

## ***No Shelter from the Storm: Update on Iron River of Guns***

### **New Data on the U.S. Gun Trade to Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean**

*A report by Stop US Arms to Mexico*

The U.S. firearms market is generating growing storms of violence in neighboring countries. From Mexico – where traffickers in fentanyl and other criminal businesses are armed with thousands of U.S.-sourced assault weapons and .50 caliber rifles – to Haiti, where gangs armed with rifles easily purchased and smuggled from Florida and Georgia dominate and terrorize broad swaths of territory – the permissive, militarized and enormous gun trade in the United States is driving thousands of families to flee their homelands, arming the men who disappear people and commit femicide, empowering traders in narcotics that take thousands more lives, and looting economies.

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The damage is not limited to Mexico and Haiti. Firearms homicides – just one indicator of gun harms – have grown in Jamaica, Barbados, Central America and other nations, in tandem with the retail proliferation of U.S. weapons. In Guatemala, the exponential growth of exports of U.S. pistols has fed weapons trafficking and homicide rates. The United States is not exempt, of course: there were more shootings in U.S. schools in the last three years than any prior year.<sup>1</sup>

The concept frequently used for this violence is that of a pandemic: the health consequences of gun violence are severe and growing, with firearms and bullets as vectors and agents, respectively.<sup>2</sup> But gun violence also behaves like a storm system in its violence and shattering effects. And the islands in which people may imagine that they are safe from these storms of gun violence are shrinking.

**New Data:** In July 2024, Stop US Arms to Mexico submitted a request to ATF for data on the zip code and county of purchase, type, make and caliber of firearms recovered in six Caribbean countries since 2015. We also requested information on the “time to crime” for each U.S. state of purchase, make, caliber, and type of firearms that were recovered in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean and traced to a U.S. purchase.<sup>3</sup>

ATF produced this data for guns recovered from 2015 through July 24, 2024, and released it to us in December 2024. This information supplements data released to Stop US Arms to Mexico in May 2024, which we analyzed in *The Iron River of Weapons to Mexico: Its Sources and Contents*.

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<sup>1</sup> See “K-12 School Shooting Database,” at <https://k12ssdb.org/all-shootings>.

<sup>2</sup> Stopping Gun Violence in the Americas: A Preventable Pandemic, Rashi Jhunjunwala, et. al., *PLOS Global Public Health*, September 2022, [speakingofmedicine.plos.org/2022/09/26/stopping-gun-violence-in-the-americas-a-preventable-pandemic](https://speakingofmedicine.plos.org/2022/09/26/stopping-gun-violence-in-the-americas-a-preventable-pandemic)

<sup>3</sup> The countries for which we obtained time-to-crime, source, type, make and caliber information on traced guns are: Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Bahamas, Barbados, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago.

