



# The illicit firearms trade in North America

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## Abstract

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Gun violence in North America is the subject of much speculation and debate, often based on limited or incomplete empirical evidence. We summarize the regulatory frameworks in Mexico, the United States and Canada, and provide statistics on gun misuse in these countries. Based on our analysis of publicly available information on sources of crime guns, we conclude that while the United States is a major supplier of illegal handguns to Canada and illegal firearms of all types to Mexico, quantifying the extent of its role, particularly in Mexico, is difficult because of data limitations. Still more difficult is to project the consequences of an effective crackdown by US authorities. If the illicit supply from the USA dried up, the criminal gangs could turn to a variety of other sources that already appear to be playing some role. A complete analysis of these issues must await more complete disclosure by the authorities of data on gun sources and trafficking investigations.

## Key Words

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gun violence • gun control • international trafficking •  
underground markets • violence

## Introduction

Mexico and Canada pose very different images when it comes to violent crime. Canada has relatively low rates of homicide and criminal violence—with about 1.5 homicides per 100,000, its rate is approximately one-quarter the rate of 5.7 per 100,000 in the United States. Mexico, on the other hand,

has higher rates of intentional homicide than the United States (at least 11 homicides per 100,000 in recent years) (UNODC, 2008), and its heavily armed gangs are not only killing each other in great numbers but also targeting law enforcement and other officials, with civilians often caught in the crossfire.<sup>1</sup>

There are a wide range of social, political and historical factors that account for these differences (Sánchez, 2007b; Briceño-León et al., 2008). But Canada and Mexico have one thing in common when it comes to armed violence—the underground gun market in the United States, which is a major source of supply to criminals and gangs in both nations. In both states the cross-border illicit flow of weapons has become a significant concern for the criminal justice system and police forces. As the American Ambassador to Mexico has argued, ‘Mexico would not be the center of cartel activity or be experiencing this level of violence, were the United States not the largest consumer of illicit drugs and the main supplier of weapons to the cartels’ (Corchado, 2008). It is estimated, for example, that 90 percent of all US cocaine transits Mexico (CIA, 2007).

In Canada, gang-related violence has increased dramatically over the last decade, even though overall levels of violence and homicide rates, in particular, have declined. According to Statistics Canada, gang-related homicides, which include those of gang members as well as police officers and innocent bystanders, have been increasing since this information was first collected by the Homicide Survey in 1991. In 2007, 117 homicides were reported by police as being gang-related, accounting for about one in five homicides nationally and 43 percent of firearm homicides. In 2007, 69 percent of gang-related homicides were committed with a firearm. Comparatively, only about 20 percent of homicides where gang activity was not present involved guns (Li, 2008).

In 2009 a surge in gun violence on Canada’s west coast was linked to the spread of violence from Mexican drugs markets. Gang violence associated with illegal drug trafficking in British Columbia, Canada, resulted in more than 40 shootings and 17 deaths between January and March 2009. This led to a joint agreement being signed by the Attorney General of British Columbia and officials from the northern Mexican state of Baja California (Meissner, 2009). The so-called ‘UN gang’ was specifically singled out by police (CTV News, 2009).

In spite of the obvious links between the illegal firearms and drug trade, criminological understanding of the dynamics of illicit weapons flows, and their impact on the scope, scale and distribution of armed violence is limited. In this article we review available evidence concerning the illicit flows of guns across the North American continent and consider how that flux of guns affects security perceptions and realities in the countries of the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA). We find that the conventional wisdom on cross-border gun trafficking is based on limited evidence in some cases, and point out areas where additional research is called for if we are to make strong claims and to develop effective evidence-based policies. There

is enough evidence, however, to support tentative conclusions, and to offer some reasonable speculation concerning the ‘bottom line’ question—would a law-enforcement-led crackdown on gun trafficking make much difference in the availability of guns to criminal gangs north and south of the US borders? Previous research (Braga and Pierce, 2005) suggests that targeted enforcement efforts supported by reliable evidence can have an impact on the supply of new weapons to criminals in some local contexts; whether such efforts can be scaled up to an international or regional scale remains, however, an open question.

Our analysis is informed by the rational choice model of classical economics (Naylor, 1994; Cook and Leitzel, 1996; Cook et al., 2007). We assume that the buyers, sellers and intermediaries in the underground markets for guns make choices that are influenced by their perception of the personal costs, benefits and risks associated with buying, selling, possessing and using weapons. We also assume that market forces operate in underground markets, albeit with greater friction than in legal markets, due to the illegal nature of the transaction and often limited sources of supply.

