The Iron River of Weapons to Mexico: Its Sources and Contents

A report by Stop US Arms to Mexico

The iron river of weapons transiting from the United States to Mexico and Central America that empowers criminal organizations and accelerates forced migration originates from hundreds of gun manufacturers and passes through thousands of local U.S. gun dealers, every year. In reaction to the flow of illicit weapons, a firearms race has developed, in which gun companies export more and increasingly militarized weapons to Mexican police and military forces.

But the number of lives lost or disappeared through violence in Mexico continues to increase, while migrants fleeing through Mexico have become understandably more desperate to get to safety. Political discourse focuses on the U.S.-Mexico border. But the unregulated, massive and militarized U.S. gun market that feeds the violence, drug trafficking, and displacement is growing – and often ignored.

The Stop US Arms to Mexico project obtained finely grained data, never before disclosed, on the origins of guns trafficked and exported to Mexico and Central America from the United States since 2015. We are publishing this data, in conjunction with this report, at stopusarmstomexico.org/iron-river.


Interactive map at: stopusarmstomexico.org/gun-traces-by-zip-code-map

1 Data was obtained on recovered guns in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. Although Central America includes other countries, this report uses “Central America” as shorthand for these three countries.
Gun violence in Mexico has spiraled in the last two decades since the expiration of the U.S. federal assault weapons ban in 2004 and the 2007 declaration of the drug war in Mexico with U.S. support. A modest decline in gun homicides since 2019 has not reduced violence even to the elevated levels of 2010-2011. Moreover, the growing number of forced disappearances, primarily carried out by criminal organizations armed with U.S. weapons and sometimes with collusion of Mexican security forces, has nullified the modest decline in gun homicides.

As violence in Mexico has grown, the Mexican government has recovered an increasing number of firearms that it has submitted to the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) for tracing to its origins: the number increased by 45% from 2015 to 2022. ATF continues to identify more than two thirds of these guns as sourced from the United States – manufactured in or imported into the United States, purchased, and trafficked over the U.S.-Mexico border. About half of the remaining third are of undetermined origin, so the proportion of U.S.-sourced guns is likely even higher.

Only a small portion of guns trafficked into Mexico are recovered there. The best analysis of the number of firearms trafficked from the United States to Mexico - in 2010-2012, when U.S. production and imports of firearms was roughly half of what it was in 2022 - estimated that 253,000 guns a year are purchased in the United States with the
intent to traffic them to Mexico. About 20,000 guns are recovered in Mexico each year and submitted for tracing.

Yet an even smaller number of crime guns destined for Mexico is recovered by the United States. Homeland Security officials boasted of increased numbers of guns destined for Mexico that were seized in FY2023 - 1,392 firearms - which represented less than a tenth of the U.S.-sourced firearms recovered by Mexico and submitted for tracing. Similarly, ATF initiated investigations for only one out of every six firearms recovered in Mexico and traced to a U.S. purchase in 2022.4

For these reasons, two U.S. actions are critical. First, efforts to stem the illicit flow of guns to Mexico must focus further upstream, to the unregulated market. Specifically, by prohibiting weapons sought by criminal groups in Mexico: assault weapons and .50 caliber rifles. We urge Members of Congress to support prohibitions on the sale of these weapons as proposed in the Assault Weapons Ban and Stop Arming Cartels Act.

Second, the United States must create an interagency strategy to proactively reduce cross-border gun trafficking, as well as the sale of U.S. weapons to police and military units implicated in collusion with organized crime or human rights violations. The ARMAS Act would accomplish those goals.

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A Breakthrough in Cross-Border Gun Trafficking Data

In March 2021, Stop US Arms to Mexico coordinator John Lindsay-Poland submitted a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for copies of ATF’s aggregate data on the number of firearms traced from Mexico and Central America since 2014, by type, caliber and make of firearm and by zip codes and counties where they were purchased.\(^5\)

ATF initially denied the data based on the Tiahrt Amendment of 2012, federal legislation that limits the government’s publication of information on individual firearms purchases but makes no reference to FOIA. Congress specifically exempted “statistical aggregate data regarding firearms traffickers and trafficking channels” from the Tiahrt limitations. Lindsay-Poland filed an administrative appeal - which ATF denied in October 2022 - and filed suit against ATF in December 2022. In December 2023, the U.S. District Court for Northern California ruled in Lindsay-Poland’s favor, saying that the data we requested should not be withheld and ordering the ATF to properly respond to the request. ATF released the requested data on May 10, 2024.\(^6\) The data may be accessed at: stopusarmstomexico.org/data. Consult a map of U.S. locations to which trafficked guns were traced, by zip code, at stopusarmstomexico.org/gun-traces-by-zip-code-map.

