

Corridors of Violence: More data on guns trafficked to Mexico and beyond

A report by Stop US Arms to Mexico – February 2026

Abstract

New data on guns trafficked from the United States to Mexico and other countries, obtained through public information requests, shows that a majority of guns recovered in Mexico and traced to a recent U.S. purchase were sold in Arizona, many of them destined for violence-torn Sinaloa in Mexico. Data on guns that are confiscated a short period after their purchase in the U.S. illustrates the impacts of differences in state gun laws. Trafficked guns continue to feed forced disappearances and other violence in Mexico, despite reported declines in homicides. Large .50 caliber rifles, which have a small U.S. civilian market but are widely used by cartel groups, are easily purchased in Arizona and Texas. Still, because many U.S.-sourced guns recovered in Latin America are not traced to a retail purchase, successful gun traces represent only a small portion of the universe of U.S. guns trafficked and used in other countries.

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Introduction

Public information on trafficked guns is limited and fragmented, for three general reasons. First, gun trafficking is an illegal and therefore hidden business. Second, gun trafficking from the United States is highly decentralized, a fact facilitated by the large number of licensed dealers and unlicensed vendors from which traffickers may acquire firearms. Third, authorities who confiscate firearms frequently do not publish or release data on these guns in any consistent way, sometimes because of political sensitivities or domestic laws that prohibit release.¹

In August and December 2025, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) released to Stop US Arms to Mexico data on “time-to-crime” intervals for guns recovered in Mexico and nine other countries from 2015 through 2024 that were traced to a purchase in the United States. The data includes the zip code of purchase for most trafficked guns, which permits analysis of the U.S. locations from which guns with a short “time-to-crime” are obtained. ATF also released to Stop US Arms to Mexico data on traces, by U.S. state of purchase, for firearms recovered in 14 other countries.² The data is posted at: www.stopusarmstomexico.org/iron-river

The Arizona-Sinaloa Pipeline

The Arizona-Sonora corridor for gun trafficking has grown in importance since 2022. Until that year, Mexican authorities recovered more firearms in Tamaulipas state – which borders the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, through which weapons trafficked from Houston and other

¹ In the United States, ATF is prohibited by federal legislation known as the “Tiarht Amendments” from releasing information on firearms buyers or dealers associated with trafficked guns. In Mexico, the Fiscalía General de la República (equivalent to the U.S. Department of Justice) restricts release of information on firearms that are part of unresolved criminal investigation.

² Unless another source is noted, data cited in this report is from this ATF production of information.

Texas cities and towns passed – than any other of Mexico’s 32 states.

In 2024, according to ATF data, most crime guns trafficked to Mexico with a short "time to crime" – the time between purchase and confiscation in Mexico, a key indicator of deliberate trafficking – came from Arizona: 62% of U.S.-sourced guns with a time-to-crime of a year or less.

Of the 15 U.S. zip codes where the most guns were purchased and then confiscated in Mexico within a year in 2023-2024, 14 of those zip codes are in Arizona. In other words, Arizona has become the principal source and corridor for gun trafficking to Mexico criminal groups. As a result, more firearms were confiscated in 2024 by Mexican authorities in Sonora, just over the border from Arizona, than any other Mexican state.³ While the portion sourced from Texas has remained relatively steady between 2015 and 2024, the portion of U.S.-sourced guns with a ‘time-to-crime’ of a year or less coming from Arizona increased dramatically, from 17% in 2015-2016 to 62% in 2024. In other words, gun traffickers’ preference for Arizona continues to grow.

Within Texas and Arizona, guns purchased for trafficking to Mexico are geographically concentrated. More than two thirds – 69% – of these short time-to-crime guns recovered in Mexico in 2024 and traced to the U.S. came from just three counties: Maricopa County, Arizona (the Phoenix area), 53.9%; Pima County, Arizona (Tucson area), 8.8%; and Harris County, Texas (Houston area), 6.4%.

