

The Illicit Trafficking of Firearms to Mexico: A Perspective from Confiscations*

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The violence related to firearms is probably the most important structural problem in terms of security and public health that Mexico has faced in recent decades. Various sources give an account of the size of this problem. A United Nations report estimated that approximately 20 000 weapons enter the country illegally each year. The study also revealed that the value of this flow amounts to US\$20 million per year, and no less than 10% of the entire global firearms market.¹

Other studies and these estimates differ. On the one hand, an assessment by The Brookings Institution showed that 2000 illicit arms enter Mexico every day.² On the other hand, a study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that the volume of arms trafficked has tripled between 1990 and 2010. This study concluded that the flow of firearms

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¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Firearms," in *The Globalization of Crime: A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment (TOCTA)*, Vienna, UNODC, 2010, p. 133, at <https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta/6.Firearms.pdf> (date of access: March 25, 2020).

² Partnership for the Americas Commission, *Rethinking U.S.-Latin American Relations: A Hemispheric Partnership for a Turbulent World*, Washington, D. C., Brookings Institution, 2008, p. 24, in https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/1124_latam_partnership.pdf (date of access: March 25, 2020).

between the United States and Mexico exceeded 200 000 weapons trafficked each year, with an annual value of about US\$127 million.³

Instead, other perspectives have focused on estimating the amount of weapons already present in Mexican territory. Gun Policy has suggested that the number of illicit weapons has increased from 300 000 in 2004 to over 600 000 in 2012.⁴ The Small Arms Survey estimated that 15 million weapons are in circulation in Mexico (the sixth largest arms market in the world). A third study suggested that Mexico could have accumulated up to 24 million weapons in the period 1990-2013.⁵

There are other approaches that add to the information on this phenomenon. One survey found that three percent of participants acknowledged that they had a weapon at home in Mexico.⁶ Another noteworthy study found that, for the first time in Mexico's contemporary history, the life expectancy of Mexicans had been reduced, to a great extent, as a result of the violence experienced in the first years of the 21st century.⁷

In general, it is clear that the estimates described above can yield very different outcomes, even when the same phenomenon is involved. The disparity in these data is due to the fact that firearms trafficking is essentially a black market. By definition, this means that the actors who sell and buy illicit weapons in this market operate "under the radar". The priority of the

³ Tophher L. McDougal, David A. Shirk, Robert Muggah and John H. Patterson, "The Way of the Gun: Estimating Firearms Trafficking across the U.S.-Mexico Border", in *Journal of Economic Geography*, vol. 15, no. 2, March 2015, pp. 297-327.

⁴ See "Número estimado de armas de fuego ilícitas", in Philip Alpers, Amélie Rossetti and Leonardo Goi, "México-Datos sobre armas, figuras y leyes", in GunPolicy.org, February 17, 2020, at <https://www.gunpolicy.org/es/firearms/region/mexico> (date of access: March 25, 2020).

⁵ Eugenio Weigend and Ínigo Guevara, *The Stock of Illegal Firearms in Mexico: An Informed Estimate*, 2015.

⁶ David Pérez Esparza and David Hemenway, "What Is the Level of Household Gun Ownership in Urban Mexico? An Estimate from the First Mexican Survey on Gun Ownership 2017", in *Injury Prevention*, vol. 25, no. 2, April 2019, pp. 93-97.

⁷ Vladimir Canudas Romo, José Manuel Aburto, Víctor Manuel García Guerrero and 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, issue 2, February 2017, pp. 188-193, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/jech-2015-207015> (date of access: March 25, 2020).

actors who participate in it is that their illegal business is not seen or understood by the authorities.

Given this fact, it is clear that there are no official figures on the exact amount of firearms being trafficked to a location. For this reason, in the absence of estimates, experts on this phenomenon take into account proxy variables (or triangulation of variables), which are useful to infer the amount of arms that exist somewhere.

The academic literature tends to identify, as a priority, seven proxy sources linked to firearms: records of hospitalization for gunshot injuries, the proportion of homicides and suicides, crimes cases presented to judges, intelligence reports on black markets, interviews with informants or police officers, surveys on victimization and confiscation data.⁸ This article focuses on presenting firearms seizure as an alternative to having better evidence about the patterns of the illicit firearms market in Mexico.