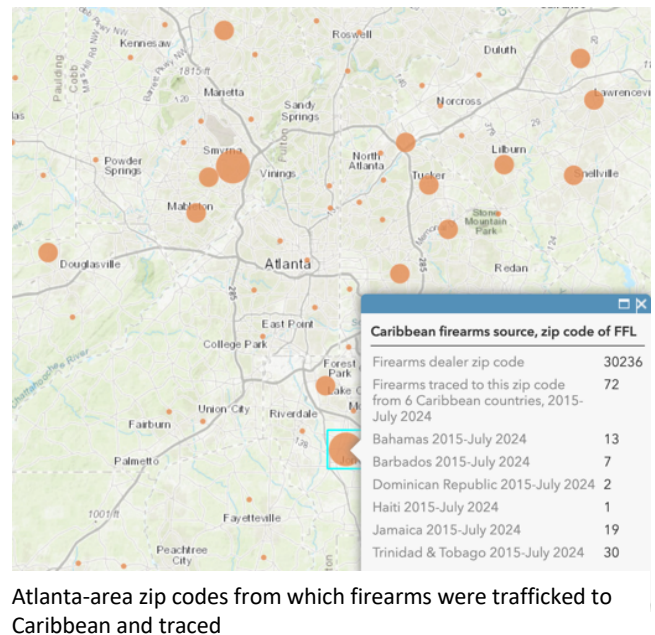
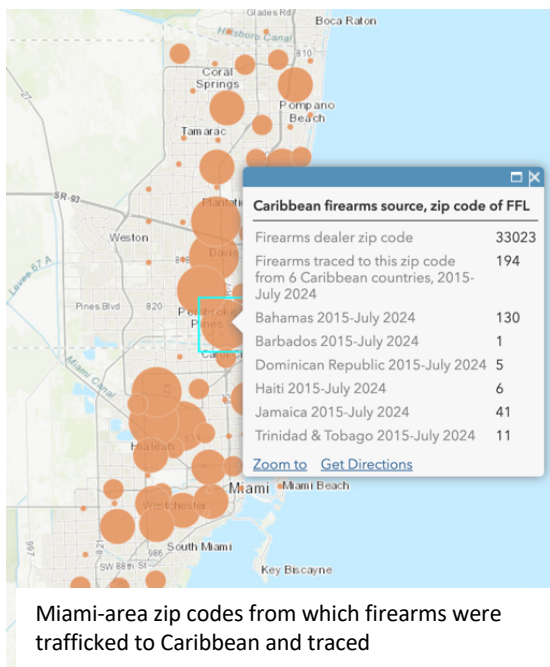
The new data is posted, along with this update and our June 2024 report, at [stopusarmstomexico.org/iron-river](http://stopusarmstomexico.org/iron-river).

## Gun Trafficking from United States to the Caribbean

The crisis in Haiti has drawn widespread attention, including several recent investigations of firearms trafficking to the country.<sup>4</sup> Growing violence in Haiti has spurred a growing exodus: the US Border Patrol reported encounters with 78,000 Haitians in 2024, the only country for which this number grew in every one of the last four years.<sup>5</sup>

During the last near-decade, more than 17,000 firearms were traced from the six Caribbean countries – more than half of these from Jamaica and the Dominican Republic (D.R.). ATF identified 73% of firearms recovered in all Caribbean countries from 2018 through 2022 as originating from the United States.<sup>6</sup> About half of the U.S.-sourced firearms (6,235) were traced to a purchase location in the United States.

The new data confirms that Florida and Georgia are the sources of more than two thirds of



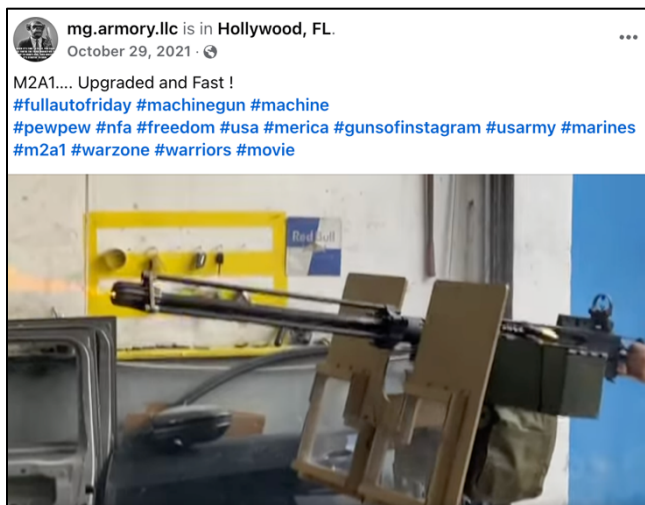
<sup>4</sup> See Fabre, Anne-S everine, Nicolas Florquin, Aaron Karp and Matt Schroeder. *Weapons Compass: The Caribbean Firearms Study*. Small Arms Survey, April 2023; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *Haiti's criminal markets: Mapping Trends in Firearms and Drug Trafficking*. (April 2023); U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Caribbean Firearms: Agencies Have Anti-Trafficking Efforts in Place, But State Could Better Assess Activities," October 2024; Matt Schroeder, Trends in Trafficking: Comparing US-based Firearms Trafficking to the Caribbean and Latin America, Small Arms Survey, November 2024.