In addition, Stop US Arms to Mexico obtained detailed purchase records for more than 62,000 firearms sold to Mexican police during a nearly five-year period in 2018-2023. The Mexican army (SEDENA) is the conduit for all weapons legally sold in Mexico, and released the records to us after Mexico’s National Institute of Information ruled that the records were not exempt from disclosure.

We also obtained from SEDENA in May 2024, through a public records request, a list of 12,500 firearms recovered in Mexico since the beginning of 2023; this complements a similar list of more than 130,000 firearms recovered by SEDENA since 2010, showing municipality and date of recovery as well as types, makes, and calibers of each firearm.

Finally, we have consulted information from SEDENA emails hacked by the group Guacamaya, which include a dataset of over 24,000 firearms recovered in Mexico and traced to the United States from late 2018 to late 2020.\(^7\)

What the Data Show: Awash in Weapons

ATF identified manufacturers of 133,558 weapons recovered in Mexico that were submitted for tracing, and 40,978 weapons recovered in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras for the eight-year period of 2015-2022. Illicit weapons are confiscated in

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\(^5\) The request was also for the numbers of purchasers and number of licensed dealers, per county, year of recovery, and country of recovery, for firearms recovered since 2014 in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras and traced.
\(^6\) Lindsay-Poland was ably represented by Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP and Giffords Law Center throughout the litigation. In zip code data, ATF excluded data for 3% of firearms representing zip codes in which only one licensed dealer operates. The court order is at: https://stopusarmstomexico.org/lindsaypolandvatforder19dec2023/
\(^7\) Posted at: https://stopusarmstomexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ARMAS-RASTREADAS-DE-EUA_31-12-2018_25-11-2020.xlsx
Mexico and Central America by diverse military and law enforcement agencies, and characteristics of the guns, including serial numbers, are shared with the ATF, in order to trace their routes of manufacture, purchase and illicit trafficking.

Some 925 manufacturers of trafficked weapons were identified for Mexico. But by far, the weapons most often recovered in Mexico are made by four of the companies that Mexico is suing in a U.S. court for negligence leading to trafficking to Mexico: Smith & Wesson, Colt, Glock, and Beretta. These four companies (if we consider both Beretta’s Italian and US production) make up fully 30% of all weapons in Mexico with identified manufacturers. They are followed by Ruger (which produces guns in four U.S. states); Romarm, a Romanian company that exports assault rifles to the United States; and the Brazilian manufacturer Taurus, a maker of inexpensive pistols.

Mexico recovered seven hundred .50 caliber rifles, which were submitted for tracing from 2015 through 2022; the Mexican army alone recovered another 100 of these weapons in 2023. Most of the recovered .50 caliber rifles are produced by Barrett Firearms, based in Tennessee, which is also a defendant in Mexico’s lawsuit against manufacturers. Such rifles can fire accurately at targets nearly a mile away and shoot down police helicopters. Because of their long range, there are hardly even locations to practice with them in the United States. They have no legitimate use for community members in the United States - or in Mexico, where they are a weapon of choice for criminal organizations that use them to grow their violent business. Proposed legislation, the Stop Arming Cartels Act, would prohibit their sale in the United States.

Rifles and shotguns made up 34.7% of identified types of firearms recovered in Mexico and Central America - more than twice the 15.8% of rifles and shotguns among crime guns recovered within the

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6 270 manufacturers were identified for Guatemala; 235 for El Salvador; 187 for Honduras.
7 Mexican Secretariat of National Defense (SEDENA), response to public information request, Folio 330026424001355, May 21, 2024.
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United States.\textsuperscript{10} Similarly, calibers of weapons most common in assault rifles (.223, 7.62 and 5.56) were found in nearly one fifth (19.9\%) of traced guns in Mexico and Central America, but only 5.6\% of crime guns recovered in the U.S. Such weapons are not legal for purchase in Mexico or Central America; they are primarily trafficked from the United States or exported legally for diverse countries and then diverted into the illicit market. In short, the problem of the U.S. assault weapons market is even more pervasive in Mexico and Central America.

