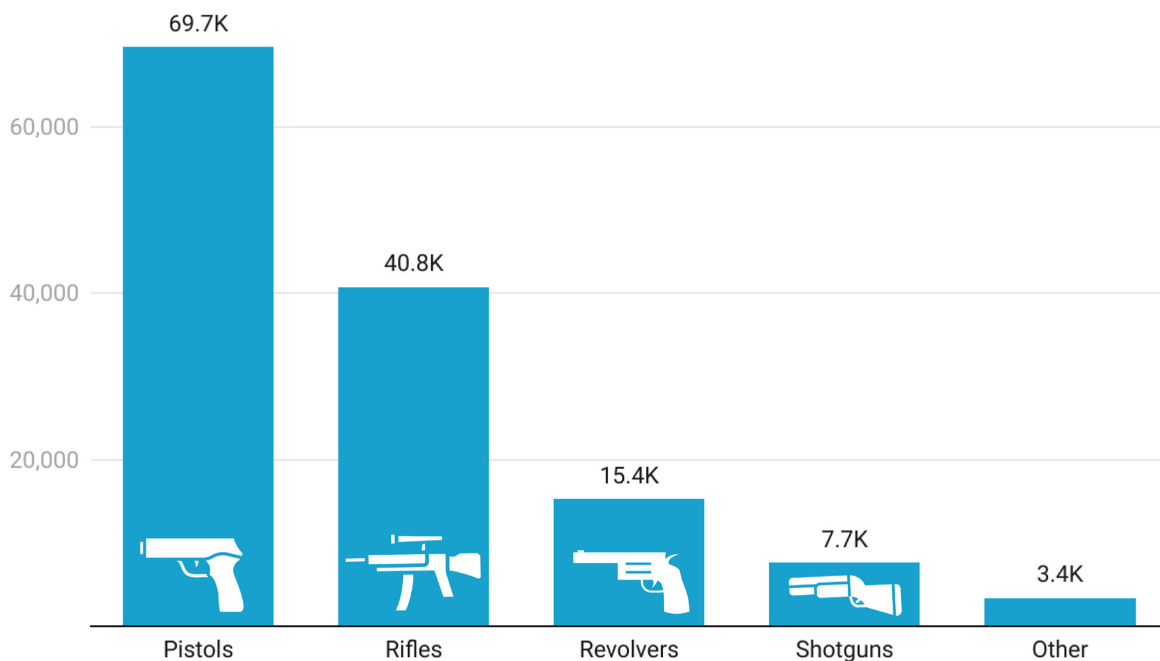
Another wide-ranging estimate comes as a result of Project Thor, an ATF-led initiative started in 2018 which partnered with over 16 executive branch agencies to disrupt Mexican drug cartels' access to U.S.-sourced firearms. The ATF, under Project Thor, estimated that cartels were trafficking between 250,000 and 1 million weapons every year, according to documents reviewed by CBS News.[53] Absent access to the ATF's methodology for calculating these statistics, CSIS cannot independently verify the assumptions and models used in calculating these estimates. Indeed, all of the above figures should be treated with a healthy dose of skepticism, as they each seek to quantify a trade that, by its own shadowy nature, deliberately seeks to evade accurate estimation. Even if only the number of recovered guns that ATF traced is used, which is clearly a significant undercount, this would still mean well over 83,000 U.S.-sourced firearms entered Mexico between 2017 and 2022, head and shoulders above the number recorded by the ATF for any other international destination.[54]

GUN TYPES TRAFFICKED

ATF data from 2017 to 2021 lists the breakdown between firearm types at a very macro level for all international traces, showing pistols at 61.3 percent of all traces, rifles at 26.1 percent, revolvers at 9.6 percent, shotguns at 2.5 percent, derringers at 0.2 percent, and others/unknown at 0.3 percent.[55] However, the data hacked recently from SEDENA and analyzed by USA Today is again

revealing here. It shows that for that sample of information, the most traced U.S.-made firearm in Mexico is the Anderson Manufacturing AM-15 semiautomatic assault rifle, chambered in NATO 5.56 caliber, of which Mexican authorities seized 504 in the 2018-2020 period.[56] The second-most recovered firearm was the Colt Government pistol, with 485 seized. The Vermont-made Century Arms RAS47 assault rifle (which appears to no longer be sold by the company) and the WASR-10, imported from Romania by the same company, were also popular.[57] This would tend to show a preference for semiautomatic assault rifles, which are designed from fully automatic military rifles, over pistols. A study by the UNODC also seems to show this preference for rifles.[58] Records of border seizures obtained by the Small Arms Survey show that 70 percent of the firearms seized by U.S. agents along the Mexican border between 2009 and 2011 were rifles.[59]

Figure 5: Types of Guns Recovered in Mexico and Submitted to ATF for Tracing, 2018–2023



Source: "Data & Statistics," ATF, https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/data-statistics.

So-called "ghost guns" are also being trafficked into Mexico. These are firearms that can be made by private individuals or assembled from manufactured kits or parts that do not have serial numbers, making them impossible to trace. In addition, since the kit manufacturers do not consider them firearms under the 1968 Gun Control Act, they were able to be purchased by minors and people who would not be able to pass a background check in the United States, with deadly consequences.[60] Ghost guns became increasingly prevalent in the United States and fueled a surge in gun crime after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic across the country, particularly in California.[61] As a result, the ATF issued a new rule in 2022 classifying the kits as firearms under the 1968 Gun Control Act, and therefore subjecting them to serializing and all the other provision of the act. A case challenging the ATF's decision brought by the manufacturers of these kits is now before

the U.S. Supreme Court, which will likely decide in June 2025 whether to uphold ATF's move, or declare it an overreach.[62] The inability to trace these firearms makes them particularly attractive to criminals on both sides of the border. In perhaps one of the most serious cases of ghost guns finding their way to Mexico, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) announced in December 2023 that it had indicted a person for engaging in a scheme to provide thousands of semiautomatic rifles to a Mexican citizen who resided in Monterrey, Mexico.[63] The individual "is alleged to have supplied enough firearm parts to arm the recipient with approximately 4,800 semi-automatic rifles." The individual received more than $3.5 million from his coconspirator in exchange.

Earlier research conducted in 2009 by the Violence Policy Center analyzed 21 federal criminal prosecutions of gun traffickers in the border states of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Texas from February 2006 to February 2009.[64] In one case, court documents alleged that the defendants had trafficked some 501 guns into Mexico, providing detailed information on 492 of these individual weapons, while prosecutors alleged that the traffickers had moved far more that went unreported. Of the 492, 42 percent were assault weapons, 30 percent were primarily semiautomatic pistols, 18 percent were armor-piercing handguns, and 2 percent were .50 caliber sniper rifles. The firearms listed were a mix of guns made in the United States or imported into the country. Of the total number of rifles (226), 90 percent (204) could be identified as military-style assault weapons, the bulk of which were either AK or AR variants.

The .50 caliber sniper rifles, in addition to the military-style assault weapons, are of special concern. The Guacamaya hack contained information showing the recovery by Mexican authorities of 121 .50 caliber Barrett semiautomatic rifles.[65] According to the National Rifle Association's American Rifleman magazine, "the .50-caliber Barrett's greatest utility is anti-materiel: punching through walls to defeat barricaded gunmen; halting vehicles, vessels, or aircraft by blasting critical components; and disabling mines and unexploded ordnance by sheer impact energy."[66] Separate unpublished data collated by the Mexican Attorney General's Office and reviewed by Reuters shows that authorities seized 300 .50 caliber rifles from 2020 to 2023. In the hands of criminal organizations, this weapon would clearly represent a major threat to any Mexican police or military response.[67]

Mexican authorities have seized other powerful equipment from criminal organizations and, in January 2024, requested that U.S. authorities investigate how arms that are "for the exclusive use of the US army" could have been in the possession of criminal organizations in Mexico.[68] The Mexican army said in June 2023 that it had seized 221 fully automatic machine guns, 56 grenade launchers, and a dozen rocket launchers from drug cartels since late 2018, without providing specific information as to make, model, and calibers.[69] The weapons were reportedly not available for sale on the U.S. civilian market. It is likely that at least some of these firearms, particularly some belt-fed machine guns, may have been from former U.S. military equipment support to Central American countries during the Cold War in the 1980s. Between 2007 and 2009, a Mexican criminal group procured or stole thousands of handguns, rifles, rocket launchers, and other military equipment from Guatemalan stockpiles, according to InSight Crime and Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa.[70] U.S. M60 machine guns, which are capable of firing 500 bullets per minute to a distance of 1,000 meters, are known to have been stolen from Guatemalan and Salvadoran arsenals.[71] In

addition, the United States sent an estimated 300,000 grenades to Central America during the 1980s, the bulk of them M67 grenades going to El Salvador.[72] These have been found at crime scenes from El Salvador to Mexico.

Other guns trafficked from the United States include the FN M249S, a semiautomatic version of the FN M249 SAW light machine gun, which can fire 800 rounds per minute, chambered in a NATO 5.56 x 45 mm and adopted by the U.S. military in 1988.[73] The M249S is sold on the civilian market in the United States and can be converted back to fully automatic, including through the installation of conversion kits.[74] The ATF has reported that between 2017 and 2021, 1,394 machine gun conversion devices, most of which were designed for handguns, were trafficked from the United States, although it does not disaggregate the data by destination country.[75] There are several cases of trafficked and attempted trafficking of the M249S to Mexico.[76]

Finally, it appears that Mexican cartels are learning from some of the world's conflict hot spots. Various reports indicate that some cartels, such as La Familia Michoacana and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, are using drones to drop explosive munitions, often grenades, a tactic that was unknown in Mexico prior to 2020.[77] Also alarming is at least one report that two AT4 anti-tank launchers (originally reported as being more sophisticated Javelin missile launchers) were confiscated from a faction of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.[78] The same cartel used an Iranian-manufactured rocket propelled grenade to shoot down a Mexican armed forces helicopter in 2015.[79] The firepower of some of the Mexican drug cartels is truly frightening, often outclassing Mexican police forces and even posing a challenge to the military.

Methods and Modalities

According to ATF data from 2017 to 2021, the most frequent types of trafficking methods, regardless of the destination of the illicit firearm, were unlicensed purchases by private individuals (40.7 percent of cases) and straw purchasing from federal firearms license holders (39.5 percent).[80] The remaining cases include illegal diversions from lawful firearm commerce, including through online marketplaces such as Craigslist, OfferUp, eBay, Armslist, and GunBroker; gun shows; flea markets; or auctions or markets on social media platforms.

The fact that unlicensed dealers are now the largest source of trafficked firearms lays bare the need to address this problem. In April 2024, the ATF finalized a new rule stemming from the 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act that will require unlicensed gun sellers to become licensed firearms dealers and, in turn, run background checks through the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) on their customers. This should make it harder for traffickers to obtain firearms from these sources.[81]

After purchases at unlicensed dealers, straw purchases at licensed dealers remain the next largest source of trafficked firearms. A straw purchase occurs when someone illegally buys a firearm for someone else because they are likely barred from purchasing a firearm or do not want their name on the forms needed to conduct the transaction.[82] They may not be able to legally purchase a firearm for a variety of reasons, including that they are underage, have a criminal record, are a

foreign national, or are addicted to drugs, among other reasons. Obvious signs of straw purchases include inconsistencies in buyer information, a first-time gun buyer, a purchaser attempting to buy multiple guns of the same model in a single transaction, making repeated purchase attempts in a short period of time, or making cash payments for the purchase. A person who lies on federal Form 4473 about the identity of the ultimate possessor of the gun being purchased can be charged with a felony, even if the transaction is denied following a background check.[83] Under the 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, the maximum term of imprisonment for straw purchasing was increased to 15 years, $250,000 fine, and up to a 25-year prison sentence if the weapon is used to commit a felony, in an act of terrorism, or a drug-trafficking crime.[84] One high-volume straw purchaser was responsible for individually purchasing 720 guns that were then trafficked to Mexico.[85]

HOW GUNS CROSS THE BORDER

The vast majority of firearms trafficked from the United States to Mexico cross the land border between the two countries in small concealed shipments.[86] The UNODC calls the phenomenon "ant trafficking" because many people transport weapons in small consignments to meet large-scale demand and reduce the risk of disruption by law enforcement.[87] This accounts for 60–70 percent of all weapons intercepted at the border, with nearly half of these comprising a single firearm.[88] The UNODC believes individual smugglers are generally not members of a particular organized crime group. Still, a trafficking cell in Racine, Wisconsin, that was connected to a broader network disrupted by the ATF in 2019 was clearly working directly for one of Mexico's most dangerous cartels (see below).

Fabián Medina, a senior Mexican official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who has written on the trafficking issue, indicated that the government mapped out the trafficking routes and their destinations, tying these to statistics on firearm-related homicides and crimes, and identified the most frequent border crossings for illegal guns.[89] As of 2020, these were Tijuana, Ensenada, and La Rumorosa in Baja California; Agua Prieta, Nogales, and Querobabi in Sonora; Ciudad Juárez and Ojinaga in Chihuahua; Nuevo Laredo, San Fernando, Reynosa, and Matamoros in Tamaulipas; Colombia in Nuevo León; and Manzanillo in Colima. Tamaulipas and Sonora were the most important arms-trafficking points, followed by Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Nuevo León.

In addition to complete firearms, law enforcement authorities are increasingly seeing gun parts trafficked across the border to be later reassembled.[90] Due to their smaller size compared with a complete gun, parts are much easier to smuggle across the border. In the case of the individual who smuggled 4,800 semiautomatic rifles to northern Mexico, the majority of the arms were moved as disassembled parts, helping to evade authorities.[91] The individual is alleged to have provided his coconspirator with the parts, tools, and counsel needed to facilitate a full firearm-manufacturing enterprise in northern Mexico.

In a policy brief, the Small Arms Survey outlines the mechanics of firearms trafficking from the United States to Mexico from an analysis of court records.[92] Traffickers used cars, minivans, sport utility vehicles, pickup trucks, and commercial vehicles of various makes and models, with no particular pattern to the type of vehicle employed, to transport guns across the border. The

firearms were hidden in all sorts of creative and effort-intensive ways, such as in fuel tanks, above the exhaust system, under the bumpers, and within the rails of a truck frame. In other cases, guns are concealed in other goods being imported into Mexico. One trafficker recalled after being caught and sentenced to prison in Mexico that for over two years, he would buy rifles in the United States for $500 to $700 each and sell them in Mexico for $2,000. He would buy about a dozen guns or more and conceal them in refrigerators and stoves he imported into the country, even paying import duties on the appliances.[93]

Most of the cross-border trafficking occurs along the land border, but Fabián Medina, the senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs official mentioned earlier, said that in the decade prior to 2020, 132,500 guns arrived by sea to Tamaulipas, likely the port of Matamoros, in commercial containers.[94]

The Value of the Trafficking Trade from the United States to Mexico

In 2020, the most recent year for publicly available ATF data, there were 146,586 individuals licensed to engage in manufacturing, importing, and/or dealing in firearms, known as holders of FFLs.[95] Of these, 59,457 FFLs were for collectors of what are known as "curios and relics," which are firearms that are at least 50 years old. These collectors are not allowed to engage in the business of buying and selling firearms but may do so to build personal collections.[96] A further 66,161 FFLs were either for dealers (58,353) (Type 1 FFL) or for sales by 7,808 pawnbrokers (Type 2 FFL). There are more gun dealers than the number of Burger King, McDonald's, Subway, and Wendy's locations in the United States combined.[97]

In the University of San Diego and the Igarapé Institute study cited earlier, the authors found that a significant proportion, or 46.7 percent, of U.S. firearms dealers were dependent on some amount of demand for firearms from Mexico between 2010 and 2012 to stay in business.[98] They also found that the value of firearms sales represented annual revenues of $127.2 million for the U.S. firearms industry from 2010 to 2012, nearly four times higher than from 1997 to 1999, when the trade was $32 million. ATF's Project Thor estimated the retail value of trafficked firearms to Mexico at up to $500 million, not including ammunition and tactical supplies.[99]