The data sources for studying the illegal movement of firearms present challenges to researchers. Police reports of firearms recovered in crime are one source, but often limited by the fact that police recover only a fraction of the firearms used in crime, and the recovered guns may not be representative. Data on seizures of firearms at the borders by customs officials are also incomplete and generally are regarded as representing only the tip of the iceberg. Incidence reports from police and public sources on firearm seizures are also partial. Finally, the results of interviews and testimony by police and investigators on the sources of firearms are often also based on partial information.

We first review the different regulatory frameworks and patterns of weapons ownership in the three countries, and then discuss the available evidence for the scope and pattern of cross-border trafficking of firearms. Next, we look at the possible links between illicit firearms and overall patterns of armed violence in Canada and Mexico, in order to tease out plausible effects of illicit trafficking. Finally, the conclusion addresses some of the considerations that explain why reducing armed violence in Mexico (and to a lesser extent Canada) will require more than just more effective policies to restrict the trafficking of firearms across North American borders, and points out some of the unanswered questions for future research.

## **Firearms and firearm regulation in North America**

The flow of contraband across the long borders between the USA and Mexico, and the USA and Canada, has been guided by the quest for profit. Canadian whiskey flowed south during the US Prohibition of the 1920s, while cigarettes were smuggled north when Canada imposed a high tobacco tax during the 1990s. North from Mexico come illicit drugs and



weapons, including handguns. To date that ruling does not affect the states, although future court rulings may extend its scope (Cook et al., 2009). This new constitutional right is very limited, but still a reflection of American exceptionalism when it comes to guns.

Canada and the USA share the longest undefended border in the world—5525 miles with 22 crossing points. Firearm regulations in states next to Canada vary considerably. For example, New York has stringent regulations while Michigan does not. Similarly, there are variations among the states adjacent to Mexico. California has relatively stringent regulations—it restricts purchases of handguns to no more than one per month, bans some types of assault weapons, regulates gun shows and is one of the few states that require individuals to register their handguns. But the other US states along the Mexican border—Arizona, New Mexico, Texas—have not legislated any significant additions to the federal regulatory system, and there are reportedly more gun dealers than gas stations in Texas near the Mexican border (Lumpe, 2000).

The United States is also a major producer of firearms for the global civilian marketplace. In 2006, 3.65 million firearms were produced, and about 10 percent of these were legally exported, as shown in Table 1.

In 2006, the United States imported 1,164,000 small arms and light weapons, for a total value of US\$245 million, according to figures from the UN Comtrade database (NISAT, 2008). This seems to be a relatively stable figure, since during the late 1990s there were also about 1 million firearms imported each year, according to official ATF figures (BATF, 2000). If that remains true, then the net addition of new weapons to the stock of firearms in the United States in the past five years would be well over 20 million. However, it is difficult to say whether the overall stock of guns in private hands is growing or not. Many of the new manufactures and imports have been exported ‘off the books’ (see later), and there is natural attrition to the older guns in that stock through permanent loss, breakage and destruction by authorities following confiscation. If the attrition rate is, say, 1 percent, and no more than a half-million guns are illegally exported each year, then there would be some growth in the stock. If the attrition rate is as high as 2 percent, then the stock is shrinking.

Table 1. US Manufacture and export of firearms for civilians, 2006

	<i>Manufacture</i>	<i>Export</i>
	<i>(in thousands)</i>	
Pistols	1021	145
Revolvers	382	28
Rifles	1497	103
Shotguns	715	58
Misc.	36	34
Total	3651	368

Source: BATF statistics.

While US manufacture of civilian firearms is large in comparison to other countries in the Western Hemisphere, the revenues are only on the order of \$2 billion, and the industry is not very potent politically. There are hundreds of small manufacturers, with production somewhat concentrated. For example, four manufacturers account for almost half of all pistols manufactured in 2006: Smith and Wesson, Sturm Ruger, SigArms and Beretta. (Beretta exported all of its output.) While the industry is not directly involved in lobbying, it does support the activities of the enormously influential National Rifle Association, through advertising and sponsorship (Diaz, 1999) The National Rifle Association is considered one of the most powerful lobbies in the world, with an estimated \$100 million in revenues. It has not only been active in the USA in opposing efforts to strengthen laws and spearheading efforts to erode legislation but is increasingly active internationally at the UN and in promoting gun lobby groups in countries such as Australia and Canada (Cukier and Sidel, 2006).

### *Canada*

Only 2.2 million Canadians (less than 7 percent of the population) own firearms, and there are estimated to be fewer than 9 million firearms in private hands for a population of 30 million, most of them rifles or shotguns, with only 500,000 handguns and semi-automatic assault weapons. This implies a per capita ownership rate about one-third that of the United States. Approximately 18 percent of households own a gun (Environics Research Group, 2003) down from 25 percent in 1991 (Angus Reid Group, Inc., 1991).

