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# ARMS TRAFFICKING AND ORGANIZED CRIME

Global trade, local impacts

Guillermo Vázquez del Mercado

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## SUMMARY

The illicit firearms trade is a threat to sustainable development, peace and security. Its proliferation not only escalates conflict but also facilitates other criminal activities. Exploring the links between firearms trafficking and other forms of organized crime requires analysis of how guns enter illicit markets; how they enable other

criminal markets to flourish; what actions are taken by governments to control their flow within and across borders; and the role firearms play in exacerbating crime and violence in communities across the world. If this is to be tackled, monitoring and deterring the trade in illegal firearms should be a top priority for governments.

## Key points

- Illicit firearms are an accelerant of crime and violence, and a threat to community resilience and democracy.
- Conflict fuels the arms trade, compounding regional instability.
- State and private institutions play a significant role in access to illegal firearms.
- The line between licit and illicit firearms markets is becoming blurred.
- Greater access to firearms and ammunition is shaping how organized crime networks operate.
- Modified and home-manufactured firearms are a growing threat.
- Reliable records and licencing processes/databases are needed for tracing and enforcing international treaties and domestic laws.





# INTRODUCTION

Illicit firearms underpin much of organized crime as we know it today. Research in a number of regions has found that whether illegally produced, recycled from past conflicts, diverted from government stocks or smuggled from areas where the supply is legal and readily available, firearms and ammunition trafficking strengthen and expand illicit markets across the world.

According to the Small Arms Survey, globally there were approximately 857 million firearms in the hands of civilians in 2017. Of this total, only 12 per cent were reported as registered.<sup>1</sup> In Latin America, one of the most violent regions in the world,<sup>2</sup> the increased availability of firearms – particularly of assault weapons that began to flow south after the US federal assault weapons ban expired in 2004 – has been linked to an increase in homicides.<sup>3</sup>

Conflict zones attract stocks of weapons, and firearms from previous civil wars and armed conflicts continue to circulate in these areas due to their long life cycles. Many of these find their way into the hands of criminals who use them to inflict violence both domestically and abroad. Firearms enable criminal groups to fight for dominance, deter state actors and threaten communities into submission, to request extortion payments, carry out robberies and hijackings, engage in poaching activities and partake in a myriad of other crimes.

The GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index 2021 ranks arms trafficking as the third most prevalent criminal market globally, and is particularly rife in Africa, the Americas and Asia.<sup>4</sup> By enabling organized crime and criminal markets more generally, the illegal arms trade represents a serious threat to community

Hundreds of millions of unreported firearms are in the possession of civilians worldwide. Above, a member of a community police group in Guerrero, Mexico. © Yuri Cortez/AFP via Getty Images

*The GI-TOC's  
Global Organized  
Crime Index  
2021 ranks arms  
trafficking as  
the third most  
prevalent criminal  
market globally.*

resilience and democracy. According to the Index, arms trafficking is linked to human trafficking and smuggling, as well as to the illicit trade of non-renewable resources. Violent crime in Latin America and Africa, and drug trafficking in Europe have also been heavily linked to the presence of illicit arms markets.<sup>5</sup>

The Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition (the 'Firearms Protocol') entered into force over 15 years ago, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC). It aims to 'control and regulate licit arms and arms flows, prevent their diversion into the illegal circuit, [and] facilitate the investigation and prosecution of related offences without hampering legitimate transfers'.<sup>6</sup> There are many areas in which its implementation within and across the borders of the 121 signatory states can be improved. It is also worth noting that this is the least ratified protocol of the UNTOC. Even countries such as the UK and Japan, which already have relatively strict gun laws and relatively low rates of gun crime, have not yet done so.

During the 65<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs in March 2022, three Latin American countries presented a resolution highlighting the need to address the links between drug trafficking and illicit arms trafficking through international cooperation.<sup>7</sup> The approval of this resolution raised the profile of this issue by encouraging member states to adopt and coordinate border strategies to prevent trafficking in firearms, provide specific training for law enforcement agencies and engage with key stakeholders, including civil society organizations. The GI-TOC's analysis of global illicit markets and their impact on development will contribute to a growing understanding of how the arms trade relates to other forms of transnational organized crime.

