

# Firearms Trafficking and Gun Shows: A Flow from North to South\*

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When the media and social networks discuss security on both sides of the Rio Bravo, on the almost 2000 miles of border between Mexico and the United States, we are practically conditioned to think in a south-north direction: on the one hand, caravans of people chasing their dreams and escaping from danger, and on the other, the flow of illegal substances, natural or synthetic, satisfying the demand of one of the countries with the greatest number of drug users, legal and illegal, in the world.<sup>1</sup> These two informative elements, often magnified or distorted, are linked in such a way that for the American public they are indissoluble phenomena. However, the situation is much more complex.

In this media eclipse, more challenges are hidden; behind the spotlight focused on immigration or drug issues, there is a reality that crosses the border from north to south, a constant flow of weapons that feeds violence and provides tools to commit crimes against some groups in Mexico.

In the case of the United States, one can speak of an extreme defense, in certain sectors of the population, of the freedom to possess arms protected

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<sup>1</sup> China, Russia and the United States have 43% of the world's narcotics users. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *World Drug Report 2019. Booklet 2 Global Overview of Drug Demand and Supply*, Vienna, UN, 2019, p. 21.

by the Second Amendment of the Constitution and supported by the powerful National Rifle Association (NRA), which, through a lobbying strategy, has sought to block every attempt to limit in any way the flow or acquisition of arms in this country, and has come to mislead the public with the concepts of freedom and possession. In other words, the debate has succeeded in mixing up the idea that to possess a weapon is to enjoy freedom.

On the surface, this is part of a domestic policy problem and has been handled for decades by most Americans in a variety of political arenas; however, because of the proximity between the world's leading economy and Mexico, it cannot be considered a matter exclusive to the United States, otherwise nothing could be further from the truth between two trading partners with a distant past and a promising future that is being forged day by day. Unfortunately, the guarantee that citizens in the United States have to access weapons of any caliber, according to their interpretation of the law, is that it has been conceived completely detached from the issue of regional or border security. Therefore, it does not take into account that both issues are closely related.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) has determined that 70%<sup>2</sup> of the weapons in the hands of organized crime confiscated in Mexico were originally purchased legally in the United States (2014); 50% of these weapons were manufactured in U.S. territory, while the other 20% were imported and sold legally in that country.

According to the report on the efforts made by the U.S. government to fight firearms trafficking to Mexico, requested by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), it is estimated that around a quarter of a million firearms are trafficked annually from the United States, many of them of high caliber, mainly assault rifles (such as the AR-15 and other AK type) that can be easily modified to be used as fully automatic weapons,<sup>3</sup> making them the weapons of choice for organized crime. It should be noted that a quarter of a million is a conservative figure considering that there are about 300 million weap-

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *U.S. Efforts to Combat Firearms Trafficking to Mexico Have Improved, but Some Collaboration Challenges Remain*, Washington, D.C., GAO, January 2016, p. 8, in <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/674570.pdf> (date of access: February 18, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

ons in civilian possession in the United States.<sup>4</sup> To put these numbers into perspective, suffice it to say that over a seven-year period enough firearms were trafficked to equip the Chinese military, which has the largest number of assets in the world. In addition, it should be noted that the number of assets in Mexico's federal security forces is estimated at almost 300 000 (Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of the Navy and National Guard combined),<sup>5</sup> so a single year of illicit firearms flow virtually equips an armed group to fight Mexican soldiers, sailors and national guards on equal footing; that's how big the challenge is. It should be added that, according to available numbers from 2018, the Mexican Army only imported 40 000 weapons, less than the number trafficked annually.<sup>6</sup>

To better understand this phenomenon, it is important to analyze the main source of illicit trafficking. According to the aforementioned GAO report, most of the weapons seized in Mexico were originally purchased in border states in the southwestern United States; 15% of these weapons were acquired in Arizona, 19% in California and 41% in Texas.<sup>7</sup> In the latter, the idea of freedom is associated with gun ownership. The phrase "Come and Take It" from the historical episode of its separation from Mexico has become an unofficial state motto and the flag with the lonely cannon waves proudly in many of their homes as a reminder of Texas history and attitude. This symbol exists in the minds of many Texans as an indissoluble link between gun ownership and personal safety, as well as regional pride, an icon of their freedom-based strength.