Historically Canada has had strict laws governing handguns: since 1930 handguns have been strictly regulated with the requirements that individuals be screened to show 'just cause' for ownership and the guns be registered. Owners must prove they have a legitimate need (lawful occupation, member of a target shooting club or bona fide collector). Personal protection is a justification only if applicants can demonstrate that their life is in danger and police cannot protect them—a total of about 50 permits in the entire country are for personal protection. Generally handguns may not be carried (except for lawful occupation) and an 'authorization to transport' strictly defines where an individual can move the handgun, for example, from home to shooting range while securely storing it with a trigger lock in a secure container.

In 1977 screening processes were introduced for owners of rifles and shotguns but the Firearms Acquisition Certificate concerned new acquisitions, not existing possession. In 1991 the screening process for all gun owners was strengthened to include a risk assessment, references and background checks. In 1995, firearm licenses were introduced to possess firearms, renewable every five years, and registration was extended to all firearms. When a firearm is acquired it is registered to its lawful owner and the information contained in the gun registry may be queried by law

enforcement. These measures were fully implemented by mid-2003 with 90 percent of gun owners complying.

Police databases provide some continuous eligibility checks, signaling when a firearm owner is charged with an offense or considered to be a risk. All sales and transfers of firearms and ammunition are regulated as individuals must present a valid gun license and private sales must be approved ahead of time by the Chief Firearms Officer. Safe storage is also strictly defined and includes secure locked containers. For most civilians, restricted weapons, including handguns, must be secured during transport from their home to the shooting range. It is unlawful to have a loaded firearm anywhere that it is not lawful to discharge it—for example, in a public space, in a car or on a subway.

### *Mexico*

Mexico has a tradition of relatively restrictive weapons ownership, with approximately 4.5 million registered firearms, and perhaps 10 million additional unregistered firearms (Small Arms Survey, 2007: 47) These numbers imply a rate of about 15 firearms per 100 people; a considerably lower rate of civilian ownership than in Canada, let alone the USA.

Article 10 of the Mexican constitution says that residents have the right to possess arms in their homes for security and legitimate defense, with the exception of arms prohibited by federal law and those reserved for the exclusive use of the Army, Navy, Air Force and National Guard. It also says, however, that Federal law will determine the cases, conditions, requirements and places in which the carrying of arms will be authorized, and in practice, the civilian ownership of firearms has been relatively tightly restricted (Sánchez, 2007a).<sup>2</sup> Generally, people are restricted to owning small calibre pistols (below .38 or .380), shotguns (12 gauge or less) and bolt or semi-automatic rifles, usually .22 calibre.

Weapons are not easily bought and sold in Mexico; there are no private gun shops, and new weapons can only be purchased from the Arms and Ammunition Marketing Division of the Mexican armed forces (Burton and Stewart, 2007). Mexico also does not produce weapons domestically for the civilian market, although it does have a limited production capacity for small arms and light weapons for its own armed forces (Klare and Andersen, 1996: 21). One obvious result is that black market prices for weapons are relatively high: one estimate (Burton and Stewart, 2007) is that they are three times the legal market value. Penalties for illegal possession of firearms are also fairly severe.

### *Implications for firearms trafficking*

There is limited empirical research on the international illegal firearms trade. However research from within the United States has shed light on

the complex shape of supply and demand and the role of regulations. For example, research has indicated that the proportion of crime guns originating within the state is lower in states which license and register firearms (Webster et al., 2001). In these states the majority of crime guns tend to originate out of state, and are more likely to originate in states where there are weak regulations, suggesting that regulation does affect the flow of illegal firearms.

The international trafficking in guns follows the same economic logic. The USA represents a low-cost supplier of guns both because of lax regulations and of the great number of guns already circulating in private hands. On the other hand, individuals and criminal gangs in Mexico or Canada do not have ready access to firearms from local dealers or other domestic sources, and hence resort to the illicit market. The amplitude of the illicit market in both Canada and Mexico will depend on the level of demand for weapons, the 'barriers to trade' created by border controls and anti-smuggling enforcement and the costs and risks associated with illegal gun transactions and ownership.

In the United States, guns may be gathered for illicit transport across the borders in several ways. Rifles and shotguns may be purchased directly from FFLs in unlimited quantities in most states. The purchase is legal as long as the purchaser does not have a disqualifying characteristic (felony record, illegal alien). Handguns may also be purchased in unlimited quantities within state of residence, but FFLs are required to report multiple sales to ATF. In practice, the question is whether buyers of any type of firearm can pass a simple criminal record check, which can be accomplished either because they are in fact qualified or that they show false identification. In some cases the FFLs are fellow conspirators, knowing that the purchases are intended for a subsequent illicit transfer. An important alternative is for guns to be acquired at gun shows, which are ubiquitous and which in most states allow private individuals to sell guns without conducting a background check on the purchaser (Wintemute, 2007). These types of transactions could equip any one individual with dozens of guns, although obtaining hundreds of guns would be more difficult without attracting attention from the authorities. Ammunition purchases are unregulated by the federal government and in most states.