Preferred Locations for Trafficking

The retail market for firearms in U.S. border states is highly advantageous for gun traffic into Mexico, the ATF tracing data show. The five cities with the largest number of firearms traced to them were: Houston (2,452), Tucson (2,156), Phoenix (1,745), El Paso (1,658) and San Antonio (1,340).

But small cities were also preferred sources: licensed gun dealers in just six zip codes in Texas border towns were the source of nearly three thousand firearms trafficked to Mexico, recovered, and traced to a purchase.\textsuperscript{11} Gun dealers in McAllen, Texas were the source of more than a thousand crime guns recovered in Mexico from 2015 through 2022; most of the 18 gun dealers in this border town are pawn brokers,\textsuperscript{12} but there is also an Academy Sports - a chain that is a source for many trafficked guns - and Dynamic Tactical Solutions, a business that advertises military weapons and states that the Second Amendment is “the only thing standing between freedom and tyranny” and seeks to “normalize gun culture.”\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{map.png}
\caption{Map detail of number of firearms purchased in Rio Grande Valley and trafficked to Mexico and Central America.}
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\textsuperscript{11} The six zip codes were in McAllen, Pharr, Brownsville, El Paso, and Laredo.
\textsuperscript{13} See https://dynamictactica lsolutionsgroup.com
Case Study of Promiscuous Gun Marketing: Palmetto State Armory

Palmetto State Armory, based in Columbia, South Carolina, states on its web site that “we want to sell as many AR-15 and AK-47 rifles as we can and put them into common use in America today.”14 Founded in 2008, Palmetto has in the past emblazoned anti-government imagery on its firearms and parts, including “Boogaloo” images.15

In 2015-2016, 55 Palmetto firearms were recovered in Mexico; by 2021-2022, 464 Palmetto weapons recovered in Mexico. During the first four months of 2024, the Mexican army reported recovering 24 Palmetto rifles. However, only a small portion of guns identified by ATF in 2015-2022 as Palmetto were identified as such by the army, so the number of Palmetto guns recovered in Mexico this year is likely several times that amount.

The ATF data does not identify the involvement of criminal cartels in weapons recovered and traced. However, other information sometimes confirms that. On October 20, 2020, Mexican army troops in the central state of San Luis Potosí, in an area with strong presence of the Gulf Cartel, reported engaging in a shootout with several armed men, one of whom was killed. The soldiers recovered five rifles, including a Palmetto assault rifle.16

Palmetto State Armory is only one of an increasing number of new producers whose assault weapons are increasingly turning up in Mexico crime scenes. In 2015 and 2016, 79 weapons from Anderson Manufacturing, which produces less expensive assault rifles, were recovered in Mexico. By 2021-2022, the number of Anderson weapons recovered in Mexico had risen tenfold, to 825.

Polymer80 is a Nevada-based company founded in 2013 that sells unserialized weapons parts, including for assault rifles, that customers can assemble themselves.17 In 2021-2022, 611 Polymer80 weapons were recovered in Mexico and submitted for tracing, while no Polymer80 weapons were recovered in 2015-2016. Another four Polymer80 weapons were recovered for the first time in Guatemala and Honduras in 2021-2022.

Guns are durable goods: their life-destroying function lasts for many years. The average time between purchase in the United States of a firearm and its recovery in Mexico is

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14 https://palmettostatearmory.com/about-psa.html
16 The Army reported that they were attacked during patrol, but had no casualties on its side, while three of the men who attacked were injured in addition to the man who was killed. “Resumen de Novedades, 21 de octubre de 2020,” extracted from emails of the Mexican Secretariat of National Defense hacked by the group Guacamaya. Weapons recovered also included rifles produced by Bushmaster, Kel-Tec and Colt - all US gun manufacturers.
17 https://polymer80.com/arreceivers/
seven years, according to ATF. As a result, tracing data sometimes identifies gun dealers that have closed business. For example, Jennings Firearms produced cheap pistols (also called Bryco guns) in California until 2006, yet more than 1,900 of the company’s guns were recovered in Mexico from 2019 through 2023. How firearms are produced and sold in the United States today is likely to have impacts in Mexico and Central America for many years down the road.