<sup>5</sup> "WOLA Border Oversight," data table of CBP Migrant Encounters, <https://borderoversight.org/2024/10/24/cbp-migrant-encounters-at-the-u-s-mexico-border-by-country-of-origin-2/>

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Caribbean Firearms: Agencies Have Anti-Trafficking Efforts in Place, But State Could Better Assess Activities," October 2024, p. 11.

firearms trafficked to the Caribbean: 57% of traced firearms recovered in the Caribbean were purchased in Florida (especially the Miami and Orlando areas), and 12% in Georgia (especially around Atlanta). Florida gun purchases made up even more of those that were recovered in the six countries less than a year after purchase – more than 70% were bought in Florida.

The zip code with the largest number of traced firearms recovered in Caribbean nations – 194 during the near-decade – is in Miramar, Florida (zip 33023), where seven licensed gun dealers include five pawn shops and MG Armory, which appears to specialize in militarized weapons. 130 of the firearms from that zip code were recovered in the Bahamas. But this zip code is not isolated in the area. Broward County, where this zip code is located, and adjacent Miami-Dade County have more than 470 licensed gun dealers.<sup>7</sup> The two counties together were the source of 2,167 firearms recovered in the Caribbean and traced – more than a third of all weapons traced to the United States.



The number of firearms recovered in Haiti and submitted for tracing is minimal, in part because the E-trace software used for tracing firearms, as of 2023, was not available in French or Creole.<sup>8</sup> From 2015 to July 2024, only 68 firearms per year, on average, were recovered in Haiti and successfully traced.

Other analyses observe that, in addition to trafficking from retail sales in Florida, Georgia and other U.S. states, firearms enter Haiti through the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas.<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of crime guns recovered in D.R. and the Bahamas that are traced, in turn, originated from the United States – 98% and 95% in 2023, respectively.<sup>10</sup> There is reportedly also a significant drugs-guns trade between Haiti and Jamaica.

The U.S. Department of Commerce implemented new gun export rules in July 2024 that suspended most U.S. exports of non-military firearms and ammunition, except to police forces, to Barbados, D.R. and Jamaica, as well as to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> ATF, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/listing-federal-firearms-licensees>

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Caribbean Firearms,” p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> UNSC, Report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime pursuant to paragraph 9 of Security Council resolution 2692 (2023), S/2024/79, (January 15, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> The portion of weapons recovered in D.R. that were U.S.-sourced increased from 2020, when it was 73%. See ATF, “International Firearms Trace Data”, at: <https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/data-statistics>

