

Mexico and the United States

A Snapshot of Illicit Arms Trafficking in Mexico*

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More than half a million people are violently killed around the world, mainly by small arms fire, every year.

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As part of the strategy presented in July 2019 by Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, to curb the illicit flow of firearms into Mexico and the subsequent violence and death they generate, the northern border, covering 3169 kilometers, was established as the main work area. 70% of all firearms destined for criminal organizations in Mexico pass through the border, which in 2019 totaled 9279.¹ As a result we have had to coordinate actions on an inter-institutional level to stop the illicit flow of firearms into Mexico and reduce deaths from armed violence.

In an unprecedented coordination from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE), we began working with our border consulates and the competent authorities in both Mexico and the United States. On the U.S. side, the Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the Homeland Security Investigation of the Department of Homeland Security (HSI) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) are involved. The Mexican authorities are represented

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¹ This analysis revisits and updates elements, with official figures and sources of public information, of the articles published between 3 and 6 February 2020 in the author's column in the newspaper *Milenio*. See Fabián Medina, "Hacia un mapa del flujo ilícito de las armas a las zonas de mayor violencia (I de IV)", *Milenio*, February 3, 2020, in <https://www.milenio.com/opinion/fabian-medina/columna-fabian-medina/mapa-flujo-ilicito-armas-zonas-violenci> (date of access: March 12, 2020).

by the Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection (SSPC), as the coordinating body responsible for the issue, the General Administration of Customs, the Ministry of Communications and Transportation (SCT), the Ministry of National Defense (Sedena), the Ministry of the Navy (Semar), the National Guard and the Office of the Attorney-General of the Republic.

By the end of 2019, the 40 existing security mechanisms between the two countries were formed over eight working groups. In the case of firearms of illicit origin, we drew up two maps with assurance records: that of their passage and impact in Mexico, and that of their origin from the United States and Europe.

These maps show the enormous and fatal damage that illicit arms flows cause in our country. Official figures reveal that in 2018, mortality rates from armed violence reached 70% of total homicides (60 000), equivalent to 40 200 deaths; ten years ago this figure was 15%.

By the end of 2019, almost 32,000 intentional homicides were recorded (compared to 3208 deaths by firearms in 2005); the highest number of these homicides occurred in Guanajuato (2685), followed by Baja California (1955), the State of Mexico (1770), Chihuahua (1692), Michoacán (1429), Jalisco (1368), Guerrero (1298) and Mexico City (1062).

These dramatic figures are due to the growing access to firearms that criminals have and, increasingly, that ordinary citizens also have, despite the fact that in Mexico the carrying of this type of weapon by unauthorized civilians is strictly prohibited. A sad example is the shooting that took place in a school in Torreón, Coahuila, in January 2020, by a minor carrying a gun for the exclusive use of the armed forces.

The number of weapons recovered throughout Mexican territory is alarming. In the last decade, 332 689 have been recovered through the fight against crime and through campaigns to exchange weapons for staple food packages. In December 2019, almost 20 000 weapons were destroyed throughout 28 Mexican states.² A major challenge will be to curb crime's capacity to resupply—which requires only 15 days on average—as well as to

² Luis Crescencio Sandoval González, "Participación del general Luis Crescencio Sandoval González, secretario de la Defensa Nacional durante la conferencia matutina, quien habló sobre la destrucción de armas," December 4, 2019, in <https://www.gob.mx/sedena/prensa/4-de-diciembre-de-2019> (date of access: February 25, 2020).

re-establish controls not only at the border, but also in the interior of the country, which were eliminated in 2013.

This preliminary mapping does not reflect the volume of firearms in criminal hands that have not yet been secured. In 2018, it was identified that between 213 000 and 230 000 firearms enter Mexico illegally each year, some of which reach the south of the country.³

In the last decade, it is estimated that 2.5 million weapons arrived in Mexico illegally. Since then, there has been an increase of 122% in assault weapons—mainly lethal high capacity, semi-automatic weapons—and a 9% increase in small arms and light weapons, out of a total of 17 million weapons in civilian hands, whose illegal sale grew by 35% in 2019.