Since the summer of 2024, when Mexican authorities arrested Sinaloa Cartel leader “El Mayo” Zambada and shipped him to the United States, internal wars have torn apart Sinaloa state in Mexico, killing nearly two thousand people, many of them uninvolved in criminal activity. Most of the weapons used in this bloody war have come from the United States – specifically Arizona. Sinaloa has become the Mexican state with more murders of police agents than any other – with 46 cops killed in Sinaloa in 2025 (through December 18).⁴ The movement of firearms to Sinaloa since mid-2024 is also reflected in data on gun confiscations in 2025: the Mexican army seized 2,095 firearms in the state last year, more than twice as many as any other state.⁵

More than 73,000 firearms recovered in Mexico in the last decade (2015-2024) were traced to a U.S. purchase, but the large majority of them were in circulation for more than three years between the purchase and confiscation of the weapon. 8,823 were recovered less than a year after their original purchase. Of these guns, more than five out of every six – 83.6% - were bought in Texas or Arizona. This percentage grew to 90% for guns recovered in Mexico in 2024, showing that the importance of these two states has grown.

³ Secretaría de Defensa Nacional, June 2, 2025, response to public information request, Folio 330026425001204.

⁴ “Asesinan a 336 policías en el año; Sinaloa desplaza a Guanajuato como el estado más letal para agentes”, *Animal Político*, December 27, 2025, at: <https://animalpolitico.com/seguridad/asesinan-policias-ano-sinaloa-desplaza-guanajuato-estado-mas-letal-agentes>

⁵ Secretaría de Defensa Nacional, January 19, 2026, response to public information request, Folio 340026400005526.

Indictments in Arizona for gun trafficking. Two prominent indictments highlight the growth in gun trafficking from Arizona to Mexico. One man, Jorge Alain Corona, coordinated others who played critical but isolated roles in the purchase and movement of firearms in Arizona from 2022 to 2024. At a gun show in Phoenix in December 2022, one woman in the group purchased in cash a .50 caliber rifle that she could not lift on her own, yet the dealer still sold it to her. The dealer, Tucson-based Flawless Ballistics, had a money-counter machine on site that it used for the cash purchases, and sold numerous AK-47s and AR-15s assault rifles in cash. The trafficker group also purchased seven other .50 caliber rifles, five assault rifles and two pistols. On January 27, 2026, a federal indictment charged seven Arizona residents and two others in the group with gun trafficking crimes. (ATF's investigative work occurred in 2023-2024, before President Trump took office.)⁶



Guns recovered in Sinaloa March 2025
Photo: Noroeste

One of the .50 caliber rifles purchased and trafficked by the group was recovered in Sinaloa on March 24, 2025, when Mexican soldiers recovered machineguns, a second Barrett rifle, other assault rifles, 1,439 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition, and an armored truck known locally as “the monster.”⁷

In another indictment of 113 counts handed down by Arizona state authorities in October 2025, investigators documented 334 guns purchased in 2024-2025 by 20 people from 23 dealers in the Phoenix area for the purpose of trafficking to Mexico. At least fourteen of the dealers had a license to manufacture as well as sell firearms. Most of the trafficked weapons (184) were rifles made by Florida-based Century Arms, which promotes itself as “America’s AK manufacturer.”⁸

Disparate impacts of U.S. state gun laws

For Mexico, proximity clearly plays an important role in where in the United States guns are purchased for trafficking. However, the difference between California, with its stricter gun laws, and Texas and Arizona, with their wide-open gun markets, is striking. During the decade from 2015 through 2024, 3.5% of guns traced to California had been purchased less than three years before recovery in Mexico, compared to 33% in Texas and 41% in

⁶ USA v. Jorge Alain Corona, et. al., U.S. District Court Arizona District, 2:26-mj-03011-MTM, January 27, 2026.

⁷ “Ejército y Guardia Nacional decomisan camión blindado y armamento en Sierra de Concordia,” *Noroeste*, March 24, 2025, at: <https://www.noroeste.com.mx/seguridad/ejercito-y-guardia-nacional-decomisan-camion-blindado-y-armamento-en-sierra-de-concordia-FH11349279>; Secretaría de Defensa Nacional, January 19, 2026, response to public information request, Folio 340026400005526.

⁸ *State of Arizona v. Victor Manuel Garcia, et. al.*, Case 97 SGJ 57, October 21, 2025.