Based on GI-TOC research on arms trafficking patterns in a number of regions, this policy brief provides an overview of the sources and flows feeding the global illicit firearms trade and the impact this has on the dynamics of organized crime. The brief also examines the shortcomings of current international regulatory frameworks and offers recommendations for states, as well as regional and international organizations, seeking to counter this illicit market.



## SOURCES OF FIREARMS

Rifles stacked on shelves  
in a secure storage area  
of a firearms dealership.  
© Shaun Swingler

In regions already afflicted by conflict, firearms trafficking acts as an accelerant. The influx of arms not only fuels the fighting but it contributes to the fragmentation and spreading of conflict; increases the number of criminal groups and their use of violence as a vehicle for market control; and strengthens armed groups against state responses. However, illicit firearms do not only proliferate in conflict zones. The interface between organized crime, violent extremism and terrorism, as well as state actors, allows regions to become flush with weapons looted from government stockpiles and weapons legally procured but sold on the black market, in addition to the usual overspill of weapons from conflict zones into other territories.

### Regional conflicts

GI-TOC research in a number of regions has found that military stockpiles are one of the most common sources of weapons. In the Western Balkans, light weapons from the Yugoslav wars are still accessible on the black market today, making the region a transit hub and a place of origin for arms trafficked into Western Europe.<sup>8</sup> This can have immense consequences: weapons used in the January 2015 attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks were acquired on black markets in the Balkans.<sup>9</sup>

Civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala in the late twentieth century multiplied the number of weapons available in the region. Many of the 30 000 M-16 rifles and 260 000 M-67 grenades sent by the US government to the Salvadoran authorities are still in circulation and have been used by the two main gangs in the country, Mara Salvatrucha-13 and Barrio 18, and sent to criminal organizations abroad.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, the protracted civil war in post-independence Mozambique has led to significant inflows of firearms. This, coupled with the collapse of the 1992 peace process, has meant that firearms from the conflict are likely to be in the hands of non-state actors.<sup>11</sup> The country has been through several processes of disarmament, but weapons used in political conflicts continue to leak into the illicit economy. According to GI-TOC research in the country, weaponry is often taken from Mozambican military sites, border posts and police armouries in towns overrun by insurgents.<sup>12</sup>

In Somalia, surplus stocks of small arms and light weapons from the civil war in Yemen are spilling over into the country. Arms from illicit maritime shipments from Iran to Yemen are diverted en route and find their way to Islamist militant groups

in Somalia such as al-Shabaab and the regional Islamic State affiliate. This new supply route from the Yemeni war has broader implications for the Horn of Africa region, as maritime arms-trafficking networks may expand their reach into the African territory, further complicating the conflict landscape. Somalia's position as an arms-trafficking hub which is potentially fuelling the civil war in neighbouring Ethiopia is a case in point.<sup>13</sup>

Evidence from these conflicts around the world raise the need for law enforcement institutions to tackle illicit flows of weapons from conflict zones to adjacent regions. This is certainly true for post-2021 Afghanistan, and it is also likely that the current war in Ukraine will not be an exception. This conflagration will most likely fuel conflict, crime and violence in eastern Europe, the wider continent and beyond.<sup>14</sup>

## State and private security groups

Police and private security organizations have also become illicit suppliers of firearms to criminal markets and groups. Weak or inadequate registration of state-owned and recovered guns has resulted in the ability to rent or sell weapons to criminal actors and/or local militias. Although weapons sold to armed forces often have markings to allow tracing, some high-ranking military officials profit from accessing weapons in bulk and selling them to criminal networks. Moreover, state-sponsored trafficking rings are difficult to counter due to corruption and complicity of law enforcement authorities.<sup>15</sup>

Since 2016, armed groups in Mali have expanded in parallel with the arms-trafficking market. Weapons stocks in the country are regularly replenished by military supplies provided either by corrupt elements of the Malian armed forces or smuggled into the country.<sup>16</sup>

In South Africa, between 2002 and 2019, more than 26 277 police-issued firearms were reported lost or stolen – although due to weak reporting methods, this figure is likely to be higher<sup>17</sup> – and

only 18 per cent of these were recovered.<sup>18</sup> Power struggles in the public transportation industry have led to the use hitmen to attack competitors, with 43 per cent of targeted assassinations in South Africa from 2000 to 2017 being related to the taxi industry alone.<sup>19</sup> Such hitmen have been known to access weapons through police officers hiring out their duty weapons.<sup>20</sup>

There is also evidence that firearms seized by police in South Africa have leaked into the black market. In June 2016, a senior police officer admitted to being part of a national network that supplied more than 2 400 firearms, 900 of which were linked to more than a thousand murders. The network operated for eight years before it was uncovered by police detectives. The police officer and his accomplices used their access to police armouries and central police firearm stores to siphon off recalled state-issued firearms, seized illegal firearms and those handed in during amnesties.<sup>21</sup>

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is estimated that, since 2006, there have been nine thefts of weapons from warehouses of the Bosnian armed forces.