Among the weapons with the highest lethal capacity, Sedena revealed that the current government has secured several weapons for the exclusive use of the armed forces—Barrett .50 caliber rifles with anti-aircraft range, produced in Tennessee; AR-15 .50 caliber rifles, produced in Arkansas; Browning M2 .50 caliber machine guns, produced in Virginia; in addition to anti-aircraft rocket launchers, AK-47 rifles, grenade launchers and grenades from the United States, Africa and Colombia.⁴

However, as indicated by Sedena, the large volume of lower impact weapons secured in the last decade, as well as their parts and ammunition, stands out. Of the total number of seizures, 48% corresponded to long arms—guns, carbines, rifles and shotguns—of which almost 132 500 had entered Mexico mainly through Tamaulipas in containers, and 28% to short arms—guns and revolvers—with 90 500 seizures carried out, mostly in their crossing through California. In 2019, 27 337 high-capacity magazines and more than one million rounds of ammunition were secured.

In addition to the impact on the labor force, the prevention of firearms-related crimes has entailed high financial costs for our country: increasing from 1.3% of GDP in 2012 to 1.5% in 2018, equivalent to more than 286 billion

³ Chelsea Parsons & Eugenio Weigend Vargas, “Beyond Our Borders: How Weak U.S. Gun Laws Contribute to Violent Crime Abroad”, in Center for American Progress, February 2, 2018, in <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/guns-crime/reports/2018/02/02/445659/beyond-our-borders/> (date of access: February 2, 2020).

⁴ L. Crescencio Sandoval, *op. cit.*

pesos, budget resources that could be allocated to other items in favor of growth and development.⁵

In this context, the proposal for an agreement between Mexico and the United States, presented in November 2019, and that of implementing joint operations at six main border crossings from December of the same year will allow for more effective and concrete actions in San Diego-Tijuana, El Paso-Ciudad Juárez, Laredo-Nuevo Laredo, McAllen-Reynosa, Brownsville-Matamoros and Nogales-Nogales. In addition, the SRE has rolled out a border strategy supported by our respective consulates at these crossings, which have been joined by seven others in Texas (Brownsville, Del Rio, Eagle Pass, El Paso, Laredo, McAllen and Presidio), two in California (Calexico and San Diego) and four in Arizona (Douglas, Nogales, Tucson and Yuma). In addition to these, within our network of 51 consulates in the United States, we also initiated a soft power strategy to raise awareness of the impact of legal arms trafficking in Mexico and to bring together like-minded people.

The strategy is in turn aligned with the “ten points to combat violence”, with which President López Obrador instructed governors last December not to allow corruption within public security institutions.

The map of illicit firearms in Mexico

With a focus on the humanitarian impact of weapons, parts and ammunition, we linked the routes and their destinations on a map to the statistics on firearm-related homicides and crimes, mainly from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI). An initial sketch formed from official sources identifies the most dynamic crossings: 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 are identified as

⁵ National Institute of Statistics & Geography (INEGI), *National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Security (ENVIPE) 2019. Key results*, Aguascalientes, INEGI, September, 2019, p. 28, in https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/envipe/2019/doc/envipe2019_presentacion_nacional.pdf (date of access: February 3, 2020).

the most important arms trafficking points, followed by Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila and Nuevo León.

In all of them, with the support of the Tax Administration Service (SAT), the National Guard, Sedena and Semar, inspection points are reinforced in a non-intrusive way against the “continuous” flow of weapons or their parts and ammunition, hidden in the daily crossing of more than 25 000 people. It is mainly Mexicans living on the border (50%) and, to a lesser extent, Americans and Central Americans, who receive from US\$ 100 for a pack of 50 bullets, to US\$ 2000 for an automatic rifle from criminal organizations.⁶ Between November 2019 and January 2020, the key arrests occurred in Nuevo Laredo, Nogales and Caborca.

In 2019, state government figures reveal that Tamaulipas, with 26%, had the highest number of arms seizures in 2019, compared to 17% in 2016, reflected in 41 044 homicides from 2006 to date. Together with Baja California, this is the state where the largest number of long arms enter the country. As of 2016, Tamaulipas ranks first nationally with 481 weapons per 100 000 inhabitants, as well as the highest number of people arrested for arms trafficking (4018) and Guerrero (2436), according to official data from 2019.

In Sonora, the murder of women and children from a Mormon community in November 2019, with AR-15 rifles, coincided with the increasing number of weapons seized, which rose from 52% in 2017 to 68.21% in 2018. Ammunition seizures follow the same pattern, with Sonoyta customs office as the main route, followed by Nogales. With a crime incident rate of 50 861 per 100 000 inhabitants, or one out of every two inhabitants, the number of homicides recorded in July 2018 more than doubled to 789 by the end of 2019.

From 2006 to 2019, Michoacán was the third state with the most firearm-related homicides (33 140), followed by Sinaloa, 22 879; Guerrero, 12 759; and Chihuahua, 10 948.