Temporary patterns in firearms confiscation

Even if it is clearly not perfect, the information available from the Ministry of National Defense (Sedena) is a suitable option to know the patterns of illicit arms confiscation in the country. This is because Sedena is the last repository of all the weapons seized in Mexico.

An analysis of this information managed by Sedena suggests that firearms confiscation had remained more or less stable from the beginning of the 1990s until the middle of the first decade of the 21st century (2005). However, the most updated data on this subject suggests that, from that moment on, the volume of arms confiscations increased substantially. In fact, more than 179 000 weapons were seized between 2000 and July 2019.⁹ This amount is not less; to have an idea of this data, 198 000 troops

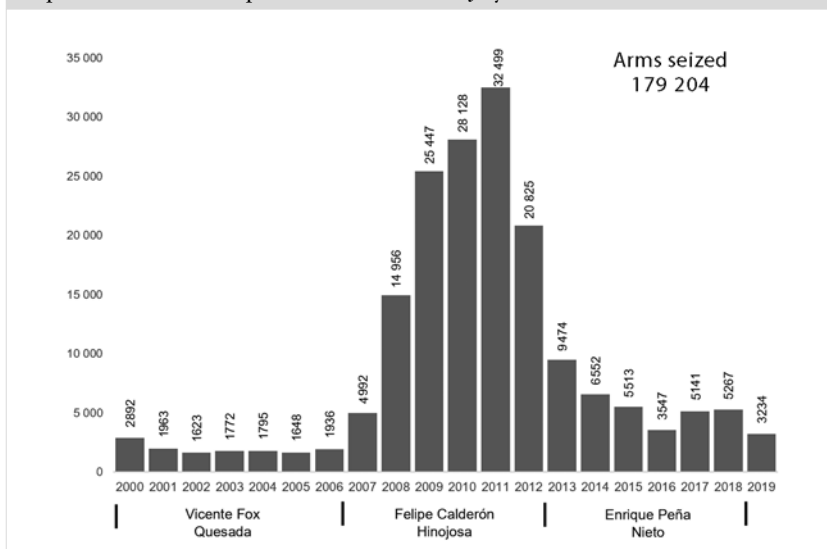
⁸ Matthias Nowak, "Arms and Illegal Arms: Sources, Methods and Recent Analysis", presentation at the Third International Conference on Governance, Crime and Security Statistics, Mérida, Yucatán, June 8, 2016.

⁹ Ministry of National Defense (Sedena), Response to the public information request number 0000700261719, available at <https://www.infomex.org.mx/gobierno/federal/moduloPublico/moduloPublico.action> (date of access: March 25, 2020).

make up the Mexican Army.¹⁰ Thus, the amount of illegal weapons that have been recently confiscated in Mexico would equal to equipping most of the troops; in fact, almost every troop of the Army.

Beyond the large volume of these seizures, it must be considered that this phenomenon is not steady in either temporal or spatial terms. In fact, there are significant variations from one year to another and between entities. Graph 1 shows that there is an increase in seizures, especially from 2007, when more than 4900 units were reported. The highest point occurs in 2011, when more than 32 000 weapons were confiscated, almost seven times the number confiscated four years earlier. From 2011 onwards, a substantial reduction in confiscation levels is observed.

Graph 1. Confiscated weapons between 2000 and July 2019



Source: Sedena, Response to the public information request number 0000700261719.

¹⁰ Ministry of Finance and Public Credit (SHCP), "Proyecto de Presupuesto de Egresos de la Federación 2020. Análisis de Plazas y Remuneraciones. Ramo: 7 Defensa Nacional," September 2019, at https://www.ppefhacienda.gob.mx/work/models/PPEF2020/docs/07/r07_appcd.pdf (date of access: March 25, 2020).

The fact that significant reductions in seizures have occurred in recent years can be interpreted as either positive or negative, depending on the additional information and the context in which this occurs. In an optimistic scenario, a lower number of confiscated arms would mean that fewer illicit arms entered the country. In a more critical scenario, a lower volume of confiscations could mean a lower capacity of the State to stop the illicit flows.