Arizona. By the last two years of this period (2023-2024), more than half the guns traced to Arizona (55%) had been purchased less than three years before their recovery.

Unlike Arizona and Texas, California prohibits the retail sale of assault rifles and .50 caliber rifles that are desired by Mexican criminal groups and requires background checks for private gun sales, including at gun shows.

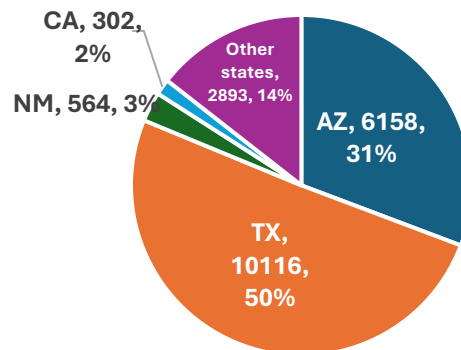
.50 Caliber Rifles

Barrett .50 caliber rifles have an impact beyond their large size. Able to fire accurately at targets over a mile away and penetrate armor, they have been used in Mexico to shoot down an army helicopter. They are highly desired by criminal organizations to contest territory with authorities and other criminal groups.⁹ In the United States, the civilian market for such rifles is extremely small. Barrett, based in Tennessee but owned by an Australian conglomerate, made only 5,903 of these rifles in 2023 – about half of which were sold to military and police forces.¹⁰

The Mexican army reported confiscating 140 Barrett .50 caliber rifles in 2025 (as well as 39 other .50 caliber rifles).¹¹ But this represents only a fraction of the Barrett rifles trafficked over the border in a given year. The Mexican army recovered 10,689 firearms in 2025 – less than one out of ten of the 135,000 firearms estimated to be trafficked from the United States to Mexico annually.¹² *If the portion of trafficked Barrett guns that are confiscated by the Mexican army is the same as for other firearms, then 1,768 Barrett rifles would have been trafficked from the United States into Mexico annually – **more than half of all Barrett's sales of .50 caliber rifles to the civilian market.***

An investigation by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists revealed that much of the ammunition for .50 caliber rifles trafficked to Mexico is made by a U.S. Army contractor in Missouri. It is easily purchased without a background check. The .50 caliber

Portion of Mexico guns with time-to-crime less than 3 years, 2015-2024, by U.S. state of purchase



Source: ATF

⁹ Violence Policy Center, *Long Range Terror: How U.S. .50 Caliber Sniper Rifles Wreak Havoc in Mexico*, 2025, at: <https://vpc.org/studies/longrangeterror.pdf>

¹⁰ ATF, Annual Firearms Manufacturing and Export Report, 2023; interview with a person in the gun industry familiar with Barrett's activities, October 2025.

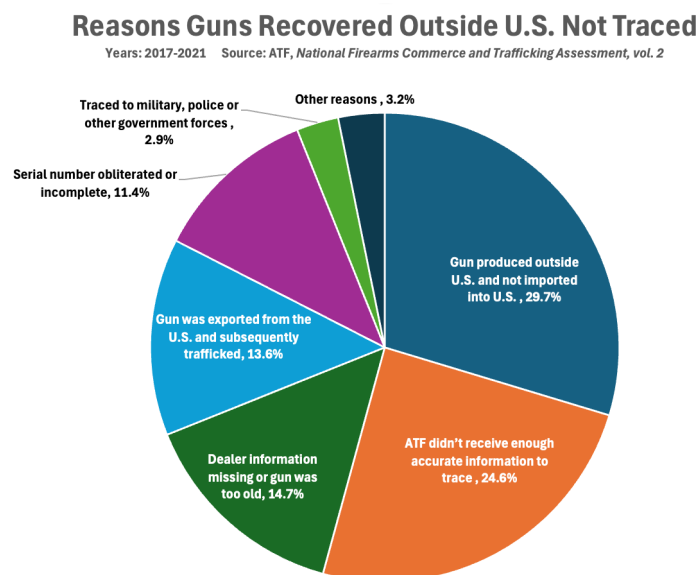
¹¹ SEDENA, response to information request, Folio 3400264005526. Sixteen of the non-Barrett .50 caliber rifles were made by Browning Arms (another U.S. company), 22 by an unidentified manufacturer, and one by Bushmaster.