While purchases from dealers and at gun shows or other private sources appear to account for how most illicit shipments originate, there are possibilities for avoiding the necessity of retail transactions and possibly obtaining larger quantities quickly—theft from FFLs, and diversion from manufacturers and domestic distributors. Military weapons, which are especially prized by some criminal groups, could be obtained by diverting legal exports or theft from military depots.

Once obtained, firearms and ammunition must be transported across the international border and to the end users. Mechanisms for doing so are discussed in the next section.

## Cross-border firearms trafficking in North America

While the United States is a low-cost supplier of guns to Canada and Mexico, it is by no means the only potential source of guns. It is not possible to determine with certainty the percentage of guns used in crime in Canada or Mexico that have been illegally exported from the United States, but there is some relevant evidence available that indicates the proportion is high. This information comes for the most part from chain-of-commerce traces.

In the United States, information on firearms recovered by law enforcement agencies may be submitted by them to the National Tracing Center of ATF. A successful trace provides information on which US dealer first sold the gun at a retail outlet. To conduct a successful trace, the National Tracing Center must track the gun (using its serial number and other identifying characteristics) through the manufacturer or importer, to the distributor, to the FFL that sold it. The minimum conditions for a successful trace are that it was in fact sold at retail in the United States, that there is a valid serial number that can be taken from the gun and that accurate records were kept at every level of the supply chain. The lack of any central registration or sales-notification system in the United States precludes a more direct search, and efforts to trace crime guns as a result often fail.

Firearms recovered by law enforcement may be viewed as a sample from an underlying population of firearms used in crime. How representative that sample is of the population is unknown. Firearms that are successfully traced are a sample of that sample, which adds further uncertainty about representativeness. Only a fraction of recovered firearms are submitted for tracing, and only a fraction of those are successfully traced (Cook and Braga, 2001). Still, the trace information is usually the best available in developing a statistical characterization of sources.

### *Canada*

The best statistical description of sources of crime guns in Canada comes from a systematic tabulation of the characteristics of firearms recovered by the police in Toronto in 2006. Details were available on 1528 recovered guns. Of those, 832 were connected to criminal activity. The most common of the recovered crime guns (39%) were restricted weapons (handguns)—the rest were either rifles and shotguns (29%) or air pistols, toys and starter pistols (27%).

Although most of the rifles and shotguns were not registered or traced, there is little evidence that long guns are targets of smugglers, since they are widely available from Canadian dealers. The supply of legal handguns is significantly more restricted. Of the 327 handguns recovered in crime by the Toronto Police Service in 2006, only 181 were traced successfully to their first retail sale. Of those, 120 (two-thirds) were traced to the United States.

A recent report on illegal firearms reported similar patterns at the provincial level in Ontario:

The Firearms Tracing and Enforcement Program (FATE) was established in 1994 in response to a requirement that all Ontario Police services would be required to trace seized firearms not registered in Canada:

- In 2007, FATE traced 705 crime guns, 90% of which were prohibited (399) or restricted (237)

Sources of traced crime guns included:

- 490 (69%) traced to U.S.
- 74 (10.5%) traced to a Canadian dealer
- 78 (11.5 %) were too old to trace and
- 60 (8%) could not be traced due to lack of information.

(Heemskerk and Davies, 2008: 82)

According to the Annual Report (2007) of the Tactical Analysis Unit, part of the Firearms Support Services Directorate of the Canadian Firearms Program, which operates at the national level, 5,616 firearms were seized in 2007. Of these:

- 2,863 (51%) were crime guns
- 1,629 (57%) of crime guns were handguns
- 1,011 (35%) of crime guns were prohibited firearms (including prohibited handguns and assault weapons)
- 837 (30%) were restricted firearms (including other handguns and semi automatic assault and tactical weapons).
- Of the 710 crime guns where the source was known, 324 were domestic and 386 were smuggled.
- Washington State was the source for 103 of these firearms, the next closest state was Florida with 50.

(Heemskerk and Davies, 2008: 80)

These data are incomplete and may not be representative as only a portion of the guns are recovered and traceable. However, among all data sources, the majority of the successfully traced handguns recovered in crime in Canada are found to originate in the United States and we know of no evidence that would lead one to believe that other countries are a major source of smuggled handguns.