With the information available, it can be deduced that the second scenario was the most feasible (until 2018). For instance, in the case of intentional homicide, there is a substantial increase in the role that firearms have had over time as a tool to commit this crime. In 1997, 15% of the intentional homicide crimes were committed with a firearm, the vast majority of which were committed with a blow or a sharp instrument. However, by 2018, its use quadrupled, as 69% of intentional homicides were committed with a firearm.¹¹

This change is relevant because it shows that between 2015 and 2018 not only the number of homicides increased, but also the level of violence associated with them. The most evident example of these high levels of violence during the most recent years is seen in the percentage of victims who died from gunshot wounds. During 2019, Guanajuato was the state with the highest number of victims of intentional homicide (3540), with a higher percentage associated with firearms (2931, that is 83% of the total). Levels similar to this indicator were observed in Colima (82%) and in the three other most violent entities in the country in 2019: Baja California (73%), State of Mexico (68%) and Chihuahua (71%).¹²

However, the increase in the percentage of intentional homicides with firearms is no exception. On the contrary, there are other crimes in which the increase in the use of firearms has been consistent. The percentage

¹¹ Executive Secretariat of the Public Security National System (SENSP), “Incidencia delictiva del Fuero Común, metodología anterior”, March 20, 2020, at <https://www.gob.mx/sensnp/acciones-y-programas/incidencia-delictiva-del-fuero-comun?idiom=es> (date of access: March 25, 2020).

¹² SENSP, “Víctimas y unidades robadas, nueva metodología”, March 20, 2020, in <https://www.gob.mx/sensnp/acciones-y-programas/victimas-nueva-metodologia?state=published> (date of access: March 25, 2020).

of intentional injuries in which a firearm was used stands out, increasing from 1.2% in 2002 to 6.5% in 2019.¹³ Based on all of the above, it can be inferred that although the number of arms confiscations has decreased in recent years, in practice it is most likely that there has been a substantial increase in the number of arms illegally brought into the country. One possible explanation is the reduction in the number (or effectiveness) of border controls and checks on the roads crossing the national territory. This reinforces the need to increase the capacity for universal (but non-intrusive) vehicle inspection on the northern border and at the main road points of the country, as the federal administration 2018-2024 has begun to implement.

Space patterns in firearms confiscation

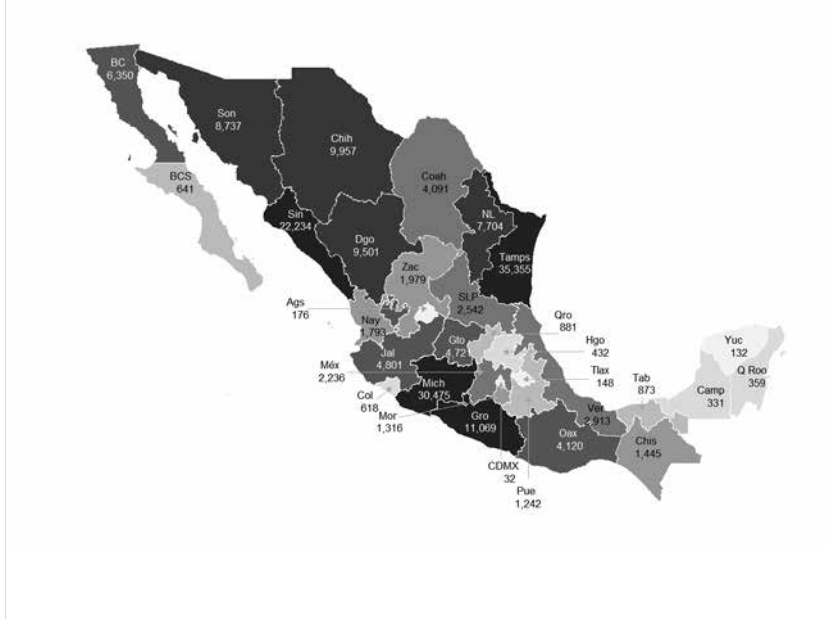
An analysis of the seizures reveals that, just as there are significant variations in seizure volumes over the years, there have also been patterns of spatial concentration. This means that some entities accumulate a greater volume of confiscated weapons than others.

In this regard, three entities stand out for the number of weapons they have confiscated between 2000 and July 2019. First, there is Tamaulipas with more than 35 000 weapons; second, Michoacán with more than 30 000; and third, Sinaloa with more than 22 000. From there, one can see entities that have (or had) a significant presence of criminal groups; such as Guerrero, Chihuahua and Durango. Likewise, other entities on the border with the United States have concentrated significant volumes of confiscated arms (Sonora, Nuevo León and Baja California), the largest source of illicit arms to Mexico. It is also observed that, in general, the entities in the center and south of the country tend to have lower numbers of arms confiscations than the entities in the north.¹⁴

¹³ *Idem.*

¹⁴ Sedena, *op. cit.*

Map 1. Firearms confiscation (2000-2019).