The trafficking ring in Racine, Wisconsin, which was connected to a broader network broken up by the ATF in 2019, bought more than $600,000 worth of high-end military-style firearms in less than a year. According to an investigation by Reuters, the broader network "bought hundreds of guns from more than a dozen U.S. states, specializing in semiautomatic .50 caliber rifles and FN SCAR assault rifles designed for U.S. special forces."[100] The guns were allegedly weapons for the Jalisco New Generation Cartel. The profits involved are attractive to traffickers despite the risks. One new Barrett .50 caliber semiautomatic rifle costs between $8,000 and $13,000, depending on the model, in a lawful sale in the United States.[101] The black-market value of the same gun in Mexico increases to between $30,000 and $50,000.[102] Semiautomatic rifles such as the AR-15 can be purchased new for as little as $450 on sites such as GunBroker.[103] For example, the Anderson Manufacturing AM-15 has proved to be a popular trafficked firearm,

according to the SEDENA files hacked by Guacamaya. These rifles can then be sold in Mexico for over $2,000 each. At these prices, the 504 Anderson AR-15s revealed in the hacked SEDENA files recovered by Mexican authorities between 2018 and 2020 could have been purchased for approximately $226,800 and then resold for just over $1 million. With an estimated range of between 13.5 and 15.5 million unregistered firearms in Mexico, the retail value of these firearms is in the billions.[104]

Bad Apples and the Responsibility of Manufacturers

According to the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence, only 5 percent of gun dealers in the United States sell 90 percent of the crime guns in the country, and they often do it with business practices that they know are irresponsible or even illegal.[105] The report provides examples of how these "bad apple" dealers illegally sell firearms, including by selling guns "off the books." While this figure is reassuring in the sense that it suggests that the majority of dealers are not the source of crime guns, it is at the same time worrisome that only 52 percent of FFLs inspected by the ATF in 2019 were found to be in compliance with federal gun laws.[106]

The Guacamaya leaks, as analyzed by USA Today, show that Mexican authorities were especially worried about big-box stores close to the border in Arizona and Texas, such as Academy Sports + Outdoors and Cabela's. Those stores sold 727 and 215 of the guns recovered in Mexico from 2020 to 2022, respectively, and were known to have sold multiple firearms in single transactions. In addition to those concerns, the Mexican government has decided to pursue a legal strategy against a small group of dealers in the border state of Arizona. It has brought a civil lawsuit against five businesses–Diamondback Shooting Sports, SNG Tactical, Loan Prairie LLC D/B/A The Hub, Ammo A-Z, and Sprague's Sports Inc. In its complaint, filed in October 2022, the Mexican government alleges that the five companies "systematically participate in trafficking military-style weapons and ammunition to drug cartels in Mexico by supplying gun traffickers."[107] The government further alleges that the "Defendants know or should know that their reckless and unlawful business practices - including straw sales, and bulk and repeat sales of military-style weapons - supply dangerous criminals in Mexico and the U.S." These five defendants are, the Mexican government alleges, among the worst gun-trafficking offenders in Arizona and the United States. The government is seeking to have the court appoint monitors with the authority to "establish, modify, and closely oversee" the sales practices of each of the companies named in the complaint to ensure they comply with the law. While Arizona dealers are the focus of the lawsuit, Texas was the state with the highest number of traced crime guns recovered in Mexico from 2017 to 2021.[108]

In addition to dealers, the Mexican government filed a civil suit in 2021 against six U.S.-based manufacturers whose guns are most often recovered in Mexico: Smith & Wesson, Beretta, Century Arms, Colt, Glock, and Ruger.[109] The lawsuit also includes Barrett Firearms Manufacturing, the company behind the .50 caliber semiautomatic sniper rifle, as well as Interstate Arms, a major wholesaler of guns for resale to dealers. The suit alleges that these companies are responsible for manufacturing 340,000 guns per year that end up being trafficked to Mexico.[110] It further claims, among various other allegations, that these companies "design, market, distribute, and sell guns

in ways they know routinely arm the drug cartels in Mexico" and that they "use reckless and corrupt gun dealers and dangerous and illegal sales practices that the cartels rely on to get their guns." The government is claiming $10 billion in damages. The case was initially dismissed by the U.S. District Court in Boston in 2022 on the grounds that foreign governments cannot sue under U.S. law, but this decision was overturned in January 2024 by the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Then in August 2024, the same judge who ruled against Mexico in 2022 dismissed the claims against six of the eight companies named in the suit, on the grounds that they were not sufficiently connected to the State of Massachusetts to establish jurisdiction, leaving only Smith & Wesson and wholesaler Whitmer Public Safety Group (the owner of now defunct Interstate Arms) subject to the complaint.[111] The Mexican government has said that it plans to appeal, or file the case in other jurisdictions.[112] Meanwhile the manufacturers have appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, challenging the ability of Mexico to proceed with the case.[113] On October 4, 2024, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case.[114]

Mexico's legal strategy to hold dealers, wholesalers, and manufacturers accountable may eventually extend to suing European manufacturers in European courts. Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Affairs commissioned a study by students at the University of Amsterdam's International Law Clinic on Access to Justice for Gun Violence, in cooperation with the Asser Institute for International and European Law, which focuses on access to justice for gun violence in European jurisdictions.[115]

Other Sources of Trafficked Firearms in Mexico

While it is the largest, the United States is not the only source of firearms trafficked into Mexico. As mentioned above, some of the fully automatic machine guns, rocket launchers, and grenades being trafficked to Mexico may have come from Guatemalan and Salvadoran military stockpiles of weapons donated by the United States during the Cold War.[116] Other guns manufactured in Europe are being trafficked directly to Mexico by sea in commercial containers, arriving at the ports of Lázaro Cárdenas, Altamira, and Manzanillo.[117] Most of these weapons are manufactured in Italy and Spain, but there are also Austrian and German guns.

Other firearms, from both the United States and Europe, are exported legally to Mexico but are then illegally sold, lost, or stolen from and by federal and state officials. Between 2006 and 2018, SEDENA acknowledged that 15,592 firearms were lost or stolen by local and federal security institutions. The Secretariat of Public Security of Mexico City lost the most guns (1,666), followed by the Secretariat of Public Security and Civil Protection of the State of Guerrero (1,469), the Attorney General's Office (1,265), and the now defunct Mexican Federal Police (1,096).[118] In a separate disclosure in 2019, SEDENA said that over the previous 18 years, more than 22,000 firearms from different local and federal police forces "disappeared."[119]

SEDENA has also acknowledged losing 13 fully automatic FX-05 Xiuhcóatl rifles, a firearm produced by the Mexican military for the armed forces capable of firing 750 rounds per minute.[120] Nineteen of the guns were stolen, and some found their way into the hands of organized crime.[121] The theft apparently occurred at the point of manufacture, when a worker stole components little by

little then reassembled the guns and sold them for approximately 50,000 pesos ($2,500). The Guacamaya leaks reveal that in 2019, the military was aware that one of its soldiers was offering tactical equipment, weapons, and grenades, in addition to providing information on mobility and armed forces operations, to a cell of a drug-trafficking cartel.

While not a case of trafficking for the benefit of criminal organizations in Mexico, there is a significant case where German firearms were exported illegally to Mexico. It involved a series of sales between 2006 and 2009 of 4,000 G36 fully automatic military-grade assault rifles by the German manufacturer Heckler & Koch.[122] The company exported the guns through SEDENA to Mexican state authorities, including to the Mexican states of Chiapas, Guerrero, Jalisco, and Chihuahua, which were prohibited by German law from receiving the guns because they were at high risk for violence and human rights violations.[123] The case is important because it shows that a company was willing to break the law to make a sale. A company employee allegedly coached SEDENA to eliminate references from its end-user certifications to certain prohibited federal states, and there were also allegations of bribery against both countries around the sale.[124]

The Impact of Trafficked Firearms in Mexico

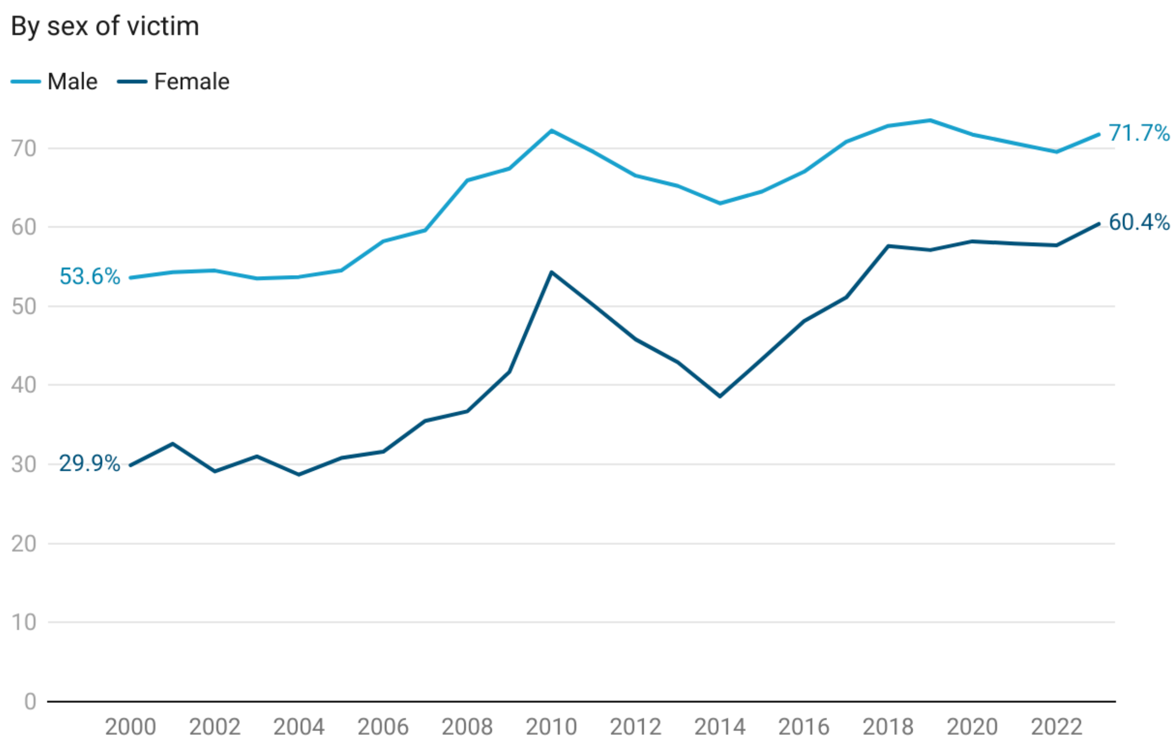
Mexico is experiencing a true epidemic of violence. Over six years, between 2015 and 2021, 205,595 homicides were committed in Mexico. Of these homicides, 68 percent, or 140,601, were committed with a firearm; this is in a country that severely restricts the number of legal guns in circulation.[125] More than 80 people were murdered every day in Mexico in 2023, mainly young people.[126] The Uppsala Conflict Data Program shows that from 2009 to 2023, the Sinaloa drug cartel was responsible for 63,075 deaths and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel was responsible for 77,786 deaths.[127] In 2023, around 6 in 10 homicides in the country, or about 18,000 murders, were associated with organized crime.[128]

Data from the Mexican government also shows that there are 110,964 cases of disappeared people in the country, with 9,424 new cases over eight months between August 2023 and March 2024.[129] More than 2,600 police officers have been killed since 2018, which means that being a police officer in Mexico is almost four times more dangerous than being a member of the general population.[130] In addition to deaths, firearms in Mexico cause injuries, disabilities, trauma, grieving, and many others forms of pain and suffering. The firepower gained through trafficked guns has emboldened Mexico's criminal organizations that challenge the government's monopoly on the use of force. They control electricity, telecommunications, and even food in some locations–sometimes even entire municipalities–and dictate who can come and go.[131] This strength has allowed them to venture beyond drug trafficking to engage in new criminal enterprises such as human trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, illicit trade in wildlife, and commercial robbery.[132]

The Mexican government claims in its complaint against gun manufacturers in the United States that as a consequence of their products ending up in the hands of Mexican cartels, there has been an exponential growth in the country's homicide rate and an overall destabilizing effect on Mexican society. The "willfully blind, standardless distribution practices" of these manufacturers, the

government alleges, "aid and abet the killing and maiming of children, judges, journalists, police, and ordinary citizens throughout Mexico" and has "substantially reduced the life expectancy of Mexican citizens and cost the Government billions of dollars a year."[133]

Figure 6: Proportion of Homicides in Mexico Committed with a Firearm



Source: "Violencia de género con armas de fuego en México" [Gender based violence by firearms in Mexico], Intersecta, October 2021, https://www.intersecta.org/posts/violencia-de-genero-con-armas-de-fuego-en-mexico. Elaborated with data from "Registros de Mortalidad" [Mortality Records], INEGI, https://www.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/olap/proyectos/bd/continuas/mortalidad/defuncioneshom.asp?s=est.

According to the Institute for Economics and Peace, the impact of violence on the Mexican economy amounted to a loss of 4.9 trillion pesos in 2023 (or $245 billion), which is equivalent to 19.8 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP).[134] That was almost six times more than the Mexican government's investments made in health and more than five times greater than those made in education in 2023. The economic impact of violence amounted to 37,430 pesos ($2,155) per person in 2023, more than double the average monthly salary in the country, and homicides constituted 42.5 percent of this economic impact. Aside from the devastating costs related to the human toll, there are also significant impacts on business. The country experienced 85,000 cargo truck hijackings between 2019 and 2023.[135] On average, 50 trucks a day are robbed in Mexico, to the tune of $6 billion in losses in 2021.[136] There were also 2,990 robberies on Mexican railways that year, resulting in $4.4 billion in economic loss.[137] Eight in 10 companies invest between 5 and 8 percent of their operating expenses to protect personnel merchandise, and the private security industry is worth approximately 2 percent of GDP.[138]

Police stand guard as forensic personnel remove the bodies of the PRI candidate for mayor of Coyuca de Benitez, Anibal Zuniga Cortes, and his wife, Ruby Bravo, killed in Acapulco, Guerrero state, Mexico, on May 16, 2024.

Photo: Francisco Robles/Getty Images

Illegal firearms are also having an impact on Mexico's democracy. Thirty candidates were murdered in the 2021 legislative elections, and there were 24 political assassinations in the 2018 presidential election.[139] According to a report by InSight Crime using data from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project published two days after the June 2, 2024, general election in Mexico, there were 102 political assassinations during this year's electoral campaign.[140] Other sources put the tally of political violence much higher, with 749 candidates for office, politicians, government officials, or their families having suffered some type of aggression since September 2023, including 231 murders.[141] Mexico is, accordingly, one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a politician.[142] Gangs shape elections by killing candidates they do not like and backing others. Their violence and threats also intimidate other candidates into withdrawing out of fear for their lives.[143] Alfredo Cabrera, an opposition candidate for the mayoralty of Coyuca de Benítez in the state of Guerrero, was fatally shot on May 30, 2024, the last day of campaigning. A video taken during a rally of supporters shows a person pointing a semiautomatic pistol at the back of Cabrera's head before firing.[144] The weapon used in the assassination appears to be an FN, FNS-40C, a .40-caliber semiautomatic pistol with an extended magazine, which was made by FN America in Fredericksburg, Virginia, a division of the Belgian company Fabrique Nationale Herstal, until it was discontinued.

3

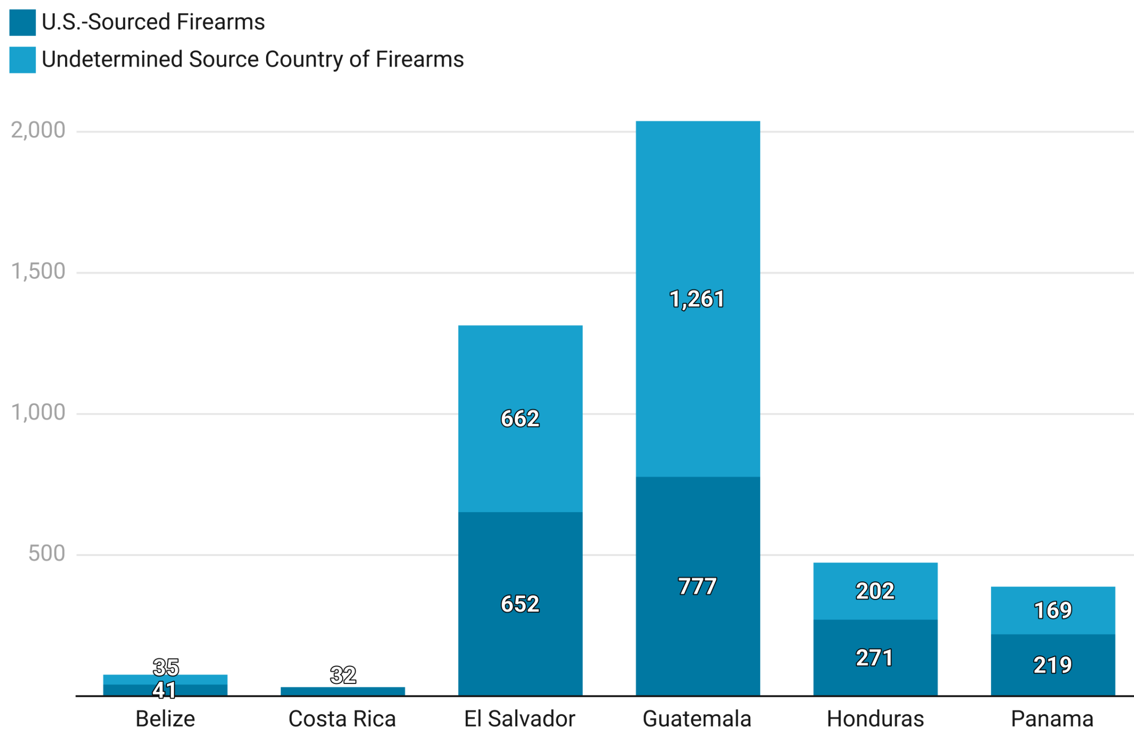
Firearms Trafficking to and within Central America

In May 2023, Randall Zuñiga, the head of Costa Rica's Judicial Investigation Department, laid out a controversial proposal. In response to rising levels of violence in the once-placid Central American country, Zuñiga argued that the police should be authorized to use the military-grade rifles seized from drug traffickers.[145] The proposition both spoke to the severity of Costa Rica's internal security challenge, where murders have risen steadily from 11 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2019 to 17.2 per 100,000 in 2023, as well as the increasingly sophisticated arsenals of the criminal groups driving this violence.[146] While handguns and revolvers still account for the vast majority of arms seized by the police, AK and AR pattern rifles and their derivatives are increasingly being found in the caches of drug traffickers. For a country such as Costa Rica, which lacks a formal military, the security services are at risk of finding themselves outgunned by a resurgent wave of violent crime.