The “Ant Trade”

Although the scale of gun trafficking into Mexico is massive, most trafficked guns are purchased one at a time, by different individuals. For example, 942 weapons were purchased in Maricopa County, Arizona that were recovered in Mexico in 2022, which were traced to at least 874 individuals, according to the ATF data, which shows similar patterns for previous years and other counties. On average, only one in every ten purchasers of a trafficked gun bought a second firearm that was recovered and traced to the same purchaser. This proportion of purchasers with a single firearm traced is consistent across all counties. One reason may be that purchasers of multiple weapons are more likely to be caught on the US side, before the weapons cross the border, than those who straw purchase weapons one at a time.

Moreover, only a portion of the U.S.-sourced guns recovered in Mexico and Central America are traced to a retail purchase. The ATF is only able to trace half the purchases of the guns recovered in Mexico that it identifies as U.S.-produced or imported into the U.S. In Guatemala and El Salvador, even fewer crime guns are traced to a purchase.

That is because so many more guns in Central America enter the illegal market from U.S. exports than through cross-border trafficking. In Guatemala, almost three times as many recovered guns were identified as legally exported from the United States as were traced to a U.S. retail purchase. In El Salvador, ATF identified a retail purchase for only 13% of recovered firearms that it confirmed were from the United States. Of the three Central American countries, only in Honduras was the number of guns traced to a U.S. purchase greater than the number of crime guns that had been legally exported.

One implication of both highly decentralized trafficking and of the inability of ATF to trace a larger portion of the U.S.-sourced crime guns to their purchases is this: enforcement against illegal diversion by retail gun purchasers will have limited effect. Instead, strategies should focus more on “upstream” solutions that address the massive and militarized gun market and lack of regulations for purchases of these weapons.

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Arms Race with Organized Crime?: Weapons Flow to Mexican Government Forces

In Latin America, Mexico is by far the largest importer of firearms from the United States. Under a new rule for gun exports announced by the Commerce Department in April 2024, Mexico would have privileged status, despite the growing violence that a militarized approach to security has not reduced.

In April 2020, at the height of the global Covid-19 pandemic, SEDENA imported 51,097 Sig Sauer pistols for use by the then-new National Guard, at a cost of US$18.6 million - the largest shipment of firearms to Mexico ever recorded, and the largest shipment of U.S. handguns to any Latin American country recorded since 2002 (Medellin, J. 2020 & U.S. International Trade Commission). In 2023, the United States exported 12,515 military rifles to Mexico - more than to Ukraine, and fewer only than to Israel - as well as a stunning 6,686 machine guns, together at a cost of more than $27 million.21

In March 2024, according to U.S. trade data, Mexico purchased more than 14,000 military rifles from the United States - more than the rest of the world combined during that month. It also purchased 414 machine guns from the U.S. in February. This trade data does not indicate who are the end users of exports, but these types of weapons are only permitted for military and police use.

Torture and other abuses by police are widespread in Mexico. Nearly half of detainees reported suffering physical aggression by police before being turned over to judicial authorities in 2021.22

Yet Mexican police agencies continue to obtain U.S.-exported firearms, in many cases assault rifles. From 2019 through 2023, Connecticut-based Colt sold thousands of weapons to Mexico for use by police, including 1,304 carbines (short rifles) to Puebla state police (Secretaría de Seguridad Pública), according to purchase records we obtained. Half of the persons detained by police in Puebla reported in a survey having been physically assaulted by police, most commonly by physical blows, but also with choking and drowning. One in eight reported receiving electric shocks.23 Two thirds of Puebla residents perceive the Puebla state police as corrupt.24 In May 2022, Puebla state police opened fire without warning on a pickup truck with 13 unarmed people aboard, killing three men, according to Puebla’s state human rights commission.25

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21 Data from U.S. International Trade Commission accessed at: https://dataweb.usitc.gov/
23 Detainees may have been subjected to this treatment by state, municipal or federal police. Forty-eight percent of detainees in Puebla were arrested by state authorities. ENPOL survey, op. cit.
Tamaulipas state police committed two massacres, in 2019, and again in 2021, when a special police unit killed 17 Guatemalan migrants.\textsuperscript{26} Fifty-five percent of detainees in Tamaulipas reported physical aggression after being arrested in 2021.\textsuperscript{27} Nevertheless, New Hampshire-based Sig Sauer exported more than 2,100 firearms to police in Tamaulipas from 2019 to 2023, including 251 rifles in June 2023.