¹² *Ibid.*, and Sean Campbell and Topher MacDougal, "Mexican drug cartels use hundreds of thousands of guns bought from licensed US gun shops – fueling violence in Mexico, drugs in the US and migration at the border," *The Conversation*, May 23, 2025, at: <https://stories.theconversation.com/mexican-drug-cartels-use-hundreds-of-thousands-of-guns-bought-from-licensed-us-gun-shops-fueling-violence-in-mexico-drugs-in-the-u-s-and-migration-at-the-border/index.html>

rifles are also easily obtained, as they are legal for civilians to purchase in 46 states.¹³

Untraced Crime Guns

Only a portion of U.S.-sourced weapons submitted to the ATF are traced to an actual U.S. purchase, although this portion grew during the Biden administration. This is especially true in Central American countries, where less than one third of guns submitted for tracing and identified as having come from the United States were traced to a retail purchase. (The number of guns recovered in South American countries and Australia that were identified as U.S.-sourced is not published by ATF.)



The main reasons for unsuccessful traces, according to ATF's analysis, are that:

- a) ATF didn't receive enough accurate information about the crime gun
- b) gun dealer information was missing or the gun was too old
- c) the gun was exported from the U.S. before it was seized
- d) the gun's serial number was obliterated or incomplete.¹⁴

Mexico had a high percentage of U.S.-sourced guns – 53% – traced to a purchase from 2020 through 2024, though for several Caribbean countries, including Bahamas, Dominican Republic and Haiti, ATF successfully traced to a purchase the vast majority of U.S.-sourced weapons.

For some countries, including Chile, Colombia, Panama, and Ecuador, the number of firearms traced by ATF doubled or tripled in 2023 and 2024. "There was a major push to improve tracing, domestic and international, during the Biden administration – helping to trace crime guns sitting in law enforcement evidence vaults and teaching E-trace all over the world," according to Marianna Mitchem, former ATF Associate Director who coordinated a four-volume ATF study of gun commerce and trafficking in 2022-2025.

The case of Guatemala: In contrast, in Central America, few U.S.-sourced firearms were successfully traced to a purchase – just 13% each in Guatemala and El Salvador for guns recovered in 2020-2024. In the case of Guatemala, this is due mostly to the fact that over

¹³ Ben Dooley et. Al., "Mexican Cartels Overwhelm Police With Ammunition Made for the U.S. Military," The New York Times, February 7, 2026, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/07/us/lake-city-army-ammunition-plant-missouri-mexico.html>

¹⁴ U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, *National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment* vol. 2, part IV "Crime Guns Recovered Outside the United States and Traced by Law Enforcement," p. 5.

two thirds of U.S.-sourced guns submitted for tracing were legally exported from the United States and then diverted into illicit use.¹⁵ Of 1,347 traced guns recovered in Guatemala and traced during the ten-year period, the largest number – 280 – came from Texas, but nearly all of them were purchased more than 3 years before their recovery in Guatemala.

The Trump administration's deregulation of gun export controls in 2020 led to an enormous growth of U.S.-exported handguns to Guatemala, from less than 5,000 pistols annually in 2015-2018 to more than 21,000 in 2023. When the Biden administration implemented its own gun export reforms in July 2024, U.S. firearms exports to Guatemala dropped to nearly zero. President Trump's Commerce Department reversed these reforms in late September 2025, and Florida exporters promptly shipped nearly 800 firearms to Guatemala in October and November.¹⁶ Lacking end-user controls on these exports, some of these guns are likely to be diverted to the illicit violence market.

The case of Canada: In Canada, four of out five crime guns recovered in 2019-2024 and submitted for tracing were identified as U.S.-sourced. Of these U.S.-sourced weapons, 37% were traced to a retail purchase in the United States, while another 39% were legally exported from the U.S., then used in a crime.¹⁷ In Canada, the role of domestic retail gun sales in gun violence stands between the United States – where legal retail sales account for the vast majority of armed violence – and Mexico, where most gun violence is committed with firearms purchased in the United States and smuggled over the border. In the case of Mexico, only a small portion of traced crime guns – 8.8% – were legally exported from the United States, although that portion was growing from 2017 to 2021.