Costa Rica is not alone in confronting a worsening scourge from illicit arms. Central America as a whole is at the locus of a perfect storm for firearms trafficking. Its proximity to the United States means that the region serves as a watershed for the iron river of firearms that passes through Mexico to the south. Furthermore, the region's bloody history of insurgencies and civil wars has endowed it with disproportionate quantities of military-grade rifles and other weaponry, stored in often leaky government stockpiles or private collections.[147] Endemic corruption and criminal co-optation of police and state security forces throughout the region stymie efforts to register, track, seize, and dispose of illicit firearms. Finally, the region faces a polarized and increasingly contentious political sphere, complete with a full-blown criminal regime in the form of Nicaragua, impeding the kind of multilateral coordination necessary to tackle the challenge of firearms trafficking effectively.[148]

Nevertheless, two trends also help moderate the severity of the firearms-trafficking threat in Central America. First, the region is not home to any major weapons manufacturers itself, meaning that weapons must come from elsewhere, either trafficked from other countries or diverted from government stockpiles. Second, Central American criminal groups are comparatively smaller and weaker than those encountered in Mexico, Brazil, or even Haiti. Indeed, one analyst described El Salvador's gangs prior to the 2021 state of exception as "poor and predatory."[149] This is not to downplay their brutality or lethality; the region experiences some of the worst homicide rates in the world, and 90 percent of all murders in the country involve a firearm.[150] But it means that criminal gangs in Central America do not always possess the means or will to acquire weapons to directly challenge the state in the same manner as criminal groups elsewhere. Instead, criminal groups such as MS-13 in El Salvador have relied on corrupting government officials to fly under the radar from public scrutiny in exchange for keeping levels of violence under control.[151] However, as larger TCOs seek to expand their networks into the lucrative trafficking routes that flow through Central America, and vie with local groups for control, the region may confront a surge in demand for more and better firearms.[152] These trends risk leaving many countries unprepared to confront violent non-state actors equipped and trained to act as paramilitaries.

Figure 7: Firearms Recovered in Central American Countries and Submitted to ATF for Tracing, 2022



No data available for Nicaragua

Source: "Data & Statistics," ATF, https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/data-statistics.

Past is Prologue

Central America's struggle with armed violence is decades in the making. During the Cold War, this region played host to three devastating civil wars—in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. These conflicts drove high demand for arms and ammunition from both governments and rebels, something the United States, the Soviet Union, and aligned countries were all too eager to supply in a bid to see their side triumph.

In El Salvador, war between the government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) raged between 1979 and the signing of the 1992 peace accords. The government pursued a brutal scorched earth strategy, which entailed major operations to sweep and clear territory of guerrilla presence. This approach not only gave way to severe human rights abuses but also an acute need for weapons to fuel the government's use of coercive violence. According to data from the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers, between 1982 and 1991, the United States shipped more than 33,000 M16 rifles, 267,000 hand grenades, and over 3,000 grenade launchers to El Salvador.[153]

Guatemala was home to the region's longest-running internal conflict, lasting from 1960 through 1996. The length of this conflict, alongside the military's pride of place in Guatemalan politics for much of the war, demanded continual resupply from foreign sources. However, when the Carter administration cut off U.S. military assistance to the Guatemalan armed forces, alternative suppliers were quick to step in. Notably, Israel supplied an estimated 15,000 Galil rifles to Guatemala from 1979 to 1981.[154] Many of these rifles remain in circulation today, with the Galil acquiring a newfound popularity among Mexican organized criminal groups to the north.[155]

Nicaragua saw the convergence of a staggering array of players seeking to arm both sides of its civil war. The Soviet Union, Cuba, Vietnam, and North Korea, among others, helped to arm the Sandinista government, which in 1989 had as many as 250,000 guns in its arsenal.[156] The United States, meanwhile, worked to supply the Contra rebels, at points via circuitous trade financed through arms sales to Iran. This resulted in perplexing outcomes at times, such as the communist bloc-aligned Sandinistas being armed with U.S.-made M16s captured by Vietnam, while the Washington-backed Contras fought with AK pattern rifles sourced from Israel via captured stocks of the Palestine Liberation Organization. The Contra war had a further ripple effect on firearms supply dynamics in neighboring Honduras. While it was spared a full-fledged civil war during this period, the country's strategic role as a staging ground for efforts in Nicaragua meant that it ranked as the second-largest recipient of U.S. military firearms (behind El Salvador) in the 1980s and early 1990s.[157]

Although the end of the Cold War heralded a wave of peace accords that brought Central America's civil wars to an end, peace on paper did little to reduce the presence of military-grade weapons in the region. Surplus firearms across the hemisphere, as a rule, were funneled into poorly maintained and often "leaky" stockpiles.[158] Governments in Central America, facing the monumental challenges of democratization, integrating former combatants, and reconstructing economies ravaged by war, often lacked the resources and will to comprehensively dispose of their vast arsenals. These challenges were exacerbated as former rebels did not comprehensively disarm; El Salvador,

for instance, found only middling enthusiasm from ex-FMLN combatants in its disarmament program.[159] In Honduras as well, 3,000 AK-47s were handed over to the government as part of a 2003 amnesty, but less than 10 years later, barely over half of these could be accounted for.[160] Similarly in Nicaragua, over 90,000 people participated in the demobilization process, but this process only yielded 17,000 guns, while in Guatemala, just 2,000 weapons were turned over as part of the peace process.[161] Accordingly, these weapons often remained with their last owners or otherwise found their way into the hands of private collectors. Having already entered the country covertly, many of these weapons simply disappeared without a trace.

Finally, the legacy of armed conflict in Central America produced a lasting impact on the region's public safety institutions. The governments that emerged from these wars faced legitimacy challenges and institutional capacity constraints that hindered their ability to deliver comprehensive security policy. This, in turn, opened the door for corruption to run rife, bringing with it organized crime, which, having simmered in the background throughout the conflict period, now emerged to take center stage. In Central America, the demand from organized crime met with ample supply from U.S. and foreign suppliers to produce a lethal new concoction.[162]

Methods and Modalities

CORRUPTION AND DIVERSION

As discussed above, Central America's surplus of firearms relative to its population has created ample opportunities to divert these stockpiles into criminal hands. Military and police stockpiles are highly opaque and subject to inconsistent monitoring and evaluation. A 2015 investigation into firearms trafficking in Honduras, for instance, found that the military did not monitor the use of ammunition, allowing officers to sign out large quantities for use in training, which could later be diverted into the hands of criminals.[163] Police stockpiles can be even more porous, as individual units may differ wildly with respect to how they register and store seized weapons. In the case of Honduras, a 2013 investigation into the police force special operations unit found that 300 rifles, along with 300,000 rounds of ammunition, disappeared from its stocks and were transported piecemeal northward, where they made their way into the hands of the Mexican Zetas cartel.[164] Most recently, in May 2024, the Honduran national police reported Salvadoran and Nicaraguan guns, "many" of which came from civil war-era stockpiles, among the 12,000 firearms seized under President Xiomara Castro's administration. Data on the exact number of guns traced to Honduras's neighbors is not currently available.[165]

One of the most high-profile cases of arms diversion from government stockpiles took place in 2001 when more than 3,000 AK-47 rifles and some 2.5 million rounds of ammunition were transferred from Nicaraguan stocks to Colombian paramilitaries. Beginning with a search by the Nicaraguan national police to obtain more modern and purpose-fit arms for their officers, the Nicaraguan government consented to the transfer from army stocks upon receiving a forged purchase order purportedly from the Panamanian national police. The arms were subsequently loaded onto the transport ship Otterloo, which, rather than sailing for Panama, docked in Turbo, Colombia, where its wares made their way into the hands of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia

(AUC), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. An investigation by the Organization of American States (OAS) found severe lapses in due diligence on the part of the Nicaraguan government and their business partner, the Guatemalan company Grupo de Representaciones Internacionales.[166] While the incident transpired more than two decades ago, and the heady days of multi-ton arms smuggling have been replaced by less-visible trafficking modalities, it nevertheless illustrates several key dynamics regarding the role diversion plays in the Central American and broader regional firearms-trafficking ecosystem.

First, it serves as a plain illustration of the risks attendant to improper compliance with firearms trade and regulations. As the OAS report found, the Panamanian government was not consulted directly at any point in the transaction, in violation of the Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacture and Trafficking in Weapons, Munitions, Explosives and Related Materials.[167] Second, it demonstrates the threat that illicit firearms pose to sovereignty. The AUC, at the time of the transfer, was not only engaged in a host of criminal enterprises, its activities and efforts to control territory directly undermined the Colombian government's ability to establish a monopoly of legitimate force over its territory. By proffering these actors military-grade arms and ammunition, the Nicaraguan government indirectly contributed to the hemisphere's longest-running civil war with weapons that had fueled Nicaragua's own internal conflict.

Finally, the episode is especially chilling in light of the current situation in Nicaragua, which has seen its government deteriorate over the past 20 years into a full-fledged dictatorship. As President Daniel Ortega has sought to consolidate ever greater control over the country, the actions of the police and armed forces have become increasingly opaque. Whereas the Nicaraguan police once held a reputation for being one of the region's more capable, if still imperfect, civil security forces, today they are best known for the suppression of protests, brutalization of detainees, and restriction of civic space.[168] Obtaining reliable information on the type, quantity, and status of the weapons in police and military arsenals has similarly become difficult. Indeed, reports of firearms seizures in Nicaragua are virtually nonexistent, and the government does not publish statistics on arms seizures with any regularity. The country appears poised to become akin to Venezuela, whose notoriously porous arms caches provide South American groups with easy access to military firearms.[169] In Honduras, government officials report that many of the AKs seized in recent years can be traced to Nicaragua. As conditions within Nicaragua deteriorate, there is a risk that the country's stockpiles grow even more porous, becoming another key node in the regional firearms supply chain.

Endemic corruption further enables stockpile diversion, especially in northern Central America. While poor accounting and a lack of technical capacity to destroy seized firearms are major challenges, the presence of corrupt actors willing to look the other way as firearms disappear from military stocks is essential for diversion to occur on such a large scale.[170] Unfortunately, examples of such corruption are rife, including at the highest levels of governance. Former Salvadoran defense minister Jose Atilio Benitez Parada, for instance, was investigated in 2016 along with other high-ranking military officials for a potential role in helping funnel arms to gangs.[171] Meanwhile, the recent conviction of former Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández in Miami on drug- and

firearms-trafficking charges showcases the prevalence of corruption at the very highest levels of national power.[172]

Figure 8: Law Enforcement and Military Firearms Holdings in Central America

Data as of 2017

Source: "Global Firearms Holdings," Small Arms Survey, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/database/global-firearms-holdings.

DELTA OF THE IRON RIVER

Central America reproduces in miniature many of the same trends common to U.S. firearms trafficking to Mexico. According to the latest ATF data, approximately 40 percent of all firearms submitted for tracing from Central America could be linked to the United States.[173] Geographic proximity to the vast U.S. firearms market, combined with entrenched organized criminal outfits, provides a continuous demand for firearms from foreign sources.

One of the main channels for firearms trafficking from the United States to Central America is through legal exports. Many Central American countries have comparatively permissive regulations surrounding civilian possession of firearms. The Guatemalan constitution, for instance, recognizes the right to own firearms, and while certain types of weapons are prohibited, there remains a robust ecosystem of gun shops in the country. In Honduras, the national armory is theoretically

the only legal dealer of weapons and ammunition, but legal uncertainty and clashes between the Ministry of Defense, which oversees the armory, and national police have created gray areas, rendering it relatively easy for citizens to obtain firearms from private dealers.[174]

These problems have been exacerbated by a renewed surge in legal imports of U.S. guns by Central America following a 2020 regulatory change that shifted oversight authority for arms sales from the U.S. Department of State to the U.S. Department of Commerce.[175] From 2020 to 2023, the number of semiautomatic pistol exports to Guatemala (the leading weapon used in violent crime in the country) more than doubled. In this period, the Central American country rapidly became the top destination for U.S. pistol exports, surpassing Brazil, a country with more than 10 times the population.[176] This wave of exports and reports that it was funneling arms to criminal groups moved the Commerce Department to act in October 2023 by suspending small-arms exports to several countries, including Guatemala, for 90 days, a move it followed up on in the spring of 2024 with tightened guidelines for export licenses and review.[177]

Firearms imports also contribute to a vicious cycle of stockpile diversion. Weapons that are imported under what are, on paper, perfectly legal conditions sometimes find their way into the hands of criminals.[178] In this case, gun store owners, private security contractors, or other importers will receive weapons and ammunition from the United States, help them clear customs and enter the country, only to later report them as lost, or else be unable to account for their whereabouts in the rare event of an end-use check being conducted.

Private security companies (PSCs) have proven to be an important vector for this method of trafficking. Central America's longstanding security challenges have driven a boom in demand for paid protection. In 2013, there were as many as 70,000 and 150,000 private security guards in Honduras and Guatemala, respectively, compared to just 14,000 and 30,000 police.[179] Staffed by ex-military and police personnel, PSCs have helped to not only drive a boom in gun imports, but they also account for an increasingly important source of diverted firearms. An investigation by Bloomberg found that in Guatemala, security firms, which are subject to even less scrutiny than military or police stockpiles, accounted for just 14.7 percent of all registered firearms but were responsible for 35.2 percent of all reported gun thefts or losses, implying that PSCs are losing and misplacing their weapons at an alarming rate.[180] In one case traced by Bloomberg, a .38 Special Smith & Wesson revolver legally imported for use by a security firm but later reported lost turned up in the pocket of a man arrested for shaking down bus drivers in Guatemala City.[181]

Although the diversion of legal gun imports is an important vector for trafficking, it alone is not sufficient, especially for criminals looking to get their hands on more powerful arms such as AR-15s, which face tighter import restrictions throughout the region. However, the lack of a land border with the United States as in Mexico does complicate the transfer process to an extent, forcing suppliers to either rely on a far longer overland route from the southern border of the United States to the southern border of Mexico or else identify more creative means of trafficking arms.