In addition to U.S.-exported weapons, Mexican police also acquired weapons from other countries. Fully a third of firearms that records show Mexican police receiving in 2019-2023 - 21,652 - came from Israel Weapon Industries. 26,061 firearms for police came from three of the gun companies that Mexico has sued for negligent practices: Glock, Beretta, and Colt. In addition, in 2023 the army began to distribute FX05 military rifles it has produced solely for military use to police as well; it sold 842 rifles to police, mostly municipal, in six states, including Michoacán and Sinaloa.

**What effect will the new Commerce Department gun export rule have?**

In April 2024, the Department of Commerce announced an Interim Final Rule governing U.S. firearms exports under its jurisdiction, including semi-automatic assault rifles and handguns.\textsuperscript{28} (The State Department continues to oversee exports of fully automatic weapons such as machineguns.) The new rule reduces all firearm export licenses issued by Commerce from four years to one year. It initially presumes denial of licenses to export guns to nongovernmental end users in 36 countries, including Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, meaning that importers will have the burden of proof to show little risk of diversion or misuse of the weapons. These changes represent a step forward in controlling and reducing U.S. guns flowing to private groups and individuals in these three dozen countries.

While the export rule lists non-binding criteria for all U.S. gun export licenses, it focuses primarily on weapons exports to non-governmental end users. The State and Commerce Departments analyzed the risk of theft and diversion of exported guns, but did not focus on risks of human rights abuses, which led them to exclude governmental end users from binding criteria for denying licenses.\textsuperscript{29}

Mexico is not on the list of countries for presumptive denial of gun export licenses to nongovernmental end users. (Nor are 39 of the 40 countries with the largest amount of 2023 gun exports overseen by the Commerce Department.) The large majority of weapons imported by Mexico are for governmental end-users. For these reasons, only increased Commerce and State Department scrutiny of military and police users on


\textsuperscript{27} ENPOL survey, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{28} https://www.federalregister.gov/public-inspection/2024-08813/firearms-license-requirements

export license applications - a scrutiny not codified in the rule - would be likely to impact the massive flow of exported guns to police and military units in Mexico.

In Guatemala and other Central American countries, however, the Commerce rule could have a significant positive impact. According to U.S. trade data, the United States exported more than $17 million in firearms, parts and munitions overseen by Commerce to Guatemala in 2023, with a tripling of pistol exports since Commerce began overseeing gun exports in 2020. Many of these weapons are likely destined for non-governmental users. Violence in Guatemala has fueled growing forced migration that leads over 200,000 Guatemalans to seek entry into the United States each year.30

Recommendations

To Members of Congress:
- Co-sponsor the ARMAS Act, H.R. 6618, to establish an inter-agency strategy to stop illicit cross-border gun trafficking and to control the export of firearms to human rights violators in the Americas.
- Approve a federal ban on the sale of assault weapons, H.R. 698 and S.R. 25.
- Co-sponsor the Stop Arming Cartels Act, which would prohibit the sale of .50 caliber rifles. The Stop Arming Cartels Act is S.R. 2926 in the Senate, and was introduced in the House of Representatives in May 2024.

To the U.S. Department of Commerce:
- Adopt policy that draws clear and binding red lines against exporting weapons to military and police end users implicated in human rights abuses, collusion with criminal groups or other violence. This should include using criteria for denying firearms exports that are at least as specific and restrictive as those for U.S. assistance to military and police forces, known as the Leahy Law.

To leaders in communities from which weapons flow to Mexico and Central America:
- We urge local, state and Congressional elected officials and community leaders in the communities in which large numbers of firearms have been manufactured or purchased and trafficked to Mexico and Central America to exercise your influence to control these gun markets, through public discussion, tax disincentives, and legislation.

To gun violence researchers and institutions that fund them:
- Because of the enormous and persistent effects of the U.S. gun market in Mexico and Central America, it is time for the U.S. research agenda on gun violence prevention to look beyond impacts only within the United States and broadly adopt cross-border perspectives.
- Use the data obtained by Stop US Arms to Mexico in multi-issue analyses of U.S. gun industry practices, state and federal gun laws and policies, and violence prevention efforts.

30 U.S. Customs and Border Protection, at: https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters
Stop US Arms to Mexico is a project of Global Exchange. This report was written by John Lindsay-Poland. Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton and Giffords represented Lindsay-Poland in the litigation to obtain data from ATF. Romo GIS Enterprises assisted with mapping traced gun purchases.

For further information, see stopusarmstomexico.org

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