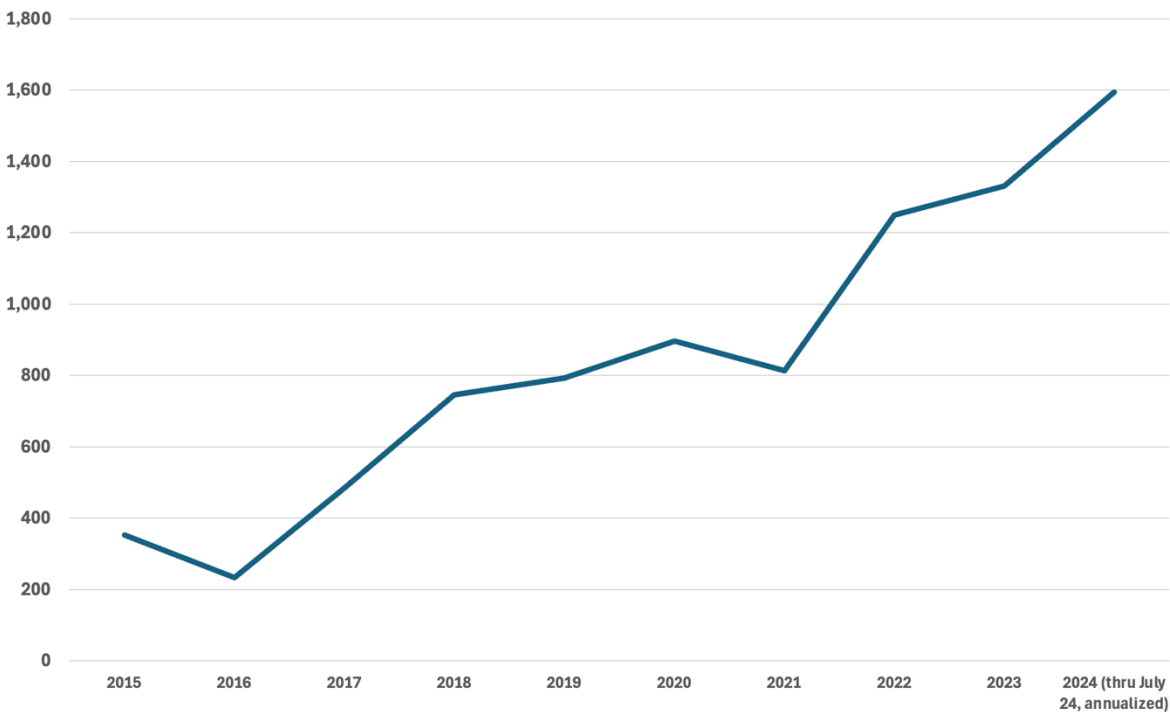
<sup>11</sup> Other countries in the Western Hemisphere to which export licenses for Commerce-controlled firearms to non-governmental end users were “presumptively denied” were Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Trinidad & Tobago. See Department of State Memorandum, April 8, 2024.

## Purchase to Kill: Arizona has become the preferred state for trafficking guns to Mexico

It's long been known that Texas and Arizona are the primary U.S. states from which firearms are trafficked to Mexico. Since 2009, the two states have consistently made up more than 60% of guns recovered in Mexico and traced to a U.S. purchase.<sup>12</sup> But an even larger portion of guns that are purchased with the likely intention of trafficking them over the border – over 80% – come from the two states.

“Time to Crime” is the period from the legal purchase of a firearm and its recovery by law enforcement. A short “time to crime” (TTC) – especially less than a year – is an important indicator of whether a firearm was purchased with the purpose of trafficking.<sup>13</sup> In December 2024, ATF released data on TTC intervals for guns recovered in Mexico from 2015 to July 2024 that were traced to a purchase in the United States. Of 70,614 firearms recovered in Mexico in the last decade and traced to a U.S. purchase, 7,789 were recovered less than a year after their original purchase.

**Firearms recovered in Mexico less than a year after purchase in US, 2015-2024**



<sup>12</sup> U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), “Firearms Trace Data: Mexico - 2018-2023,” <https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/firearms-trace-data-mexico-2018-2023>

<sup>13</sup> According to ATF, a “short [Time to Crime] TTC represents an indicator of firearms trafficking as traced guns with this characteristic have moved rapidly from the last known purchaser to recovery in crime by” law enforcement agencies. ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment,” part IV, January 2023, p. 14.

Of these guns, more than five out of every six – 83.6% - were bought in Texas or Arizona. While the portion sourced from Texas has remained relatively steady between 2015 and 2024, the portion coming from Arizona increased dramatically, from 17.6% in 2015-2016 to 38% in 2022-2023. ***Gun traffickers’ preference for Arizona continues to grow:*** From January 1 through July 24 of 2024, Arizona was the source of the majority (57%) of guns traced to the U.S. and purchased less than a year before their recovery in Mexico.