Another major source of illegal guns in Canada, and in many other countries in the world is 'leakage' from state stockpiles (police and military) through theft, corruption or other forms of diversion. For example, in one case, over 3000 firearms recovered in crime or surrendered in amnesties to the Metropolitan Toronto Police Service in Canada were illegally sold by officers and civilians working in the unit (Duncanson and Rankin, 1997, 1998).<sup>3</sup>

The main mechanisms by which weapons are illegally trafficked from one country to another are concealment, false declaration and falsification of documents and mail order. The networks for smuggling guns are diffuse and range from individuals concealing a few guns in their car to large-scale commercial operations. Long, undefended borders between Canada and the United States, in particular, present a challenge for customs officials who must balance the demands for free flow of goods and people with security needs. Corrupt officials have also been implicated in smuggling activities. Mail is another means of illegal importation and one that is often difficult to detect. Smugglers have used false documentation, misreporting and concealment with other commodities to ship weapons commercially from the United States to Canada. For example, an effort was made to import a large quantity of Chinese-made AK-47 assault rifles into Canada in a package mislabeled as hunting rifles (Associated Press, 1994).

According to Canadian customs officials, 662 firearms including 180 restricted guns (handguns and semi-automatics), 334 prohibited firearms and 148 rifles and shotguns were seized in 2007 (RCMP, 2008). This, however, is only the tip of the iceberg as customs officials only check 3 percent of traffic crossing the border. Most of the existing studies of illicit trafficking are based on secondary literature or anecdotal information. Our analysis of media accounts in Canada for the period 2006–8 indicates that there are few accounts that involved more than 10 guns. There were a handful of larger movements, and largest of all by far was diversion from authorized imports for use in making movies in British Columbia, that accounted for 800 replica handguns (Canadian Press, 2008). Also important was direct mail: the Canada Post international mail center in Vancouver reported seizing 330 guns and gun parts during a 12-month period (Canwest News, 2008).

### *Mexico*

According to the ATF director, investigators have traced 90 to 95 percent of the weapons found in Mexico to the United States (Caldwell, 2008).<sup>4</sup> This figure, however, needs to be unpacked in light of the above considerations, since it may overestimate the role of the USA in supplying guns used in Mexican crime, and says little about how they may have got there. First, the figure reflects firearms submitted for tracing by Mexican authorities. Only a fraction of firearms used in crimes and gun battles are recovered by authorities, and traces are requested on only a subset of those recovered, so the sample of traced guns may not be completely representative of weapons in use. It is also not certain that only 10 (or less) percent of weapons recovered are from other sources, since no data are available on the weapons that have not been submitted for an American trace (Carpenter, 2009).

There are a variety of routes by which firearms can move from the USA to Mexico. In general, the descriptions offered by authorities suggest that the guns are first sold at retail in the United States and end up in the hands of Mexican or Canadian criminals via smuggling on the ground across the

border, mostly in small batches (*tráfico hormiga*, or trail of ants) (Lumpe, 1998). Although the number of weapons crossing the border in any one shipment may be small, the *sources* of weapons may be more concentrated. In one recent case, for example a dealer was charged with having sold hundreds of weapons to Mexican drug cartels (McKinley, 2009). According to ATF data analyzed by Glenn Pierce and Anthony Braga, 97 cases under investigation between 1996 and 2003 involved more than 30,000 firearms, with the average number of firearms per case (excluding two very large cases) being 124 (Pierce and Braga, 2008).<sup>5</sup>

Although some of these guns may be smuggled by individuals not associated with organized criminal groups for their personal security (or subsequent resale), the concentration of sources makes it appear that the traffic is mostly organized by gangs for the explicit purpose of providing them with arms. As one source has described it:

drug trafficking organizations who are vying for control of drug trafficking routes to the United States and engaging in turf battles for disputed distribution territories. ... rely on firearms suppliers to enforce and maintain their illicit narcotics operations. Intelligence indicates these criminal organizations have tasked their money laundering, distribution and transportation infrastructures reaching into the United States to acquire firearms and ammunition. (Project Gunrunner Fact Sheet, 9/08)

While the US route is likely the most important one, at least three other sources of arms for drug gangs and armed groups operating in Mexico can be identified. It is difficult, however, to assess their relative importance. First, guns can flow northwards to Mexico from Central America, a region awash with weapons imported by both governments and rebel groups during the civil wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. It is clear (Cragin and Hoffman, 2003; Stohl and Tuttle, 2008) that extensive cross-border trafficking of weapons takes place in Central America, and it is difficult to see why Mexico should remain immune from this trafficking. High levels of armed violence and drug trafficking along the southern Mexican border area with Guatemala (Grainger, 2009) are indirect but solid indicators of high levels of weapons availability and a concentration of cross-border illegal activities, as they are in the northern states of Mexico. There is some evidence that hand grenades used in recent violence are sourced in Central America, from supplies left over after that region's civil wars (Ginsburg, 2009, personal communication).