In Texas, guns are a kind of religion, an opinion that is shared by leaders and ministers of worship such as Pastor James McAbee, who promotes

<sup>4</sup> Alex Yablon, "Just How Many Guns Do Americans Own? (And Why Do Estimates Vary So Widely?)" in *The Trace*, June 21st, 2018, at <https://www.thetrace.org/rounds/how-many-guns-do-americans-own/> (date of access: March 6, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Finance and Public Credit (SHCP, in Spanish), *Presupuesto de Egresos de la Federación Ejercicio Fiscal 2020, Tomo IX Analítico de Plazas y Remuneraciones*, Mexico, SHCP, 2020, at <https://www.pef.hacienda.gob.mx/es/PEF2020/tomoIX-IV> (date of access: February 6, 2020)

<sup>6</sup> Jorge Alejandro Medellín, "Cerca de 40 000 armas compró en 2018 el Ejército Mexicano, 4000 de ellas antitanque", *Defensa*, September, 2019, at <https://www.defensa.com/mexico/cerca-40-000-armas-compro-2018-ejercito-mexicano-4-000-ellas> (date of access: March 6, 2020)

<sup>7</sup> GAO, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

among his faithful the following idea: “We believe that an armed society is a peaceful society. This is Texas, and everybody has a gun.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition, a recent regulatory reform in Texas (2017) removed the restriction that until then prohibited people with a gun license from entering a place of worship armed, in the interest of protecting people inside the temples.

The situation is delicate in itself, and it becomes even more complicated for Mexico. Weapons are sold between private individuals as if they were any product, in variety, assortment and quantity, at the so-called *gun shows*, which are considered to be family events, where anyone can get a table to sell—without any registration or verification—any quantity of weapons, without the buyer having to show any identification. This is known as the *gun show loophole*, which has had a harmful effect on the southern border of the United States. In other words, in the United States, and particularly in Texas, gun shows are a practical, varied and well-stocked “swap meet” that criminals take advantage of given the laxity of rules.

NRA activists point out that the gun show loophole is a myth used by “liberals” to impose restrictions on the purchase and sale of weapons. However, the figures show a different reality. Most of these gun shows take place in cities near the border, and their popularity is such that an estimated 5000 events are held in Texas each year. Indeed, during my time in Texas, an event of this nature is announced every week in Dallas or its metropolitan area.

The danger lies in the blindness of the pro-gun activists. In their conception of the world, gun shows are visited only by citizens of proven moral character who are seeking means and tools to defend themselves and their families. Within this framework, they systematically refuse to see the numbers, the correlation of south-north-south flows or to accept any responsibility for the quarter of a million weapons that are trafficked to Mexico annually and that strengthen the ranks of the criminal groups that use them to secure drug smuggling to the north.

Moreover, the arms parade that begins massively at these fairs does not stop at Mexico’s borders, but continues on its way to Central and South

<sup>8</sup> Rick Jervis, “Texas, a Place Where Guns Are Right at Home,” *USA Today*, February 17, 2015, p. 1, at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/02/17/guns-are-a-way-of-life-in-texas/1926763/> (date of access: February 10, 2020).

America, where they strengthen the resources of criminal groups that destabilize the region, forcing its inhabitants to flee north in search of a sense of security.<sup>9</sup>

As you can see, it is a vicious circle; drugs purchased in the United States provide criminal groups with the resources they need to acquire high-caliber weapons in states like Texas, while the same routes used to traffic drugs to the north are used to bring money and weapons back to the south. But there is a big difference: while drug trafficking or human trafficking are federal crimes, firearms trafficking to Mexico is not considered a federal crime in the United States. It is imperative to concur in terms of wills, regulations and actions to stop this flow.

Weapons and money returning to the south strengthen criminal groups, who, with those resources, are able to confront the forces of law and order and fight each other for the control of territories, or intimidate the local population through extortion or kidnapping, generating the migration that is so widely criticized in the north.