California is known for its strong gun laws, relative to other U.S. states. Between 2015 and 2024 only 115 firearms were traced to a California purchase less than a year after purchase, out of more than 8,300 sourced to the state. More than 96% of firearms traced to a California purchase were bought there more than three years before their recovery in Mexico, indicating that they were likely on the secondary market for some time. This is consistent with recently published data on seizures within the United States from 2016 to 2023 of firearms bound for Mexico: locations in California made up only 4.4% of these seized shipments, while Laredo, Texas accounted for nearly two thirds of the seized shipments.<sup>14</sup>

Other states also account for some of the most powerful guns seized in Mexico. In Crestview, Florida, six men purchased twenty-seven .50 caliber Barrett rifles and assault rifles during a six-month period in 2022-2023 on behalf of the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación. At least one was used in a firefight in Michoacán state that left two soldiers dead.<sup>15</sup> Crestview, Florida has a population of just 27,000, but it has 25 licensed gun dealers in town. Nine of those dealers have a license to manufacture weapons. Twenty miles south of town is Eglin Air Force Base, home since 2011 of the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, which conducts special operations in Latin America and Afghanistan.

## **Legal Exports as Crime Guns in Guatemala**

Guatemala suffers from one of the highest gun homicide rates in the world. Many guns used in those homicides were reported “lost or stolen,” according to Guatemalan judge Carlos Ruano. “A backpack, a sweater, an umbrella—those things can be lost. But that many guns?” Ruano said. He believes that the guns weren’t lost or stolen, but were instead sold on the black market.<sup>16</sup>

Most of the guns in Guatemala that are confiscated and submitted for tracing were not purchased at a retail location and trafficked over the border from the United States. Instead, according to ATF data, most either came from a non-US country, or were legally exported from the United States.

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<sup>14</sup> Matt Schroeder, *Trends in Trafficking: Comparing US-based Firearms Trafficking to the Caribbean and Latin America*, Small Arms Survey, November 2024, p. 6, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-Situation-Update-2024-Caribbean-Trafficking-EN.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Laura Sánchez Ley, “El Cártel de las Barrett: Tiroteo en Michoacán exhibe red con el CJNG,” *Milenio*, January 8, 2025, <https://www.milenio.com/policia/relacion-entre-cjng-y-cartel-barrett-se-exhibio-tras-tiroteo-michoacan>; Andrés Martínez, “Ataque del CJNG a policías en Zitácuaro dejó dos muertos,” *Infobae*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2023/03/22/ataque-del-cjng-a-policias-en-zitacuaro-dejo-dos-muertos/>

<sup>16</sup> Monte Reel, “The US is Pushing Guns on a Country It Labels Violent and Corrupt,” *Bloomberg News*, August 10, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2023-us-gun-violence-border-crisis-guatemala/>.

According to ATF, nearly 60% of guns in Guatemala submitted for tracing were identified as *not* coming from the U.S. These included 1,364 weapons produced by Israel Weapons Industry (IWI) and 1,148 weapons produced by the Czech gun company CZ, that were recovered in Guatemala from 2015 to 2022 and not traced to a U.S. purchase.<sup>17</sup>

Of the crime guns in Guatemala that were of U.S. origin, most had been *exported* to Guatemala – and the portion that came from U.S. exports grew from 45% in 2015 to 66% in 2023.<sup>18</sup> U.S. trade data shows that U.S. pistol and rifle exports to Guatemala grew more than four-fold from 2015 to 2023. A change in U.S. gun export rules implemented by the Trump administration in 2020 helped accelerate the flow of guns to Guatemala. By 2023, Guatemala imported more U.S. pistols than any other country in the Americas; globally, only Israel and Saudi Arabia bought more pistols from the United States.<sup>19</sup> The growth and lack of controls on U.S. gun exports to Guatemala fed the diversion of firearms into the country’s illegal market and violence.