The second potential source of firearms would be those smuggled into Mexico from Chinese, Russian, Eastern European or other sources. Again, the evidence is anecdotal and not systematic, but nevertheless indicative. In some documented armed clashes the weapons used include hand grenades, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and AK-47 rifles, in particular in large-scale clashes with drug gangs that have occurred in 2007–9. Some of these weapons are not easily bought on the open market in the USA (although variants of AK-47s are available in the USA). Several court cases from the

late 1990s also identified particular links between Mexican and Russian criminal operations, including those that smuggled weapons, drugs and other illicit goods (Míro Ramón, 2003: 30), and it has been claimed that weapons produced in Russia, Israel and the former Yugoslavia were entering the country (Procuraduría general de la república, 2007; Sánchez, 2007a). The rise of drug trafficking links with China also may indicate increased availability of arms from that source (Ginsburg, 2009, personal communication).

A third source of weapons, the least well understood, would be the Mexican security forces themselves. As one report has noted:

In addition to acquisitions from the United States and other countries, Mexico supplies its own arsenal from local production. Some of the weapons confiscated from the Miguel Aleman ranch this month reportedly had the initials of the Mexican Defense Ministry stamped on them. As is routine practice, the most recent numbers released to the press did not shed light on the origin of illegal grenades. (Frontera Norte Sur, 2008)

In this respect, Mexico would resemble many other countries where diversion from national stockpiles (police and armed forces) represent a major (often the main) source of illicitly held weapons (Small Arms Survey, 2008).

### **The negative consequences of illicit firearms trafficking**

Overall, on the basis of the available data, we can conclude that handguns smuggled from the USA constitute a large but unknown share of handguns used in crime in Canada, and that the USA is likely the main source of crime guns to Mexico, especially in the northern border states.

Data on firearms traces may somewhat exaggerate the role of US-sourced weapons in crime in Mexico. For example, some of the weapons recovered such as grenades, RPGs and fully automatic weapons are not easy to obtain in the USA and could have originated from other sources. The evidence—which is based on trace reports, media sources and reports from police—is not fully conclusive but evidence to support alternative explanations is rare. In contrast, in the case of Canada, there are very few cases that show handguns used in crime coming from anywhere other than the USA, except of course for those cases where the guns are diverted from the legal supply in Canada.

How much of the illegal transnational flows of firearms across North America are organized? Regular and repeated use of the same gun dealers on the US side of the Mexican border suggests that, in this region at least, the illicit traffic is organized. To use the distinction introduced by Cook and Braga (2001), it is organized around ‘point sources’, which is to say specific scofflaw dealers and trafficking organizations, rather than ‘diffuse sources’ (small transactions in the informal market). It makes sense that the connections and know-how on both sides of the border that help criminal

entrepreneurs move illicit goods (drugs and people) into the United States might also help move guns back. But sourcing guns in the USA is a distinct enterprise from delivering drugs to wholesalers. The actual border crossing requires bribing a different group of officials or careful concealment measures. So while organized gangs are financing the gun smuggling, they may draw on different people and different connections for different kinds of trafficking.

Based on this analysis, there are two other questions worth reflecting upon. First, what do we know about the impact of illicitly trafficked firearms on patterns of armed violence in Canada and Mexico? Second, to what extent would stricter enforcement on cross-border firearms trafficking make a difference to weapons availability in Mexico or Canada? We treat the second question in the next section.

In general, we know little about the specific impact and effects of illicitly trafficked firearms. Although we know that armed violence can have a variety of deleterious effects on perceived and real insecurity, public health, economic development and political stability (Small Arms Survey, 2003), we do not know how much of this can be associated specifically with changes in the availability of firearms. The economic consequences of armed violence are undeniable: one global model (using a 'willingness to pay' approach and reductions in life expectancy) estimated the social value of violence reduction (to zero) at 67 percent of GDP for Mexico, the eighth-highest global value. Life expectancy is diminished by 0.6 years for all Mexicans as a result of armed violence. The figures for the USA and Canada, for comparison, are 0.31 and 0.08, respectively (Soares, 2006). A macro-economic study of direct and indirect costs of violence in Latin America estimates these at 9.5 percent of GDP for Mexico; lower than the 20 percent for Colombia and El Salvador, and around the same level as Brazil (Londõno and Guerrero, 2000).