Guanajuato has the highest concentration firearm-related crimes (2060), out of a total of 19 087 committed in the first half of 2019; it is followed by the State

⁶ See J. Jesús Esquivel, “Tráfico de armas: ningún interés en detenerlo,” in *Proceso*, num. 2254, January 12, 2020, p. 11.

of Mexico (1977), Mexico City (1753), Baja California (1339), Michoacán (1334), Jalisco (1234) and Chihuahua (1160).

Finally, Colima has the highest homicide rate, with 88 per 100 000 inhabitants, followed by Baja California, 74.2; Chihuahua, 63.2; Guanajuato, 52, and Guerrero, 47.

This illicit flow of arms, which crosses the northern border and reaches the Gulf coast, the Pacific coast, and central Mexico, is concentrated in 10 municipalities that record more than 1000 intentional homicides on average: Tijuana, Acapulco, Culiacán, Benito Juárez, Iztapalapa, Cajeme, Ecatepec, Tlajomulco, Zapopan, and Ensenada.

Although arms trafficking on the country's southern border represents only 2% of the national volume, according to government studies, the instability of the Central American region has led to the increase of secured firearms in Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Tabasco and Campeche, mainly in Ciudad Hidalgo, Tapachula, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Balancán, Veracruz and Oaxaca. These are short arms that were used in the Central American conflict in the 1980s, and anti-personnel mines, prohibited by the United Nations because of their capacity for mass destruction.

The increasing illicit flow of arms from the United States to Mexico, along with its tragic consequences, is the same phenomenon that forces many families in Central America to abandon their homes when faced with devastating violence.

Routes from the United States

Binational studies show that 41% of the weapons involved in crimes in Mexico come from Texas, followed by California (19%), Arizona (15%) and the rest of the U.S. states (25%). Weapons cross the border in vehicles (46%), with a minority coming via border crossing on-foot (4%) and only 1% by air. They also pass through tunnels, 180 of them detected in California and Arizona, by the ATF in 2016.

Within the United States, five routes have been identified over the past decade that reach the border states: 1) from Washington and Oregon; 2) Utah and Arizona; 3) Colorado and New Mexico; 4) Missouri, Eagle Pass and Laredo;

and 5) from Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana to McAllen, Roma, Rio Grande and Brownsville.

Of the 133 753 licenses permitting the sale of firearms in the United States, the four border states have 22 689 gun stores: Texas, 10 492, California, 7962, Arizona, 3188 and New Mexico, 1047. These licenses authorize the sale all types of weapons to resellers or small producers. In these stores, ‘unrestricted’ purchases are made, mainly of ammunition, small arms and components, with an average of 200 000 firearms per year flowing south.⁷

Secondly, sales at arms fairs stand out, which in 2019 totaled 1264, with Texas leading (632), then Florida (342), California (105) and Arizona (94). Of the 10895 arms fairs identified by the Public Security National System in the last decade in the United States, more than 1130 were in Texas, 809 in Florida, 569 in Ohio, 515 in Pennsylvania and 424 in Tennessee. In these events, traffickers acquire large lots of weapons with no background checks or purchase limits.⁸

A more complex situation is that of ammunition, which is sold without a license and is not recorded in traceability systems. They enter Mexico in large volumes, mainly through Laredo and Tucson, according to information from the ATF from 2016.

Whether through arms fairs, licensing at border establishments, the internet or second-hand market sales and newspaper advertisements, it is estimated that arms trafficking and clandestine parts passing into Mexico via the northern border reaches up to 250 000 weapons per year. However, this amount constitutes only 2.2% of total arms sales in the United States, which in 2018 totaled approximately 13.1 million items, with revenues of US\$ 10.508 billion.⁹ It is a minimum percentage equivalent to US\$ 224 million which, by closing the flow to Mexico, would generally not affect the profits of the U.S. arms market.

⁷ C. Parsons & E. Weigend Vargas, *op. cit.*

⁸ “Cuatro hechos sobre la legislación de armas y la violencia de los carteles en México”, in WOLA, April 8, 2013, in <https://www.wola.org/es/analisis/cuatro-hechos-sobre-la-legislacion-de-armas-y-la-violencia-de-los-carteles-en-mexico/> (date of access: January 28, 2020).

⁹ Daniel Trotta, “U.S. Gun Sales down 6.1 Percent in 2018, Extending ‘Trump Slump’”, in Reuters, January 29, 2019, in <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-guns-sales/us-gun-sales-down-61-percent-in-2018-extending-trump-slump-idUSKCN1PN346> (date of access: January 30, 2020).