In January 2024, the Department of Commerce – which oversees export licenses for semi-automatic firearms globally – announced a new export rule, which would restrict U.S. firearms exports to non-governmental end users in 36 countries. Among them was Guatemala, which received more than twice as many Commerce-controlled gun exports in 2023 as any other country on the list. In July 2024, when the new rule took effect, the United States exported no firearms to Guatemala.<sup>20</sup>

## **Gun Exports During Obama, Trump, and Biden: Regulations Matter**

The United States has been the world’s largest exporter of firearms for many years. The gun industry lobbied to liberalize U.S. gun export rules, and after Donald Trump became president in 2017, the executive branch put in motion long-sought regulatory changes to transfer gun export oversight from the State Department to the Department of Commerce, which has a mission to promote exports and different rules for doing so, including no obligation to notify Congress about even controversial gun export license applications.<sup>21</sup> In the three years after the rule change, firearms sales overseen by the Commerce Department grew by 30% globally compared to the three years prior to the change, with an 82% increase in handgun exports to Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Among the gun makes most recovered included Maverick (produced at the U.S.-Mexico border in Eagle Pass, Texas), Israel Weapon Industry, Glock (produced in Austria and Georgia), CZ (Czech Republic), Smith & Wesson (Massachusetts), Taurus (produced in Brazil and Georgia), and Beretta (produced in Italy and Tennessee). Together, these gun makes accounted for 45% of all weapons submitted for tracing from Guatemala.

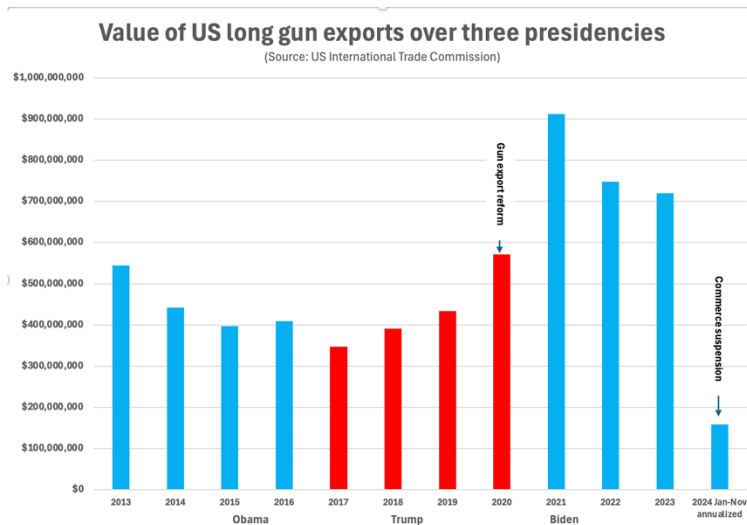
<sup>18</sup> ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: Central America,” 2015-2023, <https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/data-statistics>

<sup>19</sup> According to the U.S. International Trade Commission data platform,

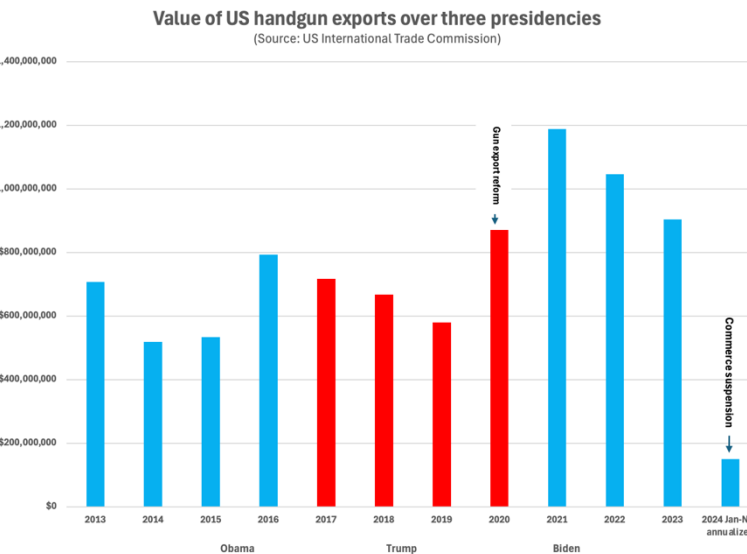
<sup>20</sup> U.S. Census Bureau data. Though it received a surge of 3,218 U.S.-exported pistols in June 2024, just before the new rule went into effect, Guatemala received no U.S. firearm exports from July through November 2024.