The negative effects of firearms are highly context dependent: they depend on the strength of demand factors, the types of weapons in circulation, the groups in society with access to weapons and the purposes for which they possess them. In the case of Canada and Mexico, illegal trafficked weapons are primarily used by criminal groups of varying degrees of organization, and in Mexico there are some weapons also in the hands of armed groups challenging state authority. The use of guns by criminal groups increases their relative power, and in the dramatic circumstances we see in Mexico, contributes to subverting legitimate authority and creating such fear as to have a substantial economic and political impact. In spite of the comparatively low rates of gun violence in Canada, random shootings in public places and increasingly weaponized conflict between criminal groups, however statistically rare, fuels a sense of insecurity. In addition, even a small number of illegal guns in circulation can have a significant impact, particularly when a cycle of retaliatory violence begins. Although data show gun homicide in Canada has declined significantly since 1991, public perceptions are that it has increased. When Toronto, a city with 2.8 million people hit 52 gun

homicides in 2005, it became ‘the year of the gun’ (Regular, 2005) in spite of the fact that the city had one of the lowest murder rates on the continent for a city of its size.

The consequences of an influx of weapons are relatively straightforward. In Mexico, it has intensified the violence associated with gang-on-gang struggles over turf, and gang versus police/armed forces clashes, the result of a government crackdown on organized drug smuggling. The firearms do not per se cause the violence, but their availability (especially of automatic and semi-automatic weapons) amplifies its severity and lethal consequences. In 2008 alone, more than 6200 people were killed in Mexico in drug-related violence (Watson, 2009). In unorganized crime or misuse, recourse to firearms, rather than knives or clubs, has the effect of intensifying violence (Cook, 1983; Reedy and Koper, 2003). But the broader effect of illicit firearms trafficking on homicide rates is unclear. In Mexico, for example, the official numbers for registered homicides (excluding ‘manslaughter’) has been steadily declining from an average of 14,346 a year between 1981–2000, to an average of 9861 a year from 2001–7 (SINAIS, 2009).<sup>6</sup> But the price of guns remains very high on the black markets, so it seems likely that there has not been much diffusion outside of organized crime groups, at least until now.

Although rates of homicide without guns are similar in Canada and the USA, rates of homicide with guns are 6.7 times higher in the USA. The same is true for robberies—robberies without guns are similar, but the USA has 5.1 times Canada’s rate per 100,000 of gun robberies (Cook and Khmlevska, 2005; Cukier and Sidel, 2006) (see Figure 1).

### Interdiction policies: drugs versus guns

There is increasing recognition by US authorities that the Mexican drug wars are serious and demand greater effort in regulating gun transactions at the source and at the border, as well as cooperating with Mexican authorities.

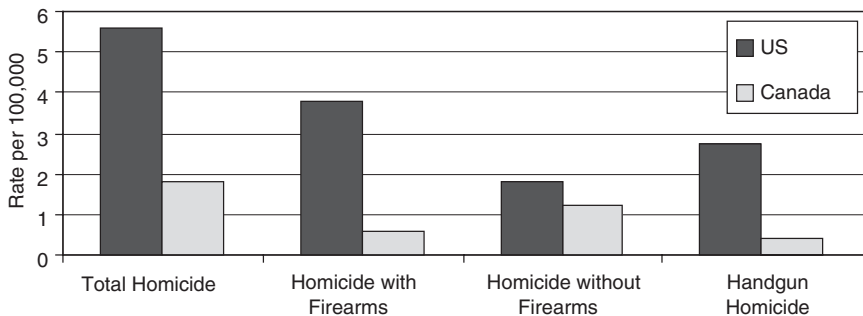


Figure 1 Canada–US homicide 2007

Source: Li (2008); United States Department of Justice (2008).

This effort has included a major campaign against transnational gangs in the United States, together with efforts to interdict trafficking through improved border security and intelligence. For example, ATF is facilitating on-line gun-trace requests from Mexican authorities through a new initiative called *Project Gun Runner* ([www.atf.gov/press/factsheets/0908-factsheet-project-gunrunner.pdf](http://www.atf.gov/press/factsheets/0908-factsheet-project-gunrunner.pdf)). Meanwhile the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency has partnered with Mexican authorities in *Armas Cruzadas*, a program intended to encourage intelligence sharing and operational coordination. The Attorney General of Mexico announced in September 2008 that Mexico would begin searching 10 percent of the vehicles heading south from the United States, a considerable increase (Asbury, 2008). ATF has also stepped up regulatory inspections of the numerous licensed dealers and gun shows in the border states (Asbury, 2008). Since 2006 the ATF has dedicated approximately 100 special agents and 25 industry operations investigators (IOIs) to *Project Gunrunner*, which ‘aims to deny firearms to criminal organizations in Mexico, and to combat firearms-related violence affecting communities on both sides of the border’ (Seelke, 2009: 13). In 2007 alone, ATF agents investigated 187 firearms trafficking cases and recommended 465 defendants for prosecution (Seelke, 2009).