In addition, not all weapons confiscated in many countries are submitted to ATF for tracing. In Colombia, for example, the National Police alone confiscated more than 3,000 firearms a year from 2017 to 2023, according to data that it provided last year to a Colombian senator.¹⁸ However, according to ATF, less than 200 firearms recovered in Colombia were entered annually into the Etrace system during that period. In 2024, 1,016 guns recovered in Colombia were entered into Etrace, but it still represented less than a third of guns confiscated by Colombian National Police. A 2024 National Police report indicated that at least 3,954 guns seized in Colombia were made in the United States, 805 in Italy, and 414 in Germany, although it is not clear over what time these guns were seized.¹⁹

¹⁵ ATF, "Firearms Trace Data: Central America – 2024," at: <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/report/firearms-trace-data/firearms-trace-data-central-america-2024>

¹⁶ Data from U.S. International Trade Commission, at: <https://dataweb.usitc.gov>

¹⁷ ATF, "Firearms Trace Data: Canada – 2019-2024," at: <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/report/firearms-trace-data/firearms-trace-data-canada-2019-2024>

¹⁸ Policía Nacional de Colombia, "Policía Nacional – Datos incautación armas y explosivos," data provided in response to request by Senator Martha Lisbeth Alfonso Jurado, August 3, 2025.

¹⁹ Adry Torres, "Arizona gun store at center of conspiracy theory around Colombian presidential assassination attempt," *Daily Mail*, June 9, 2025, at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14794841/arizona-gun-shop-plot-assassinate-miguel-uribe-turbay.html>

Despite announced reductions, gun violence in Mexico continues to rise

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum has stated that violence in Mexico has declined significantly, announcing a reduction of homicides by 40% during her first 15 months in office.²⁰ Mexico has unquestionably increased its tempo of operations against organized crime, reflected in a growing number of firearms recovered by Mexican authorities.

However, this reduction belies two important phenomena: the rapid increase in forced disappearances committed by criminal organizations, and the manipulation of statistical categories. While data on forced disappearances is difficult to verify, there is little dispute that the number of forced disappearances – usually with the use of a firearm – has increased precipitously in the last three years.²¹ In addition, some Mexican agencies have labeled violent deaths as “deaths of indeterminate cause,” or as “other crimes against life and bodily integrity”; deaths in the latter category have more than doubled since 2018.²²

Conclusion

Although data on gun trafficking from the United States to Mexico is limited by its clandestine nature and by policy restrictions, there is nonetheless abundant information that illuminates actions that the United States, state governments, Mexico, and civil society can take to reduce the flow of firearms used in massive and devastating violence. This requires focusing not only the border, where effective strategies are limited by the massive legal commerce between the United States and Mexico, who are each other’s largest trading partners, but on regulating the gun market upstream, at the points of production and sale.

If the U.S. government truly seeks to reduce the power of violent criminal organizations in Mexico, it should address the massive and open cross-border flow of militarized and ordinary weapons from U.S. gun markets. What is required is political will from the current U.S. government and others who can act.

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²⁰ ABCNoticias, “Bajan homicidios un 40 por ciento en México; destacan avances en NL”, January 8, 2026, at: <https://abcnoticias.mx/nacional/2026/1/8/bajan-homicidios-un-40-por-ciento-en-mexico-destacan-avances-en-nl-270331.html>

²¹ Instituto Mexicano de Derechos Humanos y Democracia A.C., *Informe Nacional sobre Desapariciones 2025*, at: <https://imdh.org/redlupa/>

²² Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, “Datos abiertos de incidencia delictiva,” at: <https://www.gob.mx/sesnsp/acciones-y-programas/datos-abiertos-de-incidencia-delictiva>; and “Expertos Cuestionan Validez de Datos de Violencia Presentados por el Gobierno de México,” *El Congresista*, December 27, 2025, at: <https://elcongresista.mx/politica/nacional/expertos-cuestionan-validez-de-datos-de-violencia-presentados-por-el-gobierno-de-mexico/?amp>