<sup>21</sup> See “Transfer of Arms and Ammunition (USMLCat I-III) to Commerce,” Forum on the Arms Trade, <https://www.forumarmstrade.org/catitoiii.html>

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, at <https://usatrade.census.gov> and Center for American Progress, “At Home or Abroad, U.S. Firearms Should Not Fuel Violence, Instability, and Abuse,” July 2024, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/at-home-or-abroad-u-s-firearms-should-not-fuel-violence-instability-and-abuse>



Although Joe Biden said he would reverse the rule during his 2020 campaign, he did not do so. Although his presidency took many steps to control the gun market within the United States, gun exports reached record levels during his first years, and through 2023 and early 2024 remained higher than during either President Obama’s second term or President Trump’s first presidency.



After media coverage of proliferating violence in countries with growing U.S. gun exports, advocacy by arms control groups, and repeated Congressional inquiries, in October 2023 the Commerce Department announced that it would suspend some gun export licenses and review its export rules. The new rule was announced in January 2024 and implemented in July 2024. At that point, the rate of U.S. gun exports decreased dramatically, as seen in these graphs.

## Gun Industry Makes Baseless Arguments Contradicted by Gun Trafficking Data

In response to Mexico’s historic lawsuit charging gun manufacturers with negligence that facilitates the trafficking of guns used in thousands of violent crimes in Mexico, the National Rifle Association (NRA), Republican state officials, and other gun-rights advocates filed 17 *amicus curiae* briefs to the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>23</sup> The briefs filed by the NRA and state officials rely heavily on groundless and outdated claims that have circulated since 2009, when the U.S. Government Accountability Office first reported that the vast majority of crime guns recovered in Mexico came from the United States.

The NRA cited data from 2008 to assert that “almost 90 percent of the guns seized in Mexico in 2008 were not traced back to the United States.” This was nearly entirely due to the fact that the

<sup>23</sup> See: <https://www.supremecourt.gov/search.aspx?filename=/docket/docketfiles/html/public/23-1141.html>

gun tracing system was not set up in Mexico and most seized guns were not submitted for tracing. Of those that were, 87% originated from the United States.

A brief submitted by Montana and other states asserted that “in the three years following the end of the “assault weapon” ban, homicide rates in Mexico declined. Mexican homicide rates didn’t increase until late 2006, when the Mexican government declared war on the drug cartels.”<sup>24</sup> This is both incorrect and misleading. Official data shows that gun homicides in Mexico were declining between 1994 and 2004, when the U.S. federal assault weapons ban was in effect. Once the ban expired in 2004, the number of gun homicides in Mexico increased, moderately at first, before shooting up exponentially.

As another *amicus curiae* brief, submitted by nine scholars of violence and arms trafficking observes, “the number of gun homicides increased by 58% during the four years following the lapse of the assault weapons ban... This increase is even more dramatic because it followed a sustained decrease in gun homicides in Mexico while the assault weapons ban was in force.”<sup>25</sup>

## **The Role of Assault Rifles Imported into the United States**

The ATF data demonstrates that many assault weapons desired by criminal organizations and trafficked from the United States were imported into the U.S. for its domestic retail market. The executive branch could use the Gun Control Act of 1968 to restrict the importation of assault rifles into the United States, thus stemming the trafficking of these weapons to Mexico.

The case for this executive action was laid out nearly ten years ago, by the Violence Policy Center and Washington Office on Latin America, in *Gun Running Nation: How Foreign-Made Assault Weapons are Trafficked from the United States to Mexico and What to Do About It*.<sup>26</sup> The VPC / WOLA report points out that previous administrations used the Gun Control Act's authority by interpreting assault weapons as not "for a sporting purpose." New data disclosed by ATF makes the case for such an action more concrete and immediate.