What factors affect the prospects for reducing gun trafficking out of the United States to Canada and particularly Mexico? Improvements to regulations of firearms (for example regulating transactions at gun shows in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona as they do in California), better enforcement of existing regulations that prohibit straw purchases and illicit sales at gun shows and enhanced investigations of smuggling operations would all increase the transactions costs for smuggling operations and ultimately raise the price of firearms in Mexico. However, they might result in these sources being displaced by alternative sources and trafficking routes that are currently less utilized or dormant. Such alternative sources could include purchases on the unorganized secondary market in the USA, or arms acquisitions in Central America, where millions of firearms remain in circulation as a result of past or on-going conflicts, and South America, where Brazilian manufacturers will soon face new competition from new small-arms factories in Venezuela (Stohl and Tuttle, 2008). Within Mexico there is an ongoing possibility of diversion from the military and police—a possibility that will become more difficult to deter if the price goes high enough, especially given evidence of high levels of corruption in Mexican security institutions (López-Montiel, 2000; Davis, 2006).

Consequently, the net effect of shutting down the flow of guns from the United States to Mexico is unclear—it might curtail the flow of firearms somewhat and increase the effective costs of obtaining weapons but it would not likely choke off the supply. The situation in Canada would likely be somewhat different. Relatively strong domestic regulation, the lower likelihood of leakage of weapons from security forces, and stricter enforcement mean that stronger cross-border interdiction may have an impact on the availability of weapons, especially handguns, in Canada. The impact

that this would have on levels of armed violence, however, is more difficult to say.

### Concluding thoughts

There is enough unclassified data on the illicit gun trade in North America to establish the importance of guns smuggled from US sources in arming criminals in Canada and Mexico. The immediate result is a somewhat higher murder rate in Canada and a vast intensification of drug crime conflict near the Mexican border. But the United States is not the only source of guns to criminals in Canada and Mexico. The current importance of US sources reflects the basic economic facts of the situation: suitable guns are easily obtained on the open market in the United States and can be smuggled to Mexico at fairly low cost using routes and connections that have been well established for other sorts of contraband.

But what would happen if current efforts by US authorities to interdict gun smuggling were to prove successful? At this point we can only speculate. If that flow of guns is cut off while the illicit demand remains high, then we expect that prices will increase still higher and a variety of criminal organizations would seek other sources of supply. In a world awash in small arms there is no lack of possibilities, beginning with near-at-hand sources (military diversion, Central America) and on to Eastern Europe and elsewhere. But if these alternative sources prove more costly, or can be effectively curtailed by authorities, then the net result would be to provide some check on the deadly arming of criminals and criminal organizations.

A firmer factual base for this sort of speculation could be established if data from criminal investigations and gun tracing were released for research purposes. The statements made by public officials are usually intended to influence public opinion by offering conclusions, rather than providing the sorts of information that would allow the researchers to do our own analysis. A broader inquiry is warranted: the stakes are very high for developing effective strategies for limiting the illicit movements of guns.

### Notes

- 1 There is some uncertainty over homicide statistics, especially for Mexico, and some annual variation, but the overall relationship between the three states is roughly 1:4:8. Statistics are taken from UNODC (2008) for comparability; national sources have slightly different figures.
- 2 Artículo 10. Los habitantes de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos tienen derecho a poseer armas en su domicilio, para su seguridad y legítima defensa, con excepción de las prohibidas por la Ley Federal y de las reservadas para el uso exclusivo del Ejército, Armada, Fuerza Aérea y Guardia Nacional. La ley federal determinará los casos, condiciones, requisitos y lugares en que se podrá autorizar a los habitantes la portación de armas.

- 3 Similarly, investigators from the US General Accounting Office discovered that gun parts were routinely stolen from US military bases and resold at gun shows or to gun dealers. In 1997 undercover FBI agents arrested six US Marines and seven civilians for weapons trafficking after recovering over 50 machine guns, explosives, rockets and other military devices. These arrests were part of a larger investigation in the south-eastern United States that focused on gun shows, military bases and dealers (Nowell, 1997).
- 4 There are literally dozens of media accounts of firearms flows from the USA into Mexico in recent years. See, for example, Grillo (2007); Caldwell (2008); Verini (2008); Billeaud (2009); Robbins (2009).
- 5 Not all of the weapons under investigation were allegedly trafficked to Mexico.
- 6 Figures from the Mexican SIN AIS database (available at SIN AIS <http://sinais.salud.gob.mx/>). Thanks go to Katherine Aguirre for preparing these statistics. The figures appear, however, suspiciously low given the body count for gang-related violence; homicide figures will not include people killed by police or the army, and the figures for manslaughter would roughly double these numbers.

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