In other words, if the aim is to reduce the migratory flow, it is necessary to attend to all the circumstances that cause it, and today, one of the main issues is the massive traffic of arms from the gun shows to the south.

Mexicans who migrate to the north have undeniably strengthened the U.S. economy for years; it is no coincidence that, economically, California and Texas are two of the most powerful states in the United States and also the main recipients of migrant workers. Unfortunately, the border does not only represent prosperity for both countries. Mexico unwittingly receives a constant flow of illegal weapons, which has fueled violence in the country, violence that has decreased Mexican life expectancy for the first time in decades.

The NRA argues that a restrictive legislation would only limit access to guns to law-abiding citizens. However, the figures tell a different story; for instance, in 2004, when the federal administration in the United States lifted the restriction on the purchase of assault rifles, the acquisition of these

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<sup>9</sup> Center for American Progress and Michael D. Nicholson, *The Facts on Immigration Today: 2017 Edition*, Washington, D.C., Center for American Progress, April, 2017, p. 28, in [https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2017/04/19075656/041017\\_FactsImmigration-report.pdf](https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2017/04/19075656/041017_FactsImmigration-report.pdf) (date of access: March 6, 2020).

types of weapons increased among criminal groups in Mexico. There's the sense that the fewer controls in the United States, the greater the flow to the south.

By the time this text is published, more than 1600 gun shows will have been organized in Texas with the consequent illicit flow of weapons to Mexico; several of them, such as those in Dallas and Fort Worth, are held in very symbolic places that end up relating—and chiseling in the collectiveness—the culture of weapons with the feeling of belonging to Texas: Iconic convention centers, racetracks, rodeos, even antique bazaars and, incredibly, municipal civic centers.

Gun shows are considered, in some regions of Texas, as family events where all members of the family are encouraged to visit and there are no restrictions on access to children under 18, as long as they are accompanied by an adult. This “family” atmosphere is encouraged by not charging admission tickets to children under 12. One striking detail is that a youngster under 21 but over 18 can attend on his own and buy any type of long gun (rifles and similar), but he is prevented from buying handguns.

To better understand the connection between the sale of arms at gun shows and their illicit trafficking, it is important to emphasize that every event there are, on average, 350 to 1000 private sellers who only accept cash, since the use of credit cards facilitates the tracking of the buyer.

In addition to the above, it is important to note that in sports stores, among barbecues for camping, thermal clothing, balls, fishing hooks, bicycles, and clothing for runners, enormous sections of weapons are displayed, from the most “sporting” gun to the most sophisticated, in the view of every family and within the reach of whoever has the money to buy them.

## Conclusion

These figures show a manifest truth: we live in a globalized world, where the decisions taken by one government or state have an impact on others. Therefore, if we want to move towards a safer world for the inhabitants of all countries in our region, where no one is forced to migrate from their place of origin because of violence, we must recognize the responsibility that such decisions have at the global and regional levels.

Our northern neighbors and partners have obligations to the south for their own long-term benefit. By giving its citizens unrestricted access to firearms of all calibers, the continent pays a high price, for the safety of the population is not protected but endangered by illegally trafficked weapons.

Once the diagnosis has been made, the next step is to design a joint strategy that starts by recognizing the mutual vulnerabilities, the regional vicious circle, and eliminating the fallacy behind the defenders of unrestricted access to firearms.

An alarming fact is that a large number of the weapons that arrive in our continent were not acquired in these gun shops, evading control methods, but by U.S. citizens who are willing to make this type of purchase, commonly known as *straw purchase*.<sup>10</sup>

Firearms can be useful tools in the hands of security agents; still, if they are not controlled, they can, such as fire, leave a trail of destruction in their wake that knows little of borders.

We build North America every day, with modern trade rules, with effective integration mechanisms, but also with a willingness to stop what is harming both sides of the border. We are not against weapons or their sale; rather, we call for a bi-national collaboration to stop the illegal flow of weapons from north to south with the same energy with which we must confront, together, the flow of drugs from south to north.

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<sup>10</sup> GAO, *op. cit.*, p. 4.