

# River of U.S. guns flows north of the border

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Saint John, New Brunswick - A spate of recent shootings and drug busts here highlights a trend: Police are seeing illegal firearms – often from the United States – more frequently in this industrial port town.

"We are turning up a lot of weapons, whether it be a long gun or a handgun," says Saint John Police Sgt. Mike McCaig, who coordinates investigations for the Fundy Integrated Intelligence Unit. "It's a serious situation."

The situation might not be as dire as the frequent gun battles taking place in Mexico, where thousands of guns from the US are being used in a drug war. But Canadian authorities say they're also scrambling to stanch the flow of illegal weapons from the US.

The same pattern that allows guns from the US to arm Mexican cartels – a disparity in gun laws, a porous border, and a thriving drug trade – is also sending guns into Canada, city officials and police here say.

"These guns are causing people to die on the streets of Toronto, and they come about because the US gun laws are so lax, and it's very difficult to stop the guns at the border," Toronto Mayor David Miller says.

Comprehensive statistics are scarce, but recent cases paint a picture of the problem.

At a drug bust in New Brunswick in December 2006, police recovered two handguns traced to the US, along with a pound of cocaine, a large quantity of marijuana, \$120,000 in cash, and several rifles. The guns were among more than 60 that Andrew Porter of St. Stephen, New Brunswick, smuggled from Maine.

## Underground gun trade

One of the Maine guns was used in a grisly crime in June 2007, when a drug deal went bad at an Ottawa motel. According to the Ottawa Police Service, a drug dealer fatally shot a drug buyer and wounded his own partner with the same bullet. The shooter and his wounded friend fled. The weapon, a handgun made in Ohio, was recovered nearby.

Though the serial numbers had been scraped off the weapon, forensics agents traced it back to a gun shop in Brewer, Maine, where a resident bought eight guns for Mr. Porter, but signed a federal form saying the guns were for his own use, according to court documents.

Paula Silsby, the US attorney for the district of Maine, won convictions against Porter and several Maine residents who helped him buy guns.

She says such "straw purchasers" should know that guns can be tracked. "I don't think that they appreciate, should the gun that they are buying for somebody else ... be used and tossed at a crime scene, that it will trace back to them."

Another of the guns smuggled from Maine, a semiautomatic handgun, was recovered from a Toronto gang member who flashed it at a nightclub. The Maine guns were one trickle in what some say is a river of US guns flooding into Canada.

Damming the river?

Toronto Mayor Miller is pushing for a complete ban on handguns in Canada, and says he would also like to see more stringent gun laws in the US.

"The challenge for Toronto and for other Canadian cities is that a huge volume of guns flows north across the US-Canada border; it's far and away the single biggest border-security issue," Miller says.

Two-thirds of the guns used in crimes in Toronto come from the US, Miller says, citing local police statistics.

But Regina Lombardo, an agent with the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) posted to Toronto as the assistant country attaché, says statistics are not comprehensive enough to pin a specific percentage of the blame on the US.

Agent Lombardo worked on one smuggling case that brought about the conviction of Ricardo Tolliver, who was sentenced in March to 32 years in federal prison.

Mr. Tolliver, a US citizen who was living in Canada, led a ring that traded marijuana from Ontario for more than 500 handguns from Kentucky. One was the primary weapon used to kill eight gang members in Ontario in April 2006, officials say. The incident was the largest mass murder in the history of the province.

Lombardo believes that the cooperation between US and Canadian law enforcement agencies can be a model for more effectively fighting the illegal weapons trade to Mexico.

"We are able to now monitor a tracking device that's put in a car in Miami, and we are following it across the border, and allowed to follow it into Canada and we get our people on this end to pick up the surveillance," says Lombardo. "That's the difference, of taking it up to that next level."

World's 'longest undefended border'

In 2007, a Washington resident was convicted of trading more than 200 guns for drugs from British Columbia. And in January, border agents seized 10 semi-automatic handguns and 300 rounds of ammunition entering Alberta.

According to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2,637 crime guns were reported to the Canadian Firearms Program in 2008; 925 were linked to a firearms dealer, and three-quarters of those originated in the US.

Wendy Cukier, president of the Coalition for Gun Control in Toronto, says plenty of illegal guns are flowing north, especially handguns, which are much more tightly regulated in Canada.

"We have the longest undefended border in the world," she says. "And they inspect a fraction of the vehicles going across the border, and they seize a small, small, small fraction of the firearms coming in."

Part of the appeal of smuggling guns is that a handgun that sells for \$150 at a gun shop in the US could fetch \$500 or more on the black market in Canada.

Some guns sell for less. Saint John police nabbed another of the guns Porter smuggled from Maine – a silver, double-barreled .22 that had been in the possession of a drunken teenager. He said he bought it from a stranger at a party for \$20 and two packs of cigarettes.