One study identified two primary routes for firearms trafficking to Guatemala: overland trafficking through Mexico and smuggling on commercial and charter airline flights. Both begin in the United

States, usually with a straw purchaser who obtains the desired firearms, usually in communication with the purchaser who directs them to the models and types to buy. In one case investigated by the ATF, a Guatemalan national concealed pistols purchased at gun shows and gun shops in commercial shipments, while in another case, the straw buyer drove the weapons himself down through Mexico.[182] Traffickers moving guns by air reportedly choose airports where luggage inspection is known to be lax, and upon arriving in the country, they either register their guns upon entry or else covertly pass off the weapons before or after passing customs. Both methods exhibit characteristics of "ant trafficking" mentioned above, breaking up shipments into small pieces to disguise their full magnitude and evade detection.[183]

Trafficking from the United States is not the only route new firearms take on their path to Central America. Indeed, while a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that the United States remains far and away the largest individual source of guns, at least 39 other countries were represented among the weapons submitted for tracing. Among the prominent non-U.S. suppliers are Brazil, China, and Turkey.[184]

The Impact of Trafficked Firearms in Central America

Armed violence is more pervasive and ubiquitous in Central America than perhaps any other region evaluated in this report. According to the UNODC's fourth global study on homicide, Central America had the highest average gun-related homicide rate of any other subregion in the Americas in 2021, at 16.9 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, as compared to 9.3 in South America and 12.7 in the Caribbean.[185] The vast majority of murders across the region involve a firearm, while as many as half of all killings can be tied to organized crime. In northern Central America, especially El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, homicide rates have declined from their mid-2010s peaks but, with the exception of El Salvador, remain among the highest in the hemisphere. Furthermore, countries that had previously been spared from regional trends in violent crime are now seeing a precipitous rise.[186] Costa Rica in particular witnessed its bloodiest year on record in 2023, with 907 murders, a 41 percent increase from the previous year.[187]

Driving these violent dynamics is the ascendancy of TCOs, especially Mexican cartels. Whereas Central America's criminal landscape was previously dominated by community-based gangs which, while brutal and destructive, largely focused on extorting businesses within a circumscribed territory, the entry of foreign TCOs has prompted a brutal turf war across Central America.[188] Gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18 are now contending with transnational and international outfits such as the Sinaloa Cartel along with their local proxies and allies, with civilians invariably caught in the cross fire.[189] Battles over territorial control furthermore entail demand for weapons of all kinds, but increasingly military-style rifles, machine guns, and explosive devices–firepower that can enable criminal outfits to overwhelm both their competitors and state security forces. For Central America, with its aforementioned deep reserves of military hardware, these trendlines point toward increasing criminal contestation and bloodshed.

The Aftermath of Exception

One of the most significant developments in the Central American security environment has been the over three years (and counting) state of exception implemented by Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele. The state of exception or "el régimen" (the regime), as it has come to be known, paired with hard-on crime, or mano dura, policies has achieved one of the most dramatic about-faces in curbing homicides in what had just a few years before been one of the most violent countries outside of an active war zone. In 2015, El Salvador had a homicide rate of 107 per 100,000 inhabitants. As of 2023, this number was just 2.4 per 100,000, the second-lowest in the hemisphere bar Canada.[190] The reduction in homicides has come at a severe cost, as El Salvador's prison population has swollen with individuals accused and convicted on dubious charges and without due process. At least 241 inmates have died in crowded and dangerous prisons, while police and security forces have seen their powers increased to a startling degree.[191] Bukele, for his part, has parlayed the extreme popularity that has come from the improvement in security conditions to dismantle El Salvador's democratic institutions and constraints on executive power. His ability to consistently deliver advances in citizen security has further increased his popularity within the region. Honduras adopted its own state of exception for a period between 2022 and 2023, Rodrigo Chaves' government in Costa Rica has flirted with similar mano dura policies to control rising levels of violence, and one of the leading candidates in Guatemala's 2023 presidential elections openly expressed admiration for Bukele's methods.[192]

The case of El Salvador also presents a novel opportunity to test theories on the link between illicit arms and violence. Curiously, while el régimen has swept up some 70,000 alleged gang members in its dragnet, it has made nowhere near the same level of progress on tracking and seizing illegal firearms.[193] Indeed, according to leaked data from the country's national police, arms seizures in El Salvador have decreased since the beginning of the state of exception. Between January 1 and March 15, 2024, just 148 firearms were seized, an average of about 74 per month. By contrast, between June 2016 and May 2017, roughly 350 firearms were seized each month, for a total of 4,206 seizures.[194] Of these seizures, just 16 were categorized as rifles, maintaining a trend observed by InSight Crime wherein the Salvadoran government's crackdown on gangs appears to have not made a dent in these groups' stocks of assault rifles.[195] There does not appear to be consensus as to why this has been the case. One argument advanced by some observers has been that the gangs are stockpiling arms in preparation for an eventual clash against the government.[196] Yet, after years of targeting by the Salvadoran security forces, this theory appears increasingly improbable. Another more likely hypothesis has been that the tactics of the Salvadoran police and military have been more focused on seizing suspected gang members than contraband such as trafficked firearms. Additionally, even prior to the state of exception, El Salvador's gangs sought to maintain control over their stockpiles, centralizing access to weapons and only handing them out to enforcers right before an attack.[197] It may well be that these caches of guns remain untouched, neglected on account of the capture or flight of the gang members who once controlled them.

It could also be the case that the gangs themselves are not the sole, or even most important, actors involved in the country's arms trade. Historically, members of the Salvadoran security

forces have been involved in high-profile arms-trafficking cases, including a 2014 plot to transfer rifles, ammunition, and explosives to the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs.[198] Investigations into the military's role in firearms trafficking have implicated two former defense ministers, as well as former president Mauricio Funes. Under Bukele's state of exception, mechanisms for holding the military and police accountable have been sidelined and much diminished. At the same time, the country's Corruption Perceptions Index score has declined each year, according to Transparency International. Taken together with reporting from InSight Crime that the security services have entered the extortion business in areas cleared of gangs, it suggests that the country may be at risk of exacerbating corruption and arms trafficking within military and police ranks.[199]

Furthermore, the number of arsenals and their geographic proximity to one another means that efforts to crack down on firearms trafficking in one Central American country are akin to squeezing a balloon. When one country makes strides in securing its arsenals or dismantling a key trafficking ring, another with weaker safeguards soon takes its place. Loss of El Salvador's police and military arsenals with their stocks of wartime materiel may end up increasing pressure to obtain arms from Honduran or Nicaraguan suppliers, or otherwise turning up the pressure for U.S.-supplied guns.[200]

Ultimately, the case of El Salvador points to the need for caution in assessing the dynamics of firearms trafficking and criminal violence. Neighboring Honduras, for instance, implemented its own state of exception, which saw an uptick in firearms seizures but did not ultimately produce the desired security improvements.[201] This should not be taken to mean that efforts to clamp down on illicit firearms are immaterial to public safety. To the contrary, recent efforts by the Legislative Assembly in El Salvador to improve the tracking and monitoring of guns within the country show there is consensus among lawmakers that addressing the firearms challenge will be crucial to lock in long-term gains in security, though whether the proposed measure will achieve its desired end remains to be seen.[202] Instead, addressing firearms trafficking should be paired with comprehensive public safety policy.

4

Firearms Trafficking to and within South America

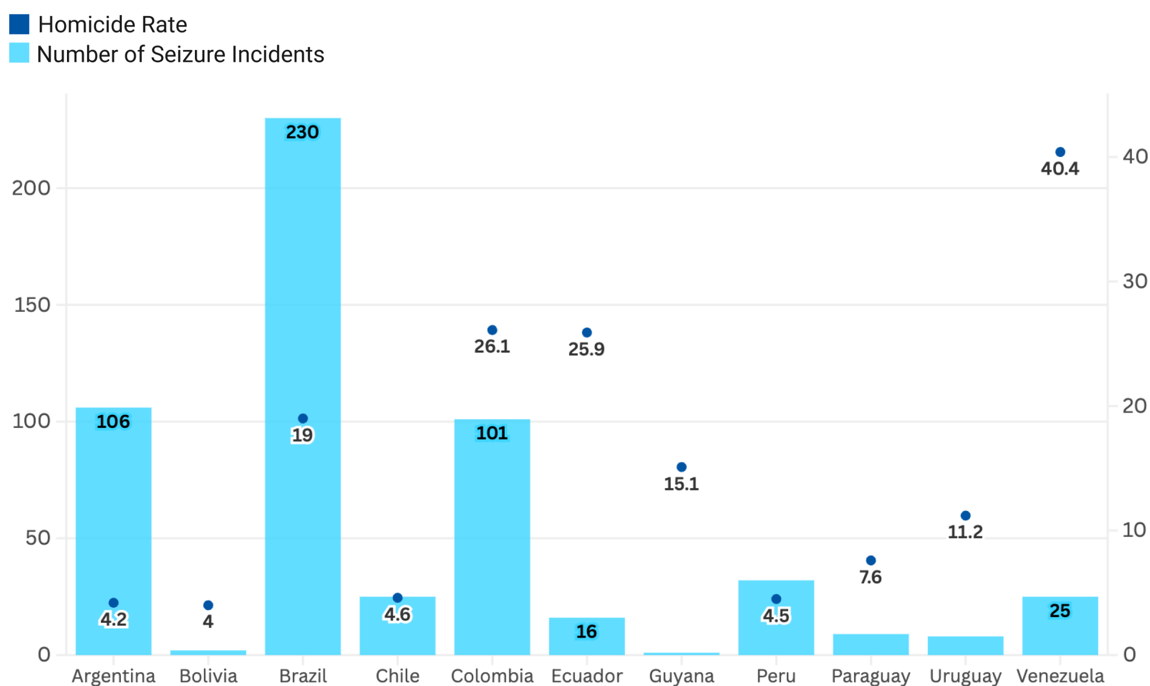
In 2024, Ecuadorean security forces seized a 9 mm handgun in the city of Guayaquil. The weapon was like many of its kind, preferred by criminal groups and law enforcement agencies alike for its portability, reliability, and availability. Subsequent forensic analysis found this weapon, in particular, could be traced to 27 individual violent incidents and a total body count of 34.[203] The episode underscored how arms trafficking has fueled an explosion in violent deaths in Ecuador over a brief period of time. It also demonstrated the nature of that country's organized criminal landscape, characterized not only by the continual arrival of new guns but also a robust internal market wherein illicit weapons change hands frequently as needed by gangs and their operatives.

Ecuador is a relatively small country within the broader South American subregion, the largest of the four surveyed in this report by population and territory. Sketching a unified picture of firearms trafficking in this region is nigh impossible in light of the sheer variety of political, social, and even geographic features that shape how and where trafficking takes place. Further complicating matters, the ATF does not include South America in its international tracing data releases, leaving researchers and governments without a key source of public data on the role of the United States in arms trafficking to this region. However, while a more fine-grained approach is needed to pinpoint the exact modalities used by traffickers across South America, it is possible to paint in broad strokes the evolving criminal paradigm that lies at the core of the region's demand for more weapons.

There are three general components to this criminal landscape. First, South America's historical role as a locus in the drug trade, especially the Andean region, has left it with powerful and

entrenched TCOs. Second, these groups are increasingly looking to diversify their sources of income, seeking to take advantage of other parts of the region's vast natural resource wealth, especially illegal mining, logging, wildlife trafficking, and even agriculture. Finally, in order to effectively branch out into these industries, established TCOs have found themselves in need of increasing firepower and more numerous foot soldiers to establish their control and keep out state security forces looking to put a halt to these new illicit operations, pushing the challenge of illicit firearms trafficking to new heights.

Figure 9: Firearms Seizure Incidents vs. Homicide Rates in South America, 2022



Source: "Small Arms, Light Weapons Dashboard 2.0," Florida International University, Security Research Hub, https://salw-dashboard.electrifai.net/analytics/main; and Juliana Manjarrés and Christopher Newton, "InSight Crime's 2023 Homicide Round-Up," InSight Crime, February 21, 2024, https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2023-homicide-round-up/.

A Match to Gasoline

Insecurity and violent organized crime are not new challenges in South America. Indeed, some groups contributing to crime and insecurity on the continent today would not have been out of place decades ago. The National Liberation Army (ELN) in Colombia or remnants of the Shining Path insurgency still active in Peru have persevered in the face of sustained efforts by the governments of both countries to disarm them. The region is also notable for its diverse security challenges. Some countries, such as Colombia, faced an insurgency that at times rose to the level of a legitimate threat to the state's continued existence, only to pull back from the brink through a hard-fought campaign (with substantial U.S. support).[204] Others, such as neighboring Venezuela, have seen the state hollowed out to such an extent that it is hard to distinguish between Nicolás

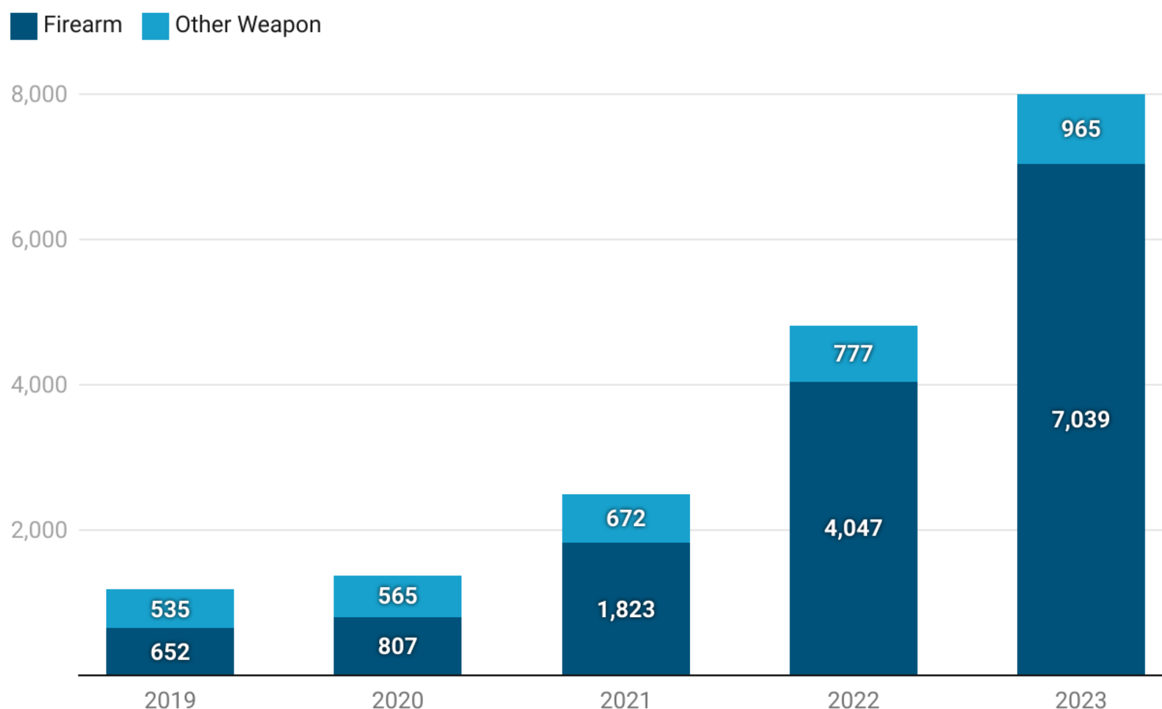
Maduro's regime and it is hard to distinguish where Nicolás Maduro's regime ends and TCOs begin.[205] Notably, countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay appear to have by and large been spared from the depredations of powerful multinational criminal enterprises.

Yet the trends outlined in the previous section, rooted in the internationalization and diversification of criminal enterprises, mean that even countries long thought to be oases of peace in an otherwise bloody hemisphere can rapidly change course. For this to happen, firearms trafficking serves as the spark which ignites further illicit activity. Ecuador again stands out as an illustrative case of this trend. Once heralded as an "island of peace," Ecuador's homicide rate has nearly doubled every year since 2020, from 7.7 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in 2020, to 13.7 per 100,000 in 2021, to 25.9 in 2022, to 44.5 in 2023.[206] This dramatic deterioration in security is the result of Ecuador becoming a primary transit point for cocaine trafficking.[207] Situated between Colombia and Peru, the number one and two producers of cocaine, respectively, TCOs have seized upon Ecuador as their transshipment country of choice. And while drugs have flowed into Ecuador, so too have weapons, pouring into the hands of local gangs who are in need of new arms to protect their valuable merchandise. In 2023, for instance, nearly 400,000 rounds of ammunition were seized by the Peruvian national police in the town of Tumbes along the Ecuador-Peru border, a 13,000 percent increase from the previous year.[208] Indeed, a Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) report suggests that Ecuadorean gangs were often paid in guns, not cash, by their benefactors, fueling a spike in violence as these groups now had to use these weapons to extract revenues from the local population, often branching out into extortion and protection rackets, and even illegal mining or logging.[209] And although the drugs left the country, often to Europe, the guns remained, enabling local gangs to more effectively war with one another over key territory and fight back against efforts by the government and police to disrupt their operations. The security crisis ultimately came to a head when newly elected president Daniel Noboa declared a state of "internal armed conflict" against 22 gangs-cum-terrorist organizations following a week of violence that saw gangs occupy prisons, open fire wantonly in the streets, and even occupy a television station live on air.[210]

One of the most notable features of the Ecuador case is the speed with which the deterioration in security occurred. While many of the seeds of this were planted long ago, especially with former president Rafael Correa's efforts to curtail security cooperation with the United States and institutionalize the gangs as community organizations, the transition in practice has been frighteningly swift. Once-vibrant neighborhoods are now no-go zones after dark, carved up by invisible but lethal borders demarcating different gangs' territories. Elsewhere in South America, challenges from simmering organized criminal activity and weak or corrupted state institutions mirror the conditions in many communities found in Ecuador circa 2019. Indeed, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay are all grappling with escalating violence within their borders.[211] In Argentina, for instance, the city of Rosario reported a murder rate in 2023 that was five times the national average, fueled by its increasing strategic importance for drug trafficking from Brazil. Chilean voters, meanwhile, consistently cite insecurity as a top concern following a rise in organized criminal activity, especially in the country's northern provinces.[212] In these cases, criminal groups are already active, but a spike in the availability of firearms can often act as a

powerful catalyst. Absent efforts to meaningfully constrain the ability of criminals to move arms and ammunition around South America, the expansionary and internationalist tendencies of organized crime bode ill for even the hemisphere's more stable and high-capacity governments to keep a lid on TCO operations.