It is estimated that there are 393 million weapons on the market in the United States, representing more than 40% of the total weapons in the world (955 million), 75% of which belong to civilians.¹⁰ That is, out of every 10 U.S. citizens, 4 possess a weapon, and in most cases, more than one per person.

Armed violence statistics in the United States between 2013 and 2017 reveals that 310 people were assaulted daily and 113 108 victims injured annually; an average of 36 383 pass away, of which 1488 are minors.¹¹ By incorporating suicides using firearms, 39 773 deaths were recorded in 2017 alone.¹²

Even more alarming is the growing number of mass shootings. In 2019 there were 417, representing more than one per day throughout the year, surpassing the record of 382 in 2016.¹³ 100-104 firearm deaths per day represents a cost of US\$ 229 billion per year due to the labor force used.¹⁴

Thus, we are facing a great binational challenge that has been growing exponentially since 2004, when the George W. Bush Administration withdrew the ban on assault weapons for civilian use (Federal Assault Weapons Ban), after having been in force for a decade. According to government sources, the production of pistols has increased from 200 000 to 600 000 by 2010, while that of assault weapons has risen from 100 000 to 500 000, and that of rifles from 10 000 to 90 000, according to official data from 2013.

¹⁰ Aaron Karp, *Estimating Global Civilian Held Firearms Numbers*, Ginebra, Small Arms Survey (Briefing Paper), 2018, in <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-BP-Civilian-Firearms-Numbers.pdf> (date of access: January 29, 2020).

¹¹ The Brady Plan, "The Facts that Make Us Act", in <https://www.bradyunited.org/key-statistics> (date of access: January 28, 2019).

¹² Kenneth D. Kochanek, Serry L. Murphy, Jiaquan Xu & Elizabeth Arias, "Deaths: Final Data for 2017", in *National Vital Statistics Report*, vol. 68, no. 9, June 24, 2019, p. 12, in https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr68/nvsr68_09-508.pdf (date of access: January 28, 2020).

¹³ Gun Violence Archive, "GVA-Six Years Review", 2020, in <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/> (date of access: January 29, 2020).

¹⁴ U.S. Congress. Joint Economic Committee, Democratic Staff, "A State-by-State Examination of the Economic Costs of Gun Violence", September 18, 2019, [p. 2], in https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/b2ee3158-aff4-4563-8c3b-0183ba4a8135/economic-costs-of-gun-violence.pdf (date of access: January 29, 2020).

This phenomenon certainly implies a shared responsibility, although in Mexico armed violence causes havoc greater than that registered annually in the United States, due to its population being almost a third of that of the United States. Therefore, closing the illicit flow of firearms into Mexico is urgent and also feasible, as it would not affect the booming market in the neighboring country and would contribute to a safer shared border.

Routes from Europe through the United States

Official data from the last five years also reveals that 30% of the weapons that arrive in Mexico illegally come from six European producers. Some have established factories in the United States taking advantage of lax regulations. Others regularly export to U.S. gun stores. In other cases, assault rifle parts made in Europe are transformed into unidentified weapons once in Mexico.

These are 5658 weapons of Spanish manufacture—23% of total European weapons secured in Mexico—4280 from Italy (20%), 3395 from Romania (14%), 2967 from Austria (12%), 2749 from Germany (12%), 1904 from Belgium (8%) and 4039 from 19 other European countries. These weapons crossed the border between 2014 and 2019 through California, Arizona and Texas—a state through which mainly Italian and Romanian weapons circulate. The same official data reveals that of the 24 992 European weapons secured in the last five years and 116 560 in the last decade,¹⁵ 77% corresponded to small arms—almost 8000 arrived via the United States and more than 11 500 via other routes. The majority of long weapons (3500) entered via the United States and more than 2000 entered directly by sea. Some states importing European arms that have passed illegally into Mexico are Virginia, Florida, Illinois, and Tennessee.

In particular, weapons from Romania arrived in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and Connecticut, and then went down to Tamaulipas. Special mention should be made of the Ciugur rifles that, according to ATF data from 2016,

¹⁵ Robin Eveleigh, “European Gun Makers are Quietly Supplying the Mexican Drug Wars” in *Vice*, January 28, 2020, in https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/3a8dxb/european-gun-makers-are-quietly-supplying-the-mexican-drug-wars (date of access: January 29, 2020).

enter Mexico illegally from the United States to be transformed into high-powered automatic weapons, equivalent to a machine gun.