One of the thousands of gun dealers located near the US–Mexico border. Legally owned firearms easily cross into the illicit sphere.  
© Gilles Mingasson via Getty Images

In March 2017, eight pistols and six automatic handguns went missing from a military barracks in Republika Srpska;<sup>22</sup> in 2018, a number of weapons and ammunition were stolen by a soldier from barracks in Pale, near Sarajevo;<sup>23</sup> and in February 2021, at the basic training centre in Pazarić, the ministry of defence reported that 'a certain amount of weapons disappeared' and that the security seal at the entrance to the weapons and military equipment warehouse was damaged.<sup>24</sup>

As with other illicit markets, arms trafficking is enabled by corruption and a lack of accountability at different levels of government. The involvement of the state and private institutions in arms-trafficking rings needs to be tackled at source by raising states' investigation and prosecution standards.

Efforts to monitor arms flows and reduce the spread of small arms and light weapons in eastern Europe and the Balkans have been made through cross-border initiatives. The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) has, for the past 20 years, worked to increase regional cooperation; improve legislative frameworks, policies and practices; and build local capacities to reduce gun-related violence and crime.<sup>25</sup> Another project, REGISYNC, aims to develop common EU minimum standards for civilian firearms registers and encourage information sharing with neighbouring states in the Balkans to prevent the diversion of legal firearms to criminal and terrorist organizations.<sup>26</sup>

## Legal firearms and illicit markets

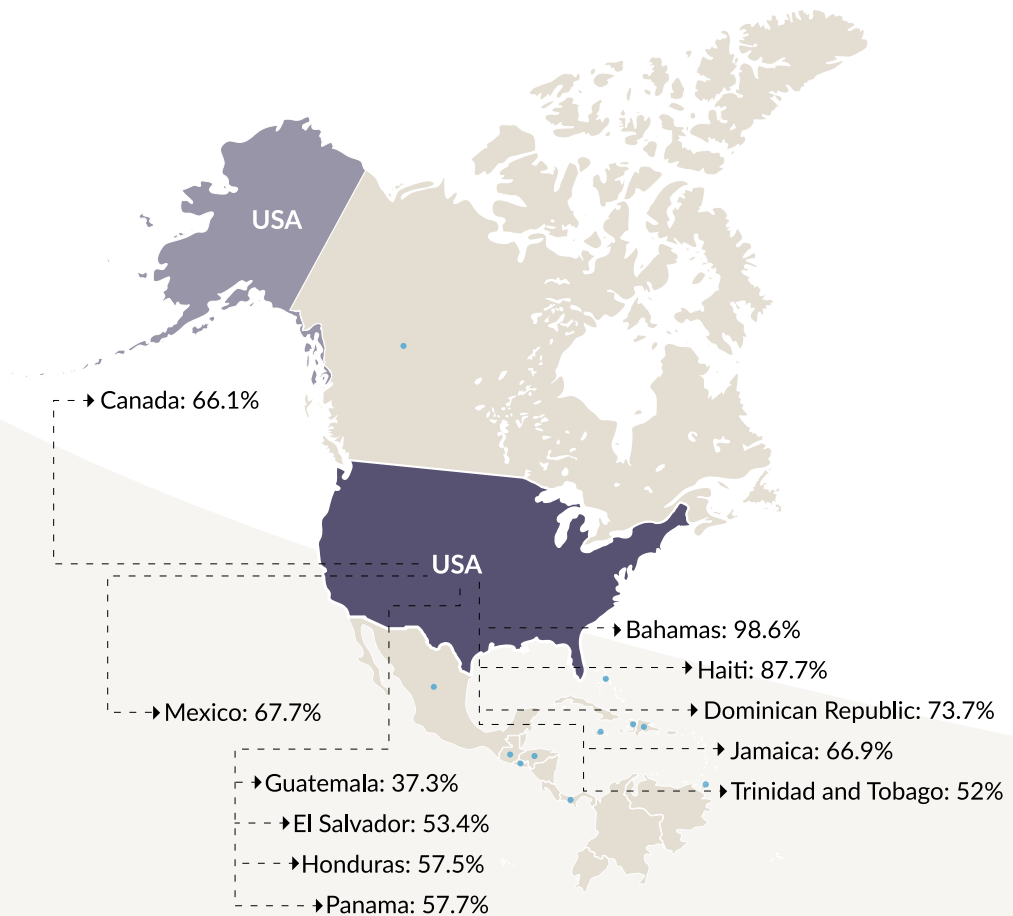
Legally owned and registered firearms easily cross into the illicit sphere, such as the use of legal firearms for illegal purposes or the fraudulent issue of firearms licences by authorities. In South Africa, private security companies working on behalf of the taxi industry have been known to use legal firearms to conduct illegal operations. Meanwhile, corruption in the country's Central Firearms Registry has enabled criminals to gain access to firearm licences. In 2020, police arrested 28 people, including high-ranking police officers and Cape Town-based