Figure 10: Intentional Homicides in Ecuador by Type of Weapon Used, 2019–2023



Source: Adapted from Carla Álvarez, Paradise Lost? Firearms Trafficking and Violence in Ecuador (Geneva: Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, June 2024), https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Carla-A%CC%81lvarez-Paradise-lost_-Firearms-trafficking-and-violence-in-Ecuador-GI-TOC-June-2024.pdf; and "Boletín anual de homicidios intencionales en Ecuador: 2023" [Annual Bulletin of Intentional Homicides in Ecuador: 2023], OECO, 2024, https://oeco.padf.org/boletin-semestral-de-homicidios-intencionales-en-ecuador/.

Methods and Modalities

SUBVERTED STOCKPILES

As home to many of LAC's largest and best-equipped militaries and police forces, South America's armories are overflowing with high-powered weapons and ordnance.[213] The security of these stockpiles varies from country to country. For instance, Peru and Ecuador both amassed considerable military forces over the course of their long-running border conflict. Following the 1998 peace agreement between the two, Peru embarked on a considerable effort to destroy excess stocks while Ecuador did not, leaving its Ministry of Defense with thousands of surplus arms to safeguard and control.[214]

In Brazil, police stockpile management has proven a serious challenge. A survey by the Brazilian NGO Instituto Sou da Paz (ISDP) reported that 9 state police forces only used paper records, while 20 used electronic systems but under various methodologies (another 4 did not respond to the survey), resulting in an incomplete understanding of firearm diversion at the national level.[215] ISDP subsequently found 185 cases of diversion from police stockpiles in Bahia, Pernambuco, and São Paulo states alone.[216]

As in Central America, stockpile insecurity in one country creates challenges for others, as traffickers can easily move weapons through porous borders to supply the demand for weapons elsewhere. Brazilian authorities have, for instance, seized weapons dating to the Falklands/Malvinas War originally from Argentine military stocks. In Peru's case, despite efforts to destroy surplus arms, government armories have proven surprisingly leaky; the country has played a role sourcing grenades to TCOs throughout the continent.[217]

Venezuela is a particularly concerning case where military stockpiles not only contain advanced and highly destructive equipment, but state control over these is absent at best and potentially incentivizing diversion at worst.[218] In a September 2023 raid on Tocorón prison, for instance, a base of operations for the notorious Tren de Aragua organized crime outfit, Venezuelan authorities uncovered anti-tank rocket launchers and artillery rockets, weapons far beyond the kind inmates would be able to merely smuggle in through civilian straw purchasers.[219] Notably, Venezuela's arsenals also contain thousands of man-portable surface-to-air missiles and their associated launchers, or man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS).[220] These weapons could provide any armed group with a highly advanced capability to hold at risk military and civilian aircraft alike. While no criminal group has publicly used MANPADS in LAC to date, a loose Soviet anti-aircraft missile and a U.S. Redeye launcher have turned up on separate occasions in Mexico, the latter of which was found in an arms cache belonging to members of La Línea cartel.[221] The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) as well were known to possess a limited number of legacy Soviet SA-7 systems in bases along the Colombia-Ecuador border.[222] In all cases, the systems seized were outdated at the time of their capture and extremely limited in quantity, speaking to the continued robustness of regional arms control measures for these high-end weapons systems. However, even outdated MANPADS can pose a threat to civil aviation, and strict controls around anti-aircraft missiles have not stopped criminal groups from trying to get their hands on more advanced systems on at least one occasion.[223]

ARTISANS AND ARMORERS

The longstanding presence of criminally and politically motivated non-state armed groups in South America has given rise to a sophisticated ecosystem of illicit armorers who can help assemble and maintain artisanal weapons built virtually from scratch. This practice was pioneered by the FARC and ELN in Colombia, which, over the course of their decades-long insurgencies, had ample opportunity to cultivate a dedicated corps of gunsmiths able to keep weapons working and even construct their own arms and ammunition.[224] In 2011, for instance, Ecuadorean police raided an alleged clandestine firearms factory in Quito which was helping to supply the FARC fronts operating out of the border regions.[225] In 2013, the Colombian military discovered another such facility, this

one dedicated to the production of artillery shells.[226] Today, arms trafficking in Colombia often relies on the shipping of individual parts of a weapon separately for later assembly in country. Often, criminals will use firearms receivers which are machined to be only 80 percent finished, and hence do not legally constitute a firearm, in conjunction with parts from Colombian military and police rifles to produce custom AR-15 equivalents.

Similar practices can be found across South America, especially as criminal groups look to obtain more powerful and fully automatic weapons. These tend to be more difficult to purchase on the legal or gray markets and harder to traffic wholesale. However, unfinished receivers offer a convenient workaround for groups looking to increase their firepower. Alternatively, in Brazil, popular firearms observed in the SALW dataset are rifles made from U.S. parts with airsoft lower receivers typically sourced from China.[227] These weapons stand out for their distinctive branding, typically consisting of a falsified Colt logo on one side and a Punisher logo on the other. As of 2022, these weapons were typically manufactured in Paraguay and smuggled into Brazil.

The rising accessibility of 3D printing has also been a cause for concern. In 2022, U.S. and Brazilian authorities conducted a joint operation to bring down a gun-trafficking ring based out of Florida and Rio de Janeiro.[228] The group would covertly traffic ammunition and parts from the United States through multiple ports of entry into Brazil where the finished weapons were completed using 3D-printed parts. Although 3D-printed weapons remain a marginal piece of the firearms trafficking puzzle overall, their ability to streamline the manufacturing of weapons by, for instance, printing the receiver (the only piece of a gun considered to be the firearm itself under U.S. law) has led these so-called ghost guns to become a priority for U.S. small-arms-control efforts.[229]

In Ecuador, artisanal firearms consistently top industrial guns in police statistics of weapons seizures.[230] Reportedly, these weapons differ significantly in quality and reliability but make up for these flaws by being effectively untraceable. These advantages are well worth the cost for gunmen looking for a weapon to use and then dispose of to evade capture. In recent years, seizures of industrial firearms appear to be on the rise as well, speaking to the burgeoning demand for firepower of all types as the security situation in Ecuador continues to deteriorate.[231]

FROM LEGAL TO BLACK MARKET

Paradoxically, rising levels of violence and insecurity brought on by heavily armed criminal groups have resulted in a new vector for arms trafficking in the form of liberalized regulations surrounding civilian firearms possession. If organized crime is able to draw upon ever-greater stocks of weaponry, the argument goes, so too should civilians have the opportunity to be better armed for their own defense. Brazil has been a standard-bearer for this initiative and, under Bolsonaro, took steps to increase the accessibility of arms for citizens. These included increasing the number of weapons and the quantity of ammunition a single person could possess, as well as authorizing civilians to carry “9mm pistols, .40 semiautomatic carbines, 9mm AR-type semiautomatic carbines and 33-round Colts,” weapons previously only authorized for military and police personnel.[232] These changes resulted in a dramatic increase in arms imports by Brazil, with imports of handguns rising by 94 percent between 2019 and 2020.

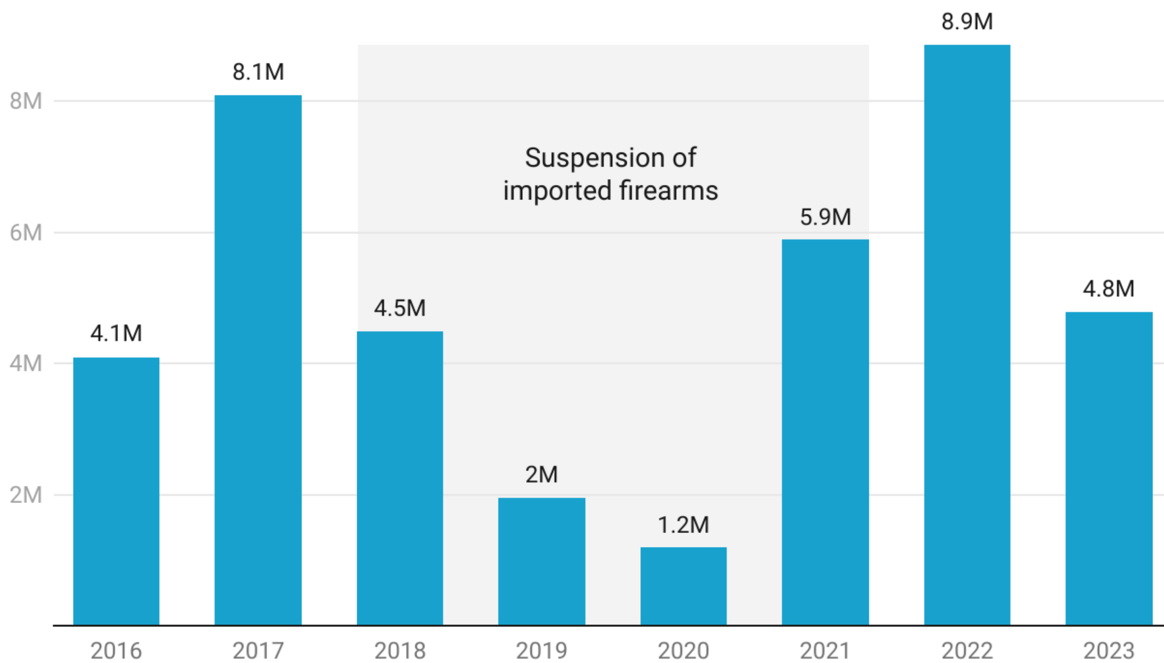
However, the speed with which the liberalization of firearm ownership laws in Brazil were implemented complicated arms control efforts, especially as Bolsonaro's initiatives allocated no budget increase for stockpile management and, according to the Igarapé Institute and the ISDP, in fact cut the budget for inspections of firearms shops, creating a new window for crime guns to enter the country.[233] Finally, the dramatic rise in civilian gun ownership precipitated by these moves raised concerns about increasing the supply of illicit firearms as a consequence of quotidian theft and robbery. According to another study, between 2011 and 2020, 47 percent of all victims of firearms diversion in São Paulo were employed in the private sector (by contrast, just under 23 percent of victims were either police, military, or public servants).[234]

In the face of a cresting crime wave, Ecuador has also sought to make it easier for private citizens to own and carry firearms. Between 2022 and 20233, Guillermo Lasso's administration walked back much of the previous Correa-era firearms regulation which, among other measures, imposed a 300 percent sales tax on all purchases of firearms and ammunition.[235] Lasso dropped this tax to just 30 percent while also increasing the import quotas for firearm purchases by private security companies. However, Ecuador's experience also underscores the crucial importance of pairing any change in firearms regulation with significant investments in institutional capacity-building efforts. According to a recent GI-TOC study, while the decrees made it easier for Ecuadorean citizens to carry firearms for protection on paper, obtaining a new license under this process required psychiatric and toxicology tests, yet "the country's arms control computer system does not yet have a list of professional forensic psychiatrists and psychologists who are authorized to perform the tests and issue the corresponding certificates, nor does it have a list of health establishments equipped to perform the toxicological analysis."[236] Accordingly, as of February 2024, it remained theoretically impossible to obtain a license to carry under this new regime. Nevertheless, firearms imports by private security firms have dramatically increased, presenting new avenues for diversion through theft, loss, or corruption.[237]

Finally, in Paraguay, the pendulum of firearms regulation has swung back and forth in recent years. Between 2016 and 2023, the country imported roughly 130,000 weapons of various types, though this was punctuated by a three-year suspension of weapons imports from May 2018 to 2021. Imports peaked in 2022, the first year after import restrictions were eased, with the Paraguayan National Customs Directorate reporting the importation of nearly 29,000 firearms that year.[238] This figure has drawn international and domestic scrutiny as excessive for a country of 7.4 million people, far outstripping the needs of the anticipated internal market for firearms. These suspicions appear corroborated by a set of recent high-profile arms-trafficking cases involving Paraguay. A trilateral operation by Brazilian, Paraguayan, and U.S. authorities in 2023 found that the company International Auto Supply worked together with Paraguay's Directorate of War Materiel to funnel 25,000 guns to the organized crime syndicates First Capital Command (PCC) and Red Command in Brazil.[239] Interpol's largest-ever firearms trafficking case, Operation Trigger IX, also featured Paraguay in its crosshairs as a key transshipment point for firearms trafficking to Brazil. In response, the Paraguayan government has made strides to improve transparency and combat illicit firearms trafficking. These modifications were introduced to incentivize civilians to register arms and included a 50 percent reduction in the cost to register firearms, limited annual importations of

firearms, and the implementation of a ballistic fingerprint system.[240] Initial reports suggest that these efforts are beginning to have a positive effect, though by making Paraguay a less attractive target for arms traffickers, they may in fact be displacing more of this trade to nearby Uruguay and Argentina, thus illustrating the need for heightened cross-regional cooperation to tackle the threat of illicit arms fully.[241] In Uruguay, one expert interviewed by CSIS highlighted that police have found themselves in the crosshairs of gun traffickers. The 9 mm sidearms carried by the Uruguayan national police are favored weapons across the border in Brazil, leading to criminal groups seeking to either divert police stocks or outright attack and steal these weapons from officers.[242]

Figure 11: Small Arms Import Reports for Paraguay, 2016–2023



Note: All values are in then-year USD. UN Comtrade commodity categories used are 930120, 930190, 930200, 930320, 930330. Chart format adapted from Beatriz Vicent Fernández, “Arms Trafficking Case Puts Europe-Paraguay Pipeline on the Map,” InSight Crime, January 11, 2024, https://insightcrime.org/news/arms-trafficking-europe-paraguay-pipeline/.

Source: “UN Comtrade Database,” United Nations, accessed September 16, 2024, https://comtradeplus.un.org/TradeFlow?-Frequency=A&Flows=X&CommodityCodes=TOTAL&Partners=0&Reporters=all&period=2023&AggregateBy=none&Break-downMode=plus.

The Impact of Trafficked Firearms in South America

The flow of illicit firearms across South America has escalated existing conflict by intensifying confrontations between criminal organizations and facilitating other criminal activities. In 2021, the region reported 55,100 gun-related homicides. Firearms are primarily used by organized crime gangs to control and compete with other criminal groups but also fuel other criminal activities such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and smuggling.[243] The consequences of firearms trafficking

and the violence it produces fall disproportionately upon the marginalized populations of South America. This is especially true as TCOs expand their reach into new markets and categories of economic activity. Groups seeking to break into new industries need weapons to assert control and often to inflict lethal violence as a form of signaling to would-be competitors that they are willing to fight for their slice of the pie. Illegal mining is emblematic of this threat. In the Brazilian Amazon, from 2018 to 2023, illicit miners known as garimpeiros moved in droves to exploit the natural resources on the protected territories of several of the country's Indigenous tribes. The Yanomami people were among the hardest hit, facing famine, water insecurity, and disease, in addition to violence at the hands of the miners. The humanitarian crisis eventually grew to such a fever pitch that outside observers deemed it a genocide, and the intervention of the Brazilian Armed Forces was needed to curb the activities of the garimpeiros.[244] This crisis was enabled by the wildcat miners' access to firearms and connections to organized crime, which allowed them to violently stake their claim on protected territory and challenge the Brazilian state within these remote environs.[245]

South America has faced a remarkable increase in homicides caused by firearms. Guayaquil, Ecuador, ranks among the largest violent cities in the world, with a homicide rate of 88.82 per 100,000 inhabitants.[246] In addition, the proportion of Ecuador's homicides committed with a firearm increased from 55.5 percent in the first half of 2019 to 88.1 percent in the first half of 2023.[247] This epidemic of armed violence across South America is responsible for over 60 percent of homicides in the region.[248] Tensions between criminal groups or an increase in illicit economies such as drug trafficking tend to result in higher rates of firearms-related homicides. In recent years, Rosario, Argentina, has become the center of the highest rate of homicides in the country.[249] Rosario's proximity to Paraguay and Bolivia has facilitated the flow of drugs, resulting in an increased presence of criminal groups and armed violence. In Brazil, of the 50,000 homicides in 2022, 78 percent were caused by a firearm.[250] The threat of firearms is not limited to the increase in homicide rates but also to a diversity of criminal activities involving kidnapping, extortion, and gun violence threatening and intimidating communities across the region.