Source: Sedena, Response to the public information request number 0000700261719.

An additional analysis worth considering is whether the entities that accumulated the most firearms during the period 2000-2019 are the same ones that recently concentrated the most weapons (from January to July 2019). From this analysis, it is possible to confirm that Tamaulipas and Michoacán were also leaders in the first months of 2019 (with 442 and 379 arms, respectively). Following these two entities, there are Sonora, Jalisco, Baja California, Guanajuato and Chihuahua.¹⁵ In general, the cases of Jalisco and Guanajuato, two states that have seen significant increases in the number of confiscated arms and in intentional homicides, are relevant.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

Tactical patterns in firearms confiscation

As with other illegal markets, including the illicit drug market, not all types of weapons tend to be confiscated in the same proportion. The reports that Mexico has submitted to UNODC reveal that certain types of weapons tend to be confiscated more frequently.

An analysis of the confiscations reported in six recent years suggests that 42% of the weapons seized are rifles; pistols are next (27%); in third place are unidentified weapons (13%); in fourth and fifth place are revolvers and shotguns (8% and 7%, respectively). The rest of the weapons include machine guns, sub-machine guns and other weapons.¹⁶ Without a doubt, these patterns are valuable for understanding the preference of the organized crime that operates in the country for long weapons.

Criminal patterns in firearms confiscation

Although there is no official and public information on this subject, the data available shows that more firearms were confiscated from certain criminal groups. From a database covering confiscations between 2006 and 2010,¹⁷ it can be estimated that 44% of the weapons were held from members who identified themselves with the *Zetas*. In second place, with 22%, is the *Gulf Cartel*. This would mean that two out of three weapons were confiscated from groups with a high presence in the northeast, specifically in the state of Tamaulipas. This confirms the above hypothesis about the relevance of that entity in terms of confiscated weapons.

The rest of the confiscations are distributed among other criminal groups. For example, the Beltrán Leyva family (10%), the *Sinaloa Cartel* (8%), the Arellano Felix family (7%) and the *Michoacán Family* (1.5%) stand out.

¹⁶ UNODC, "Arms Seized by Type", in DATAUNODC, at <https://dataunodc.un.org/content/firearms%20seized> (date of access: March 25, 2020).

¹⁷ Sandra Ley, Roberto Villanueva and Patricia López, "Informe de la base de datos Firearms Recovered and Traced-Purchased between 12/1/06 and 11/30/10 with a Mexico Recovery, 2014", available at <https://igarape.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Reporte-NoMasArmas-MxLaPaz.Mx.pdf> (date of access: March 25, 2020).

Other groups, whose weapons seized represent about 1% of the total, are the *Jabalines*, the organization of the *Barbie*, the *Pelones*, the *Pacific Cartel*, the *Line* and the Carillo Fuentes. The intelligence that can be obtained from the criminal groups through the seizures deserves a coordinated effort by all the security organizations of the Mexican State.

Tackling the root causes of the issue

The information derived from the seizures is also very useful in revealing the origin of the weapons that enter the country illegally. Based on the confiscations, it is known that about 70% of the weapons confiscated in Mexico come from the United States.¹⁸

Academic literature suggests that these weapons trafficked into the country may come from a variety of sources. The most explored are straw purchasers, people who use their right to buy legal weapons in official stores (gun shops), and then resell them to people who do not have that right, but acquire them with the objective of trafficking them to Mexico. A second source is weapons lost or stolen from legal sources in the United States and then trafficked to Mexico. About 1.2 million weapons are known to have been stolen in the United States between 2012 and 2015; that is, a weapon is stolen every two minutes.¹⁹ Given their obvious crime-related nature, and that a vast majority of the robberies occur in Texas,²⁰ it is likely that a significant part of these stolen weapons have ended up illegally in Mexico.