The new data breaks down the number of recovered guns by manufacturer, caliber, state of purchase, and time to crime. Some manufacturers with the largest number of weapons recovered in Mexico within a year of purchase make handguns principally or exclusively. This is the case for Glock, Taurus, Beretta, and Sig Sauer. However, some of the manufacturers with the largest number of short times to crime guns make primarily long guns, especially assault rifles. These include domestic manufacturers, such as Anderson, Palmetto State Armory, and Barrett.

However, among the ten manufacturers with the largest number of short time-to-crime are four manufacturers or importers of foreign assault rifles: Century Arms, Romarm, Pioneer Arms, and

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<sup>24</sup> Brief by Montana and 26 other states in *Smith & Wesson Brands Inc. v. Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, December 3, 2024, p. 7, at [https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/23/23-1141/333134/20241203103542181\\_23-1141%20Montana%20et%20al%20Amicus%20Brief.pdf](https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/23/23-1141/333134/20241203103542181_23-1141%20Montana%20et%20al%20Amicus%20Brief.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Brief by ten social science scholars in *Smith & Wesson Brands Inc. v. Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, January 17, 2025, at: [www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/23/23-1141/339606/20250117142928060\\_Amicus%20Brief.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/23/23-1141/339606/20250117142928060_Amicus%20Brief.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Washington Office on Latin America, [https://www.wola.org/sites/default/files/Gun\\_Running\\_Nation.pdf](https://www.wola.org/sites/default/files/Gun_Running_Nation.pdf)



Zastava. Century is based in the United States but imports assault rifles, while Romarm is based in Romania, Pioneer in Poland, and Zastava in Serbia. Century - which both manufactures and imports AK47 rifles - accounted for 1,221 (over 15%) of short time to crime firearms recovered in Mexico. It is not clear whether all the firearms identified as Century were produced in the United States. Romarm, Pioneer and Zastava produce primarily assault rifles, exclusively outside the United States.

According to a 2017 binational study by the ATF and Mexico's Justice Department (*Fiscalía General de la República*), "Firearms imported into the United States from other countries and then later trafficked to Mexico include assault-type firearms such as AK variants, which remain popular with [transnational criminal organizations] in Mexico. AK variants commonly recovered in Mexico are the Norinco MAK-90, and the Romanian-made Romarm Cugir."<sup>27</sup>

In other words, the new ATF data makes a strong case that traffickers purchasing weapons in the United States to traffic them to Mexico are heavily focused on imported assault rifles. While it is unlikely in a Trump administration, executive action to interpret assault weapons as not "for a sporting purpose" and suspending the importation of such weapons would have a significant impact on the criminal market for weapons in Mexico that are trafficked from the United States.

## Recommendations

Measures that U.S. federal and state governments should take to regulate the gun market:

- Prohibit the commercial sale of weapons most desired by Mexican criminal organizations:  
.50 caliber rifles and assault weapons
- Require criminal background checks for sales of firearms online and at gun shows
- Prohibit high-capacity magazines, which are also commonly used by Mexican criminal organizations
- Significantly increase inspections of licensed firearms dealers, especially those in border states with prior violations
- Prohibit multiple sales of multiple firearms to the same customer within a short time period

To gun violence researchers and institutions that fund them:

- Because of the enormous and persistent effects of the U.S. gun market beyond U.S. territory, research agendas on gun violence prevention should adopt a holistic view of the effects of the U.S. gun market both within and outside the United States.
- 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.

*Stop US Arms to Mexico is a project of Global Exchange. This report was written by John Lindsay-Poland. For further information, see [stopusarmstomexico.org](http://stopusarmstomexico.org) January 2025*

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<sup>27</sup> ATF, "Firearms Trafficking into Mexico," chapter of binational study, Secretaría Técnica GC Armas, September 8, 2018, extracted from emails of the Mexican Secretariat of National Defense hacked by the group Guacamaya.