Triple Threat

South America's so-called Triple Frontier, the shared border area between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, presents a microcosm of the region's struggles with firearms trafficking. The three countries involved each make up a piece of the overall puzzle. Brazil, in particular, as home to some of the hemisphere's strongest criminal groups, especially the PCC, is a choice destination for trafficked firearms. Paraguay, while small compared to both its neighbors, grapples with endemic corruption and porous borders that make it an appealing transit country for arms traffickers.[251] Paraguay also experienced the largest robbery in its history at the hands of the PCC, when dozens of heavily-armed men assaulted the headquarters of a private security firm in Ciudad del Este on the Brazil-Paraguay border, making off with millions from the company's vaults.[252] Finally, while Argentina faces the lowest levels of organized crime penetration and violence among the three, its wealth and ports means the country is a prime market and transshipment point for traffickers.[253]

The Paraguay-Brazil route is one of the major trafficking paths for firearms in South America. Even after Bolsonaro's regulatory changes, Brazilian criminal groups such as the PCC still prefer to get their arms through third countries, with Paraguay serving as a common go-between from firearms suppliers to their end users in Brazil. While the nature of the clandestine arms market makes it difficult to estimate average prices for illicit firearms, in at least one case, this has proven a lucrative arrangement for arms traffickers, with an investigation in Argentina finding that arms purchased from the United States for between $800 and $1,000 were sold to criminals for as much as $20,000 **in Brazil**.[254] Paraguay's low import duties on firearms and high levels of organized crime penetration within the government and military further incentivize arms traffickers to make it their supplier of choice. Indeed, even though Brazil possesses a robust domestic small-arms industry, a rarity in LAC, Paraguay remains a preferred trafficking route for traffickers to move handguns and rifles manufactured in the United States and Europe into Brazil.[255]

The Triple Frontier countries furthermore occupy a crucial geographic position amid the evolving and increasingly Atlantic-oriented narcotics landscape.[256] The port of Santos in southeastern Brazil has seen an explosion in violence by armed gangs competing with each other, much like Ecuador, to control and co-opt the port and its environs. Meanwhile, Argentina has been slow to react to the growth of cocaine transiting through its ports, seizing just 7.3 tons in 2023, nearly 10 times less than the amount seized in neighboring Brazil, and likely a small fraction of the total which has transited through the country's ports, especially Rosario.[257] Even Paraguay, while landlocked, is connected via riverine networks to Argentina, which are appealing routes for the country's local criminal groups to ship illicit cannabis into the Argentine market.[258] These criminal dynamics intersect with an environment of diverse non-state armed groups along the Triple Frontier.

The PCC again stands head and shoulders above other groups due to its strength in numbers, financial acumen, international connections, and brutality. The group has persistently worked to internationalize its operations, now reportedly counting members in 23 countries outside of Brazil, including a sizeable presence in Lusophone Africa and in European ports, which are the primary destinations for its illicit cocaine exports. In Brazil's recent regional elections, scholars raised concerns over the growing intervention by the group in politics.[259] In this way, the PCC is one of the TCOs which best represents how a new style of organized crime is driving up demand for illicit firearms. Along with the PCC's geographic expansion comes a need for more weapons to arm its members and muscle out rival groups. Even as groups like the PCC continue to internationalize, the Triple Frontier will likely remain a focal point for arms trafficking and organized criminal activity, to the detriment of governments and citizens on all sides.

5

Firearms Trafficking to and within the Caribbean

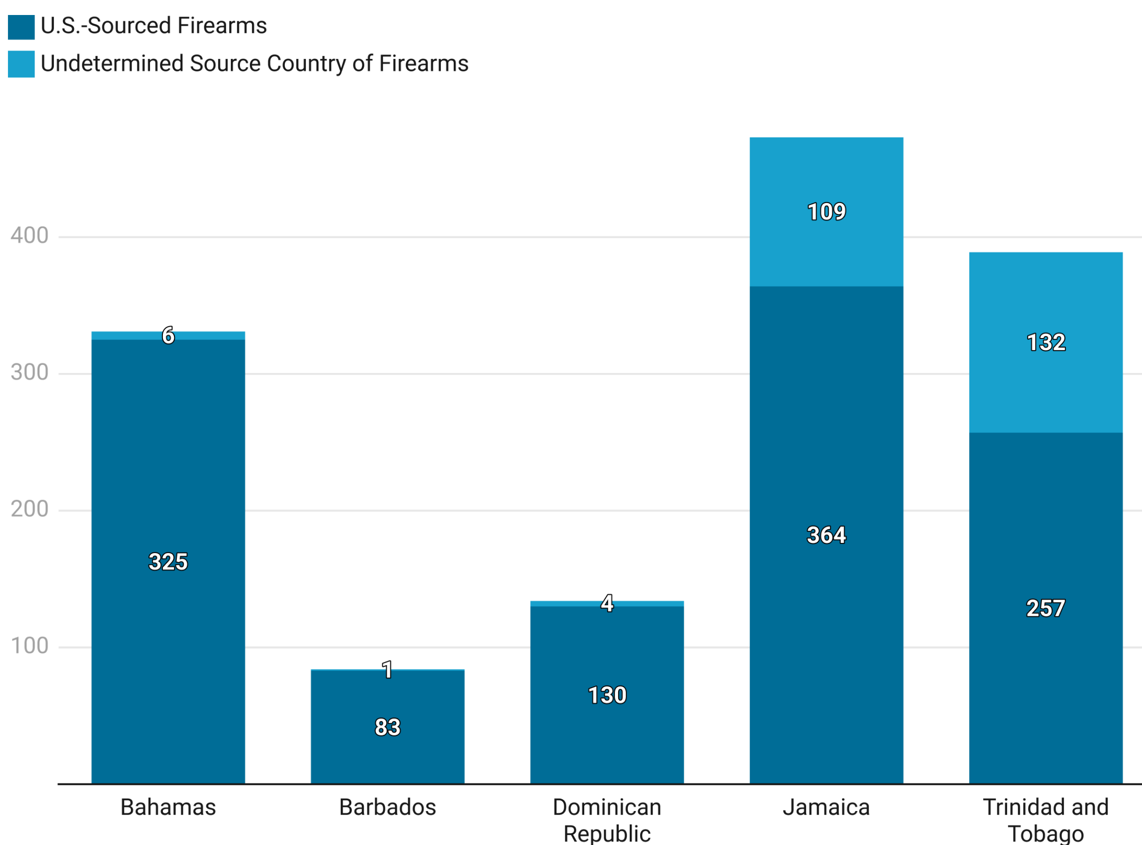
In March of 2023, Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Belize, Jamaica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago joined in an amicus brief in support of Mexico's suit against U.S. gun manufacturers.[260] The move by these countries, all members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), illustrates the extent to which the threat of firearms trafficking from the United States is perceived as a regional issue, and the acuteness of the issue in the Caribbean especially. Indeed, the brief noted that a majority of firearms seized in the Caribbean and submitted for tracing through the ATF returned with a link to the United States. In The Bahamas, less than 200 miles off the coast of Florida, the ATF found that 99.2 percent of traced firearms were sourced from the United States.[261]

Measured by total number of countries, the Caribbean is the largest subregion examined by this report. It is also the least populated, accounting for just 1 percent of the global population. These factors present a unique challenge and operating environment for efforts to curtail firearms trafficking. First, the sheer number of countries means achieving regional cooperation on the illicit trade of firearms is a major challenge. Different regulatory regimes, as well as the sheer number of potential ports of entry and lengthy and unsecured coastlines, provide traffickers with ample opportunity to smuggle in illicit arms.

Furthermore, the small size of many of these countries means that it does not take a significant injection of weapons to have a major impact on public safety. For instance, St. Kitts and Nevis topped InSight Crime's 2023 Homicide Roundup, with a murder rate of 65 per 100,000 inhabitants, surpassing that of Honduras, Ecuador, and barely edging out Jamaica.[262] It achieved this with just

31 reported murders but a low overall population of roughly 46,000. Effectively keeping weapons out of the hands of organized criminal operations in these small Caribbean countries is, therefore, a major challenge, as even a handful of guns can produce a significant effect on the safety and security of their citizens.

Figure 12: Firearms Recovered in Select Caribbean Countries and Submitted to ATF for Tracing, 2022



Source: "Data & Statistics," ATF, https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/data-statistics.

The Caribbean's largest countries have not been spared this threat either. Most notably, Haiti has descended into a state of domestic chaos and frequently teeters on the brink of complete state failure. In early September 2024, a state of emergency was extended across the entire country.[263] Illegal firearms are key to this crisis, offering gangs the firepower not only to overwhelm the Haitian national police but to deny whole neighborhoods to international aid organizations and force any effort by the Kenyan-led MSS to confront the possibility of costly and bloody urban combat.[264] Other regional heavyweights such as Jamaica have also been forced to declare states of emergency and deploy their armed forces to confront gangs that have grown powerful and violent through the illicit arms trade.[265]

Limiting the spread of illicit guns throughout the Caribbean is, accordingly, a thorny challenge, but much of the groundwork exists already. The region has strong multilateral security institutions, including the CARICOM Implementing Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS), which has focused its attention on grappling with the scope of the firearms challenge of late. Furthermore, the United States, through the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) and U.S. Southern Command's Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-South), has the institutional foundation necessary to become an active partner in curtailing the arms trade in the region. However, these mechanisms need an urgent rethink to effectively improve security across such a vast and diverse territory.

Drugs Out, Guns In

The rising demand for guns from the Caribbean's criminal groups is inextricably tied to the region's growing relevance to the international drug trade. South America is currently producing record levels of cocaine, especially in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, where the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy reported that production increased by 256 percent, 103 percent, and 48 percent, respectively, over the past decade.[266] While the United States historically provided much of the demand for cocaine from the hemisphere, Europe has more recently taken its place as the market of choice, with cocaine fetching higher prices and facing lower barriers to entry than the U.S. market.[267] However, traditional cocaine producers have also taken steps to harden their borders. Colombia, especially, has systematically strengthened its port security, intelligence capabilities, and naval and aerial interdiction capabilities, forcing traffickers to move through more circuitous routes. The Caribbean, with its proximity to cocaine producers, access to Europe, and overall weak port security infrastructure, is proving an environment ripe for exploitation by traffickers. Furthermore, the Caribbean subregion is also home to many European overseas territories, which have more permissive customs regimes and direct transatlantic flights to European capitals. French Guyana and the French Antilles, for instance, were the source of more than half of all cocaine seized by France in 2022.[268]

Common trafficking routes typically run over land from Colombia to Venezuela, where border controls and state capacity are weaker amid the continued presence of armed groups steeped in the drug trade, such as the ELN. From there, traffickers load the product onto boats and either speed quickly to major ports in countries such as the Dominican Republic or else go "island hopping" up from Trinidad and Tobago through the Antilles before finding a suitable location to send their illicit cargo onward to Europe.[269]

The Caribbean's growing role in the transnational drug trade has resulted in a greater share of the profits from the industry. This, in turn, fuels firearms trafficking through two mechanisms. First, criminal groups now have the cash needed to purchase firearms from traffickers, who often buy arms for cheap in the United States. The UNODC, for instance, reports that a handgun purchased for between $400 and $500 in the United States can be sold for as much as $10,000 in Haiti, allowing trafficking networks to turn sizable profits.[270] Second, as criminal organizations find themselves needing to defend key transit points from potential competition and government forces, they seek to purchase more firepower, driving up violence within many Caribbean countries.

The firearms trade also overlaps with the intra-regional drug trade. For instance, reports have surfaced of a guns-for-drugs scheme linking Haiti and Jamaica. Well-armed Haitian gangs are known to trade weapons for Jamaican-grown cannabis, enlisting local fishermen as intermediaries to help facilitate the transfers.[271] The drugs are later sold, often in the Dominican Republic, which is an ideal target due to its land border with Haiti. This relationship demonstrates a self-contained regional cycle of illicit trafficking. It also illuminates how, in the evolving transnational criminal economy, groups increasingly trade their illicit wares directly with one another. With the reduced use of cash, commodities are king, with InSight Crime reporting, for instance, that 30 pounds of cannabis trades for approximately one assault rifle.[272] Similar patterns play out elsewhere in the region, with Interpol's Operation Trigger VII, carried out with over a dozen Caribbean nations, emphasizing "the convergence of trafficking routes and the use of firearms used to control the illegal drug trade."[273]

Methods and Modalities

MIAMI'S IRON RIVER

Existing data suggests that the United States ranks as the predominant supplier of both legal and illegal firearms to the Caribbean. Indeed, ATF data suggests that the United States may provide an even greater proportion of guns to the region than it does for Mexico. However, while the U.S.-Mexico border has long been the subject of (not always effective) efforts to harden it against illegal trade in weapons and drugs, the United States' so-called third border with the Caribbean has not received the same level of attention or sustained focus. Combined with the sheer volume of maritime commerce, tourism, and trade that binds the southeastern United States and the Caribbean together, states such as Florida have become a prime source of firearms trafficked to the region.[274] The Bahamas, for instance, reported that 90 percent of all U.S.-sourced firearms recovered by authorities could be traced to Florida, followed distantly by Georgia at less than 3 percent.[275]

While AR-15s and other long guns lie at the heart of cross-border arms-trafficking tensions between the United States and Mexico, handguns remain the weapon of choice within the Caribbean. According to Interpol data, handguns make up 88 percent of all firearms submitted for tracing from the region.[276] This difference is likely the consequence of differing patterns of criminal activity, with Caribbean organizations tending to take the form of community-based gangs that lack a significant need for heavier firepower to contend with one another or overawe state forces.

Trafficking from the United States to this region takes many pathways to reach its final destination. One commonality, however, as outlined by a recent landmark study conducted by the Small Arms Survey and CARICOM IMPACS, is the simplicity of the trafficking pathways. The report found that: "Unlike the elaborate transcontinental arms trafficking operations documented by UN investigators in other parts of the world, the schemes used to smuggle firearms to the Caribbean require minimal knowledge, skill, or planning to execute."[277] This is the result in part of weak customs and enforcement practices at ports of entry across Caribbean countries, but also the vast amount of commerce that occurs between the United States and the region on a daily basis. Traffickers exploit virtually every facet of this trade to their benefit, from private yachts and chartered boats

to international mail delivery services and even commercial airlines. The most common modality, however, is through maritime shipping, which accounted for 24 percent of all firearms trafficking, according to the report. International marine commerce is already a notoriously facile route for illegal goods. According to estimates from Caribbean officials, just 2 percent of all shipping containers arriving in the region are inspected, while U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) inspects less than 4 percent of cargo entering the United States.[278]

Provided traffickers take basic precautions to disguise their arms, such as by storing them in secret compartments, in the panels of cars, or even inside cereal boxes, they can be reasonably sure the weapons will reach the container's intended destination. More elaborate schemes have also been documented, such as concealing weapons in shipments of raw meat to deter customs officials from inspecting the cargo.[279] Disassembling weapons and ammunition before shipment is another common practice to further lower the profile of the trade and reduce the chances of inspection. Once the weapons reach the region, they are picked up by local smuggling networks, who help to guide them to their final destinations.

WEAK BARRIERS, FEWER BRIDGES

Any response to firearms trafficking in the Caribbean must be multinational to succeed. Without strengthening all countries' ability to interdict illicit firearms and dismantle the organizations that profit from them, the region risks death by a thousand cuts as weapons continue to flow through the most vulnerable ports of entry. To this extent, the multilateral cooperation promoted by CARICOM IMPACS is of vital importance, as is the Regional Security System (RSS), a collective security organization which counts Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines among its membership.[280] However, alignment on policy priorities for these regional mechanisms remains a challenge, as different countries and areas of the Caribbean confront starkly different threats. The Dominican Republic, for instance, has come under pressure from other Caribbean states over its hardline approach to neighboring Haiti, complicating efforts to forge a unified security policy toward the country.[281] Corruption and the co-optation of security forces, especially customs officials, is another major impediment to strengthening cooperation between Caribbean countries and with partners in the United States and Europe.