In the case of Germany, the world's fourth largest arms exporter in 2018, the United States is its second largest buyer spending 525 billion euros. Because of the national restrictions they face for private sales, some of their companies have established themselves in the United States.

By sea, European weapons arrive through the ports of Lázaro Cárdenas, Altamira and Manzanillo. Most are manufactured in Spain and Italy, and have been secured in Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán, Jalisco, Guanajuato and the State of Mexico—where German, Italian and Austrian weapons have also been secured.

In addition to this, European arms exports to Mexico worth 105 million euros are also subject to diversion or theft, according to the Campaign Against the Arms Trade. In this regard, Sedena noted that from 2009 to 2019 more than 12 000 weapons were lost or stolen.¹⁶ Due to the abovementioned reasons, in collaboration with Europol and these countries, we have proposed various cooperative measures to curb their illegal entry into Mexico and to strengthen the risk analyses for deliveries.

Perspective

The great flow of weapons that have been circulating freely in the United States since 2005 has attracted European producers to establish themselves in the market and, above all, has aggravated the crisis of violence in our country, generating an increasing number of deaths of innocent civilians. Aware of this situation, 18 states in the United States already have regulations on light weapons; among them are California, Illinois, Massachusetts and New York, and, as of January 2020, Virginia.

¹⁶ See the presentation of Luis Crescencio Sandoval, Secretary of National Defense, at the morning conference on August 13, 2019 in the Presidency of the Republic, “Versión estenográfica de la conferencia de prensa matutina”, August 13, 2019, in <https://www.gob.mx/presidencia/es/articulos/version-estenografica-de-la-conferencia-de-prensa-matutina-martes-13-de-agosto-2019> (date of access: March 13, 2020).

Armed violence has already left its mark on other parts of the hemisphere. In 2019, the region had high rates of firearm-related homicides, especially of young people between 18 and 19 years of age, estimated at 46 per 100 000 inhabitants—with 50 per 100 000 in El Salvador and 41 per 100 000 in Honduras. Compared to Africa or Asia, where 28% of homicides are caused by firearms, in Latin America and the Caribbean they account for 70% of homicides, with Mexico in seventh place with the most civilian controlled firearms in the hemisphere.¹⁷

The Merida Initiative implied an exponential growth of U.S. arms exports to the Mexican Armed Forces, without stopping the violence and deaths. In addition to this strategy to combat crime with higher levels of firearms, during the last government period the so-called “second border” was withdrawn, which maintained inspections on the main transfer routes.

The results of both failed measures are devastating. A 2017 study indicates that life expectancy in Mexico fell, for the first time since the Mexican Revolution, 0.5 to 2 years in the states with the highest levels of armed violence.¹⁸

The recent legislative reform adopted by the Trump Administration in January 2020 will encourage a higher flow of firearms into Mexico: it provides export licenses for semi-automatic weapons and their ammunition, and for other large-caliber weapons, by shifting its oversight from the Department of State to the Department of Commerce, without congressional control.¹⁹

With this change, it is estimated that U.S. assault weapons exports will increase by 20%, to 300 000 per year. This is a regulatory liberalization promoted by the National Rifle Association, with significant resources

¹⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide 2019*, Viena, UNODC, 2019, to be found in <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html> (date of access: February 1, 2020).

¹⁸ Vladimir Canudas Romo, José Manuel Aburto, Víctor Manuel García Guerrero & Hiram Beltrán Sánchez, “Mexico’s Epidemic of Violence and its Public Health Significance on Average Length of Life”, in *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, vol. 71, no. 2, February 2017, pp. 188-193, in <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/jech-2015-207015> (date of access: February 1, 2020).

¹⁹ “International Traffic in Arms Regulations: U.S. Munitions List Categories I, II, and III”, *Federal Register*, vol. 85, no. 15, January 23, 2020, pp. 3818-3833, to be found in <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/01/23/2020-00574/international-traffic-in-arms-regulations-us-munitions-list-categories-i-ii-and-iii> (date of access: February 24, 2020).

in the United States—US\$ 21 million in the last presidential campaign and US\$ 36 million for this year's campaign²⁰—which adds to the barriers making the illicit trafficking of firearms a federal crime in the United States.

The joint operation between Mexico and the United States that began in late 2019 is a first step in the right direction. However, much remains to be done. We will continue to work on various fronts throughout 2020 with the support of several countries, civil societies, and our diplomatic and consular network, to prevent these exports and the illicit flow of weapons from claiming more lives in Mexico.

²⁰ J. Jesús Esquivel, *op. cit.*, p. 14.