A very relevant source that has received little attention are the so-called gun shows. These events are informal fairs where gun enthusiasts gather in public places (such as parking lots, gyms, and street bazaars) to freely

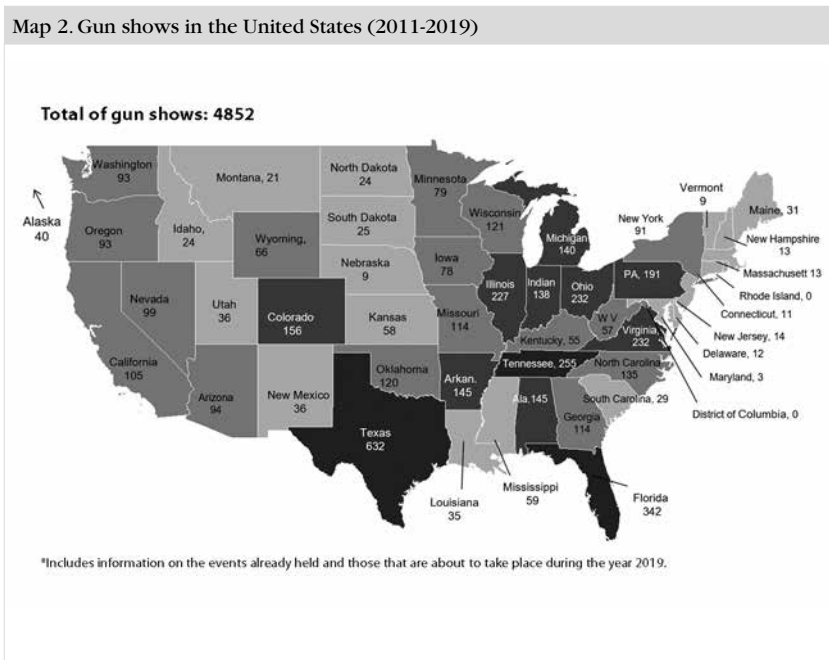
¹⁸ Office of Strategic Intelligence and Information-ATF, *Mexico. Data Source: Firearms Tracing System, January 1, 2013-December 31, 2018*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Justice-ATF, March 2019, at <https://www.atf.gov/file/135106/download> (date of access: March 25, 2020).

¹⁹ Chelsea Parsons and E. Weigend Vargas, "Stolen Guns in America: A State-by-State Analysis", in Center for American Progress, July 25, 2017, at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/guns-crime/reports/2017/07/25/436533/stolen-guns-america/> (date of access: March 25, 2020).

²⁰ *Idem*.

buy and sell these items. Gun shows are legal in the United States. And, in most cases, no identification is required to buy or sell any type of firearm.

Gun shows, however, pose a major threat and risk to security in Mexico. Recently, a study found that states with more gun shows tend to be the most common sources of traffic to Mexico.²¹ The little known data on gun shows is worrisome, as it reveals a high concentration, mainly in Texas and in places near the long and porous border with Mexico.²²



Source: D. Pérez Esparza, “Gun shows in the U.S.: spatial and temporal analyses”.

²¹ D. Pérez Esparza and E. Weigend, “The Illegal Flow of Firearms from the United States into Mexico: A State-level Trafficking Propensity Analysis”, in *Journal of Trafficking, Organized Crime and Security*, vol. 1, issue 2, July-December 2015, pp. 115-125.

²² D. Pérez Esparza, “Gun shows in the U.S.: Spatial and temporal analyses”, in process of peer review.

Conclusions

Information on firearms seizures is extremely relevant to understanding the patterns of this black market that has caused so much damage in Mexico. However, as is the case with other illegal markets, it is essential to consider a broader context regarding the main determinants of the illicit flows that can accompany these phenomena.

Academic literature has suggested that firearms policies in the United States can have a huge impact on the violence that occurs in Mexico.²³ From this perspective, it becomes an essential strategy for foreign policy to place the fight against arms trafficking as the backbone that, from the outside, is needed to urgently pacify Mexico.

²³ See T. McDougal, D. A. Shirk, R. Muggah and J. H. Patterson, *op. cit.*; Arindrajit Dube, Oen-drila Dube and Omar García Ponce, "Cross-Border Spillover: U.S. Gun Laws and Violence in Mexico", in *American Political Science Review*, vol. 107, issue 3, August, 2013, pp. 397-417; and D. Pérez Esparza, Shane D. Johnson and Paul Gill, "Why did Mexico Become a Violent Country?", in *Security Journal*, May, 2019, pp. 1-31, in <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41284-019-00178-> (date of access: March 24, 2020).