At a practical level, many Caribbean countries lack the resources to implement an overhaul of their maritime and port security institutions that would improve detection of illicit firearms. In a study of 12 CBSI member countries conducted by the Center for Naval Analyses, just one country, the Dominican Republic, was rated as having "high" port security. Two countries, the Dominican Republic and The Bahamas, were also rated as having "high" maritime patrol and interdiction capabilities, the remaining countries suffered as a consequence of insufficient numbers of offshore patrol vessels, aircraft, and reconnaissance capabilities to detect unlawful movements within their waters.[282]

ATF data presents another weakness in tracing firearms in the region. Given the predominance of U.S. guns in the Caribbean arms market, the ATF is a key partner for helping trace seized weapons back to their suppliers. However, a successful trace reveals only the last legal point of sale or

legitimate import, not potential third countries or intermediate steps. In the Caribbean, traffickers often employ "island-hopping" strategies to move illicit wares through multiple jurisdictions on their way to the final destination, further complicating efforts to understand and dismantle trafficking routes. In the case of the Cayman Islands, a British overseas territory, guns originally legally sold in the United States are first trafficked from Miami to Jamaica, where gangs coordinate with their Cayman counterparts to supply illicit arms thirdhand.[283] Finally, while a plethora of agencies contribute to arms control and interdiction efforts in the region, U.S. authorities are not fit for purpose to deal with the growing threat of firearms trafficking in the Caribbean. JIATF-South, the United States' premier interagency player for addressing security threats in and through the Caribbean, is required to focus narrowly on the interdiction of drugs bound for the United States. This means that even in cases where the task force is aware of an illicit arms shipment bound for a Caribbean partner, it cannot move to interdict without also confirming the presence of narcotics aboard. Reforming these authorities would grant the United States wider remit and help remedy some of the maritime patrol and interdiction shortfalls observed throughout the region.

HOMEGROWN KNOWLEDGE

A final emerging challenge and source for crime guns in the Caribbean is privately made or "artisanal" weapons. Artisanal firearms in the Caribbean vary wildly in their sophistication, from flare guns modified to carry lethal ammunition to a fully 3D-printed FGC-9 submachine gun seized in Trinidad and Tobago in 2023.[284] Additionally, in some cases only parts of the weapon will be homemade, such as when an unfinished lower receiver is shipped to a country to be milled and turned into a workable component of a gun.

Furthermore, organized crime outfits in the Caribbean have proven adept at modifying firearms to become more lethal. This is primarily done through the addition of conversion devices or "selector switches," which convert semiautomatic handguns into fully automatic weapons. Between April 2023 and April 2024, CARICOM IMPACS and the Small Arms Survey detected at least 11 instances of firearms modified with these switches in St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.[285]

A notable step forward occurred in 2023 when a police raid on a workshop in Trinidad and Tobago uncovered the first reported use of 3D printers for arms manufacturing within the Caribbean.[286] This incident has been followed by reports of 3D-printed weapons in Antigua and Barbuda, Jamaica, and St. Lucia, pointing to the versatility this technology offers to illegal manufacturers who are now able to manufacture sensitive parts, accessories, and even entire guns and deliver these directly to their end users, avoiding the circuitous trafficking routes and increased risk of seizure from smuggling whole firearms.[287]

The Impact of Trafficked Firearms in the Caribbean

Criminal violence remains a major challenge for the Caribbean, which, according to the UNODC, generates nearly a quarter of all globally recorded homicides, producing a regional murder rate of 15.1 per 100,000 inhabitants.[288] The proliferation of firearms in the region, as with others, has been a significant driver of these murders, with guns involved in half of all homicides regionally. In some

Police forces take part in an operation against powerful gangs in the city center near the National Palace in Port-au-Prince on July 9, 2024.

Photo: Clarens Siffroy/Getty Images

of the Caribbean's most violent countries, such as Jamaica and Haiti, these numbers rise to 90 percent and 84 percent, respectively.

In a novel effort to quantify the effects of gun violence, CARICOM IMPACS and the Small Arms Survey sought to estimate the medical and productivity costs associated with shootings in three countries, The Bahamas, Barbados, and Jamaica. These estimates for 2019 found that gun violence imposed an approximately $135 million cost on the Jamaican economy, equivalent to 0.9 percent of GDP.[289] In all three countries, lethal violence imposed the greatest estimated costs. As homicide rates have continued to rise in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean, the illicit arms trade is exacting an even steeper economic toll, to say nothing of the families and communities left decimated by gun violence.

Finally, Haiti serves as a sobering example of how armed criminal groups can push a country toward a full-blown humanitarian crisis. Gangs in that country exacerbate virtually all facets of human need, preventing access to medical care by shutting down neighborhoods and threatening and intimidating individuals to worsen the country's migration crisis. Furthermore, an emerging literature has shown the connection between access to illicit firearms and the epidemic of GBV in the country.[290]

Guns, Gangs, and State Collapse

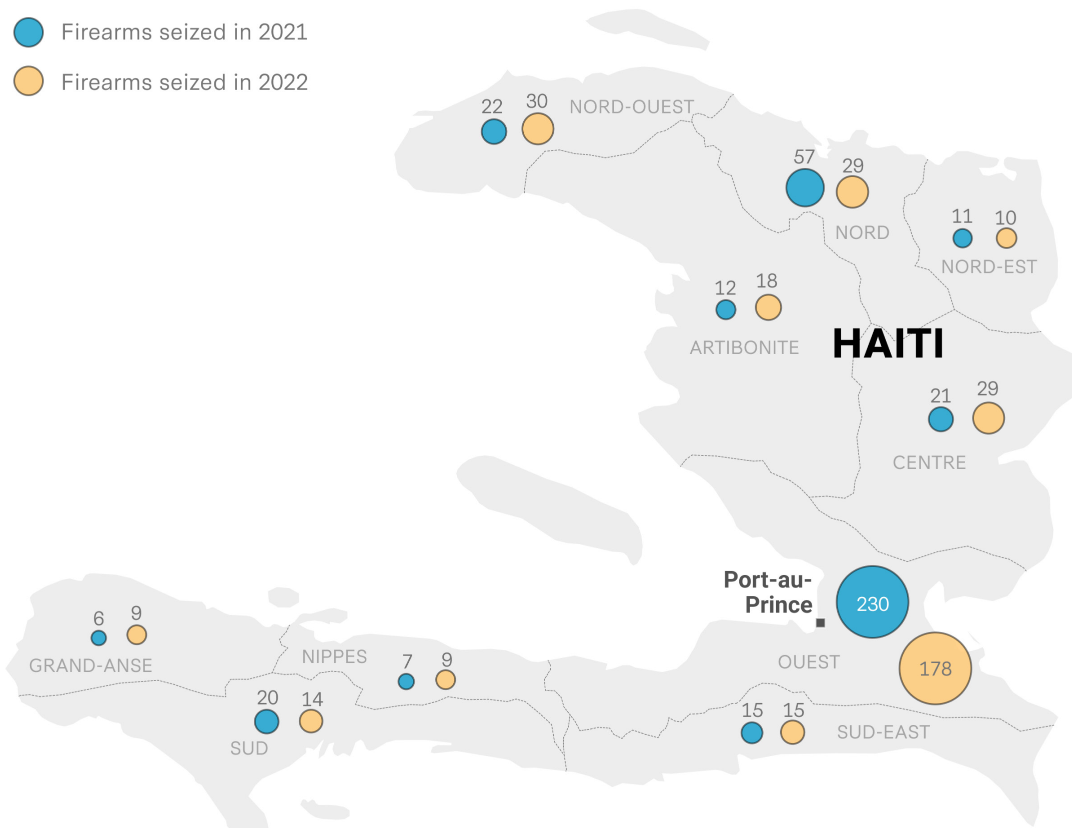
Perhaps no country better exemplifies the destructive intersection of illicit arms, organized crime, and the breakdown of sovereignty than Haiti. Since the 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, the country has entered a spiral of compounding political, security, and humanitarian crises that have pushed its institutions to the breaking point. Gangs, buoyed by this chaos, have come to exercise de facto control over swathes of the country, especially in the capital of Port-au-Prince, home to roughly a fifth of the island's population. While the causes and dynamics of this ongoing crisis are manifold, one especially important consequence of this deteriorating security situation has been the need for gangs to acquire more and more weapons to consolidate their gains and resist both Haitian government and international efforts to restore order. As a result, and unlike much of the Caribbean, Haiti has become a primary destination for rifles and machine guns trafficked from the United States.

Heavily dependent on imports, which it received through porous seaports and border crossings with the Dominican Republic, Haiti is especially vulnerable to the dynamics of firearms trafficking observed in the Caribbean. The country has 1,770 kilometers of coastline, but a coast guard just 181 strong with a single operational patrol boat. Its border patrol is less than 200-strong as well, and is responsible

for covering nearly 400 kilometers of border with the Dominican Republic, among other tasks.[291] Corruption among customs officials means that cargo inspections are few and far between, while the presence of gangs in key ports like Port-de-Paix and Port-au-Prince means that police and inspectors are regularly subject to intimidation and violence if they seek to carry out their duties. Nevertheless, according to reporting from the *Miami Herald*, U.S. customs inspections of maritime cargoes bound for Haiti from Florida have not changed in spite to the rising demand for illicit guns in Haiti.

Traffickers have also been known to use clandestine airstrips scattered throughout Haiti's hinterlands in order to move drugs and weapons, albeit in far smaller quantities than the traditional maritime routes. One such location, in Savane Diane in the Arbonite department, was ordered to be destroyed by President Moïse shortly before his assassination, though local authorities refused to comply with the mandate.[292] The types of weapons trafficked are also changing, from handguns to assault rifles and high-caliber sniper rifles, which give the gangs the ability to handily take on the Haitian National Police (HNP), largely armed with 9 mm handguns. Indeed, from 2021 to 2022, the number of arms reported seized by the HNP decreased, likely a function of weakening capacity amid successive crises, but the number of rifles seized increased from 59 in 2021 to 66 in 2022.[293]

Figure 13: Firearms Seized by Department in 2021 and 2022 in Haiti



Source: HNP and UNPOL, adapted from UNODC, *Haiti's Criminal Markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking* (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/toc/Haiti_assessment_UNODC.pdf.

Cumulatively, the flow of guns into the hands of Haitian criminal groups has granted these non-state actors the ability to explicitly challenge and overwhelm the state. This was on full display in late February 2024, when gangs stormed the port of Port-au-Prince as well as the city's airport, putting sorely needed aid to the country on hold and disrupting flights for nearly three months in an effort to bring down the government of Prime Minister Ariel Henry. Jimmy Chérizier, leader of the powerful G9 Family and Allies grouping of gangs, threatened the outbreak of a "civil war" if Henry did not resign (which he finally did in April), a clear indication of how heavily armed criminal groups have been capable of explicitly influencing political outcomes at the highest level.[294] More recently, in response to the planned deployment of the MSS, gangs took to the streets and to social media showing off their arsenals, replete with assault rifles and .50 caliber sniper rifles capable of punching through cover and striking from over a mile away. The move was a calculated signal to the coming police forces that the gangs were ready and willing to fight to preserve their territories. As of this writing, the gangs appear to have made good on this promise, and while the MSS has experienced success in securing some critical infrastructure in Port-au-Prince, police routinely report clashing with gangs, including coming under sniper fire, during their patrols.[295]

While historical drivers and political instability have made Haiti particularly susceptible to the influence of illicit firearms, they remain indicative of trends that are playing out across the Caribbean and LAC more broadly. From Jamaica, where explosions of criminal violence have been met with periodic states of exception, to Trinidad and Tobago, where these outbursts have been dubbed "bloody weekends," the vicious cycle retains many of the same broad contours.[296] State weakness—allowing organized crime to thrive and grow profitable from the trade in illicit commodities—establishes the conditions for groups to acquire more and more powerful weapons, and eventually challenge the state to secure their interests.

6

Policy Recommendations

Addressing a challenge as complex and pervasive as firearms trafficking in the Western Hemisphere is a significant undertaking. Nevertheless, it may be an area where a more sustained U.S. commitment can yield new opportunities for collaboration with regional allies and partners. The following section lays out recommendations for the United States, Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean to develop a more comprehensive regional response to arms trafficking.

The United States

Existing evidence suggests that the majority of crime guns employed in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean and an important number in South America are being trafficked from the United States. A lesser number of those firearms are being trafficked from European and other sources, with some of those guns being first imported to and then trafficked from the United States. No other country in the world combines such a huge number of firearms manufactured or imported into the country each year (in 2021, 21,037,810 total firearms were either made or imported) with a permissive purchasing environment.[297] With this level of new annual availability of guns and with an estimated 393.3 million firearms in civilian possession in the United States as of 2017, according to the Small Arms Survey, there is no real substitute for the U.S. gun market for criminals in LAC seeking trafficked firearms, except perhaps for war zones or former conflict areas.[298] The violence wrought by these groups in the region washes back upon the United States in the form of regional instability and a northbound flow of illicit drugs and other commodities. The discussion that follows is not aimed at questioning Second Amendment rights in the United States. Rather, it is solely

directed at suggesting ways to prevent the trafficking of firearms into the hands of criminals inside the United States and toward LAC.

Recent U.S. efforts to curb the trafficking of firearms have included the 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act.[299] The act clarified the definition of an FFL and sought to crack down on criminals who illegally evade licensing requirements by prescribing which sellers need to register, conduct background checks, and keep appropriate records. It also created new penalties for straw purchasers. In April 2024, the ATF finalized a new rule stemming from the act which requires unlicensed gun sellers to become licensed firearms dealers and, in turn, run background checks through the NICS on their customers.[300] This should prevent sales of firearms to people who are ineligible to purchase them, and could make it harder for traffickers to obtain firearms from these sources, especially as unlicensed dealers are now the largest source for trafficked firearms, as mentioned earlier in this report.

In announcing the new rule on FFLs, the Biden administration also highlighted efforts (including those made during the Trump administration) to crack down on rogue gun dealers.[301] These include new ATF inspection policies that have led to 245 license revocations over the past two years, the highest two-year total in nearly 20 years; new rules to limit the proliferation of ghost guns—the recovery of which increased tenfold between 2017 and 2021; compliance by ghost gun manufacturers with FFL requirements; and the establishment of crime gun intelligence centers to provide investigative leads to solve shootings and identify gun-trafficking channels. Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced in September 2023 that it and the ATF had significantly outpaced the seizures in fiscal year (FY) 2022 in FY 2023.[302] Operation Southbound, established by the ATF under the Trump administration in April 2020, aims to disrupt the weapons-trafficking capabilities of Mexican cartels and other criminal groups.

Operation Without a Trace is a unified effort by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)'s Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and CBP, alongside the ATF, to identify, target, and investigate the financing, transportation, and communications methods employed by firearms-procurement and smuggling networks in an effort to disrupt and dismantle their illegal gun-trafficking operations.[303] Operation Southbound, established by the ATF in 2020, aims to disrupt the weapons-trafficking capabilities of Mexican cartels and other criminal groups. The operation employs a whole-of-government approach in nine interagency Firearms Trafficking Task Forces deployed in eight cities along the United States' southwest border to interdict illegal guns and prosecute those responsible.[304]

Another effort underway is the ATF's Anti-Firearms Trafficking Public Safety Campaign. The campaign focuses on reducing gun trafficking and stopping illegal gun purchases for prohibited individuals at the United States' northern and southern borders. The ATF partners with the CBP, ICE, and HSI on this initiative.[305]

The GAO evaluated U.S. agencies' initiatives to disrupt the flow of guns to Mexico through 2021.[306] It evaluated several efforts, including the ATF's Operation Southbound, ICE and the CBP's joint operation to intercept firearms being smuggled to Mexico, and a Department of State working

group to coordinate these and other U.S. efforts with the government of Mexico. The GAO's findings included that the agencies involved needed to identify performance measures, including goals, indicators, targets, and time frames, that would enhance their ability to optimize the use of U.S. government resources to stem the flow of illicit firearms to Mexico and beyond.

Recent legislative efforts include the Disarming Cartels Act, which would increase interagency collaboration to identify, target, disrupt, and dismantle transnational criminal organizations responsible for exporting firearms and related munitions from the United States to Mexico; expand the collection and analysis of information concerning firearms recovered at crime scenes in Mexico to identify U.S.-based gun traffickers; and enhance coordination with Mexican agencies, among other actions.[307] The Stop Arming Cartels Act of 2023 would prohibit future nongovernmental manufacture, importation, sale, transfer, or possession of .50 caliber rifles and regulate existing rifles; allow victims of gun violence to sue manufacturers and dealers under certain conditions; prohibit the sale or transfer of firearms to individuals sanctioned under the Kingpin Act and add those individuals to the background check system (NICS); and require firearms dealers to report sales of multiple rifles to state and local law enforcement agencies, which they currently have to do for handguns.[308]

Despite these efforts, much more can and should be done to prevent trafficking, beginning with strengthening the ATF's ability to investigate and prosecute those involved, keep and make records on gun purchases searchable, lift congressionally mandated restrictions on the agency, increase inspections of FFLs, and technologically improve existing tracing systems. However, many of these efforts depend on the ATF's ability to fully execute its responsibilities, which in turn rests in large part on the bureau having an adequate budget and personnel contingent. While other federal law enforcement agencies grew substantially in the wake of 9/11, the ATF did not; it had fewer employees in 2017 than it did in 2002.[309] Its FY 2024 budget request included 5,965 total positions; this is less than the number of sworn officers in the Philadelphia Police Department.[310]

1. In June 2021, the Biden administration announced a new zero-tolerance policy for rogue gun dealers and that the consequences would be the revocation of dealers' licenses the first time that they willfully violate federal gun laws. This is a departure from previous practice.[311] ATF data from 2017-2021 seems to show that the bureau prioritizes the investigation and prosecution of unlicensed individuals, individuals who provide false information when buying firearms (likely straw purchasers), felons in possession of a firearm, or individuals in possession of a stolen gun over violations by FFLs.[312] One in-depth investigation by The Trace and USA Today found that the ATF has been largely "toothless and conciliatory," bending over backward to go easy on FFLs found to be violating the law.[313] FFLs selling weapons to convicted felons and domestic abusers, lying to investigators, and fudging records were issued warnings, sometimes repeatedly, but the ATF allowed the stores to operate for months or years, according to the investigation. **In addition to revoking their licenses, the ATF must continue to increase the number of investigations and prosecutions of FFLs, especially "bad apple" FFLs who repeatedly violate federal gun laws.**

2. The ATF's recordkeeping system is rudimentary and less sophisticated than an online card catalog maintained by a small-town public library.[314] This is deliberately so. In 1986, Congress enacted the Firearms Owners' Protection Act, which bans the ATF from creating a registry of guns, gun owners, or gun sales. Records that are kept are required to be "non-searchable"; keyword searches or sorting by date or any other field are prohibited.[315] Were it not for this prohibition, the ATF could almost instantly trace a gun used in a crime or identify persons purchasing multiple firearms or engaging in behaviors that would likely indicate a repeat straw purchaser. **The U.S. firearms recordkeeping system should be modernized and reformed** to more easily identify patterns that would indicate unlawful purchases for the purpose of trafficking while respecting the privacy of lawful purchasers.
3. The Tiahrt Amendments, which have been attached to DOJ appropriations bills since 2003, restrict the ATF's ability to release firearm trace data for use by researchers (including for this report), litigants, and members of the public and require the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to destroy all approved gun purchaser records (from the NICS) within 24 hours.[316] They also prohibit the disclosure of data on multiple handgun sales reports and prohibit the ATF from requiring gun dealers to submit their inventories to law enforcement, which could help reduce the number of approximately 14,000 firearms that are reported lost or stolen by dealers each year.[317] Requiring the submission of inventories by gun dealers leads to greater accounting of firearms and can help prevent bad apples from claiming that their firearms have simply disappeared when instead they are supplied to the illegal market.[318] **The United States should reassess those provisions of the Tiahrt Amendments that affect the ability to research, investigate, and prosecute arms trafficking.**
4. The ATF is limited to conducting one inspection of FFLs per year. But a recent audit by the DOJ's Office of the Inspector General found that due to resource challenges, the ATF has not been able to inspect all FFLs even every three years, and some had not had an onsite inspection in over 10 years.[319] Instead, the ATF relied on a risk-based identification of FFLs to prioritize which ones to inspect. **The ATF should implement the 13 recommendations issued by the Office of the Inspector General to strengthen its compliance inspection activities and its oversight of FFLs,** ranging from refining the bureau's strategies for identifying and tracking risks, deploying resources, and accomplishing goals to strengthening its controls to ensure a robust evaluation of the resolution of individual inspections outcomes, and other measures.
5. The ATF itself, in the 2023 National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA): Crime Gun Intelligence and Analysis - Volume Two, recognized that its capacity to meet an ever-increasing demand for tracing information was decreasing and **recommended several technological improvements to help it process trace requests from law enforcement agencies.**[320] These recommendations included upgrades to the National Tracing Program and the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network, as well as for the prevention of firearm theft from FFLs, interstate shipments, and private citizens, among other suggestions. All of the recommendations complied with existing rules and legislation.

6. Finally, individual U.S. states can also have a significant impact on curbing firearms trafficking, at least locally and, in some cases, perhaps internationally. But these efforts will require closer interstate cooperation, as a crackdown on arms trafficking in one state will likely displace attention from arms traffickers to others. Improved state-federal coordination is also key, and in July 2021, the DOJ launched five regional firearms trafficking strike forces integrating U.S. attorneys and ATF agents alongside state and local law enforcement to better respond to instances of trafficking.[321] **Strengthening interstate intelligence cooperation on arms trafficking, as well as coordination between states and the federal government, should remain a priority.**

Mexico

The Mexican government's civil suits against gun manufacturers and dealers, if successful, could reduce the flow of illegal guns to the country, especially by forcing "bad apple" dealers to strictly adhere to their licensing requirements. However, there are other efforts that Mexico can make on its side of the border.

1. Mexican civil society organizations have, for instance, suggested that the country develop a comprehensive policy to address the problem of the wide availability of firearms.[322] It also needs better public data on the availability, distribution, trafficking, and use of firearms, while at the same time protecting ongoing investigations and citizens' privacy concerns. The fact that the country's Ministry of Defense, SEDENA, is the institution in charge of controlling firearms in the country instead of a civilian institution means that the issue of trafficking is seen through a defense lens and not a public safety one.[323] **As such, Mexico lacks a specialized and professional civil institution that could look at the issue of firearms in all its dimensions, from illicit trafficking to legal possession to control to their impact on society, and should therefore establish one.**
2. **Increased cooperation and exchange of information with the countries of origin for trafficked arms is also essential,** not only with the United States but also with countries such as Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, and Spain, who are collectively responsible for 30 percent of the illegal guns in Mexico.[324]
3. Timely and rapid exchange of information between Mexican intelligence services and the various police forces is another area where Mexico needs to make progress.[325] According to one Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, another factor that hinders Mexico's ability to stem the flow of illicit firearms is the lack of a hardened border to prevent the entry of illegal guns.[326] Seizures of firearms by Mexican customs authorities represent only a small proportion of guns recovered in the country, accounting for less than 2,000 guns between 2012 and 2018.[327] During the same period, 78,052 guns were recovered by SEDENA, Mexico's Secretariat of the Navy, the national police, and the national guard. The majority of seizures occur at the final destination of the weapons, often in violent areas with high levels of homicides committed with firearms, when confrontations between criminals and SEDENA

or other law enforcement authorities occur. **Therefore, Mexico needs to redouble its capacity to detect and confiscate trafficked firearms as they come over the border.**

4. In addition, **Mexico should ensure that all crime guns recovered in the country, not only those held by federal authorities, are traced by the ATF and processed through the eTrace system by the Attorney General's Office.** It should take steps to train and strengthen the capacity of those responsible for weapons tracing and make greater use of the Integrated Ballistic Identification System (IBIS), a registry managed by the ATF and FBI of forensic ballistic traces that can assist forensic experts in making identifications for criminal investigations and trials.[328]
5. Finally, **updating the country's Federal Law of Firearms and Explosives, which dates back to 1972, when firearms trafficking was not the concern that it is today, is also necessary.**[329] One update prohibiting the unlawful use of drones (which, as mentioned earlier, are now being employed by some Mexican drug cartels) and establishing severe penalties for their criminal use was approved by Mexico's congress in June 2024.[330]

Central America

A fragmented political landscape magnifies the challenges Central America as a region confronts from illicit firearms. While many of the countries in the hemisphere are firm U.S. partners, the presence of a consolidated dictatorship in the form of Nicaragua has the potential to snarl meaningful cooperation on arms trafficking. Similarly, should El Salvador continue down the path of authoritarianism promulgated by the self-styled "world's coolest dictator," it may be increasingly difficult for the United States to find common ground with San Salvador, especially on matters of public safety.[331] Efforts remain underway, however, to enhance the capabilities of regional customs, police, and other security forces.

1. The United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, for instance, has partnered with Guatemalan authorities to enhance scanning of inbound cargo for illicit weapons, while the United States has donated equipment to El Salvador and Honduras to support the safe destruction of seized firearms.[332] **However, genuine progress in addressing corruption, securing existing stockpiles, and streamlining end-use monitoring will be essential for progress to be made.** The Guatemalan NGO Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible has articulated a series of recommendations to enhance stockpile management in the region, including digitizing records, more frequent stockpile inspections, and developing specific security plans to address the vulnerabilities of individual arsenals.[333] Finally, a central question for government in the United States and Central America must be how to address the arms already present. Central American countries have among the highest rates of firearms per capita in the world.[334] Even if U.S. exports and illicit trafficking to the region were to cease completely, hundreds of thousands of small arms and light weapons across Central American six component countries would remain in need of stronger monitoring and tracking to prevent diversion.

An electromagnetic crane carries firearms–seized by Peruvian authorities–to a smelting pot to be destroyed, at a smelting plant in Pisco, 250 km south of Lima on July 19, 2019.

Photo: Chris Bouroncle/Getty Images.

2. Stockpile management should therefore be a priority for Central American countries seeking to restrict the circulation of weapons already within their countries while they strive to reduce new trafficking into the region. **The security of stockpiles can be enhanced by adopting a digital platform to log weapons and ammunition inventories, improvements in training and infrastructure, and better recordkeeping of all usage of these weapons in the case of active armories.**[335] Ideally, such a database would be shared across military and police forces, as well as the justice system, to provide a comprehensive view of the state of firearms stockpiles within the country.

3. **The United States, for its part, can further assist partners in the region by supplying additional specialized equipment to help countries destroy surplus arms and facilitating information exchange on armory management best practices.** Guatemala stands out as an important partner in beginning this process, as it finds itself at the crossroads of both trafficking from and to Mexico while simultaneously possessing significant firearms reserves of its own.[336] The anti-corruption mandate of the government of Guatemalan president Bernardo Arévalo also means the country could be a valuable partner in a bid to strengthen regulations and transparency in the management of firearms stocks.

South America

While the security challenges South America faces may be grave, the subregion may hold some of the greatest potential for increased cooperation with the United States on combating firearms trafficking. The region is home to competent and well-institutionalized security forces, while governments such as the Noboa administration in Ecuador and Milei administration in Argentina are pursuing closer ties to the United States, especially in the security domain. Accordingly, U.S. technical assistance, along with greater intraregional cooperation, could have a pronounced effect on arms-trafficking dynamics.

1. **Border security should be made a priority for South America to tackle the challenge of firearms trafficking.** In the case of Ecuador, while there are just two official crossings along the country's border with Peru, there are an estimated 48 unauthorized crossings as well. Clashes between criminal groups to cement their control over these all-important points of entry have contributed to Ecuador's present security crisis.[337] In the Triple Frontier area as well, the expansive territory to be covered, as well as its generally inhospitable terrain, means that achieving full coverage of the border is likely beyond any single country's

ability. Improving cross-border collaboration between police and customs forces will be necessary to challenge the freedom of movement TCOs enjoy in some parts of the region. New technologies such as uncrewed aerial vehicles can also provide an advantage. Brazil has already experimented with deploying drones to hunt for illegal mining operations.[338] Tracking down illicit border crossings may represent another valuable use case.

2. In addition, as the region grapples with growing challenges from TCOs, the debate over civilian firearms regulation will likely grow in saliency. **Any government looking to expand access to guns should ensure that these efforts are paired with a regulatory regime capable of accommodating and tracking the influx of weapons to guarantee that these do not find their way into the hands of organized criminals.** Scaling up and, where necessary, standing up agencies to issue firearms permits and conduct checks on legal arms sales will be crucial for any country dealing with a burgeoning domestic demand for guns. The United States, for its part, can lend the expertise of its own responsible agencies such as the ATF, DOJ, and DHS to share best practices on how to detect and respond to potential malfeasance in the firearms market.
3. The Arms Trade Treaty is an international instrument that all countries should strive to sign and ratify. It obliges members to assess the potential that exported arms could be used to commit human rights violations and, if so, prohibit the export of arms. More applicable to importing states, and especially states that do not fabricate firearms, the treaty also requires measures to prevent the diversion of arms and ammunition and to mitigate risks of diversion by cooperating and exchanging information.[339] Fortunately for LAC, most countries have signed and ratified the treaty. As mentioned above, the United States has signed, but not ratified the treaty, with Haiti in a similar position. Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, all dictatorships or authoritarian regimes, have neither signed nor ratified the treaty.[340] Neither has Ecuador, which is especially surprising given the explosion of violence there in recent years and concomitant demand for legal guns. **It should consider signing and ratifying the treaty.**
4. Finally, **enhancing subregional cooperation within South America should be a priority,** including by connecting specialized agencies like the Information Center for Explosive Devices and Firearms Tracking in Colombia; the Federal Police Communications System and the Comprehensive Management System for Controlled Materials of the National Agency for Controlled Materials of Argentina; and the Brazilian Tracking Center. The MERCOSUR Security Information Exchange System must also be strengthened.[341]

The Caribbean

While initiatives like the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) have done well to showcase political will from Washington to help the region tackle its security challenges, the Caribbean remains a region which has been historically underinvested in by the United States.[342] Shoring up international coordination mechanisms and recalibrating existing authorities to better target arms trafficking will be essential to curb the rising tide of illicit weapons flowing through the Caribbean.

1. **Building up capacity in the Caribbean's ports and coast guards and improving maritime domain awareness should be priorities for the region.** As the Caribbean does not produce

significant quantities of firearms internally, seizing weapons before they can enter provides the most straightforward pathway to circumscribe criminals' access to guns. Implementing new equipment such as advanced scanners, K9s, and electronic customs systems can all go a long way toward hardening the port infrastructure. Financial assistance will likely be necessary to accomplish these goals, especially in smaller Caribbean countries with limited resources or that lack the volume of port traffic at their ports needed to justify such domestic investment.

2. The United States can also do more to build upon existing institutions for tackling the intersection of crime and violence in the Caribbean. **In particular, JIATF-South's authorities should be expanded to grant it an explicit authorization to target arms smuggling in addition to narcotics, recognizing that the two activities often go hand in hand.** The U.S. Coast Guard should also consider spearheading joint patrols in partnership with Caribbean allies to pool resources and achieve more comprehensive coverage of hotspots in the trafficking of illicit guns and drugs, such as the sea routes connecting Jamaica and Haiti.
3. **Intelligence sharing is another area where greater regional cooperation can have an outsized effect, as countries can leverage one another's capabilities to make up for their own shortfalls in situational awareness.** To this end, organizations such as CARICOM IMPACS, the RSS, JIATF-South, and Europe's Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre all offer a strong foundation to build upon.[343] In September 2023, for instance, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, in partnership with CARICOM IMPACS, conducted Operation Hammerhead, which reviewed hundreds of thousands of export logs from the United States to the Caribbean to identify cases of possible firearms trafficking.[344] More should be done, however. For instance, building vetted investigations units within regional police forces would provide international partners with trusted units within Caribbean countries' security forces and, in doing so, help to cut down on the risks associated with sharing operational intelligence on organized criminal activity.
4. The case of Haiti represents a unique challenge within the Caribbean subregion, and is perhaps the most intractable security crises in the Western Hemisphere today. The Haitian National Police, as well as Haiti's customs authorities and coast guard, urgently need resources and training to better confront the threat of arms smuggling. **The United States should use the window of opportunity created by the arrival of the MSS to push for this capacity-building assistance to the country in order to hopefully develop long-term solutions even amid the violence that plagues the country today.** However, in all cases, the United States and international community must focus on small, incremental advancements rather than hoping to grasp the whole of the problem immediately. Finally, increased resources to stop the flow of arms before they reach Haiti will be critical to give local and international security personnel the breathing room needed to continue to push out the gangs. Bolstered cooperation with the Dominican Republic to curtail overland trafficking into Haiti in this way could play an important role, as could increased monitoring of cargo shipments bound from south Florida to Haiti.

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