underworld figures, for their involvement in the fraudulent procurement of licences.<sup>27</sup>

In North America, US federal and state gun laws allow easy access to and flexible ownership of a diversity of firearms, including high-calibre assault weapons. As a result, it is estimated that US citizens own 393.3 million firearms,<sup>28</sup> which have been acquired in more than 136 643 Federal Firearm Licensees (FFL) or gun shops, and more than 17 per cent of them along the southern border states.<sup>29</sup>

Weapons and accessories can also be bought or sold by licenced and unlicenced dealers at gun shows, which due to legal loopholes, are not considered FFLs. Gun purchases made by third parties, those acquired at gun shows and weapons stolen from or lost by FFLs are the principal ways in which legally owned firearms are diverted into illicit markets within the US and move into Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>30</sup>

Although Mexican gun laws are stringent and only allow citizens to legally purchase firearms from the defence ministry, the number of guns in Mexico has been estimated to be 16.8 million, as a result of an influx from the US.<sup>31</sup> From 2015 to 2020, an average of 69 per cent of all guns seized in Mexico had been manufactured in or legally imported into the US.<sup>32</sup> Similar percentages were recorded in Central American and Caribbean countries. Canada has also been impacted by illicit flows of weapons originating in the US – in 2020, 66.1 per cent of weapons in the country came from its southern neighbour.<sup>33</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Percentages of US manufactured or imported firearms seized by country in North-Central America and the Caribbean, 2020.

Although this data provides a clear picture of how regulated sales enable illicit flows across the Americas, this can only be done when arms seizures data is collected from all agencies and complete registries are shared with the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives for tracing. The process therefore requires cooperation and collaboration from all security and law enforcement agencies in a given country.

For the past 20 years, Mexican security and law enforcement agencies have made an effort to seize weapons from the hands of illicit actors. According to official data, more than 273 000 weapons have been seized by federal agencies over that period – equivalent to 13 650 weapons per year.<sup>34</sup> Given that Mexican authorities have estimated that 200 000 weapons are smuggled yearly into the country,<sup>35</sup> average annual seizures represent about 5 per cent of the total. Coordination among security and law enforcement authorities from federal and state agencies is crucial not only to increase seizures but also to obtain better tracing data, which can give a more comprehensive view of the illicit gun market and how it fuels organized crime.

Seizing and tracing illicit guns are only the first steps in a long chain of intelligence that needs to be gathered and processed by law enforcement authorities to prosecute those involved in arms-trafficking rings. According to the US Government Accountability Office, a lack of cooperation between US federal enforcement agencies with Mexican federal and state authorities has severely hindered this effort.<sup>36</sup>

In January 2022, the Mexican and US governments released a joint statement announcing that they would increase the seizure of firearms and ammunition and the prosecution of arms traffickers in both countries. 'Those who traffic arms will pay for it in both countries,' said the US Ambassador to Mexico, Ken Salazar.<sup>37</sup>

The US–Mexico collaboration in tracing weapons demonstrates areas for coordination among security and law enforcement agencies in the Americas and beyond. Border enforcement agencies need to further cooperate to interdict the trafficking of legal guns before they cross into the illicit sphere.

*Border enforcement agencies need to further cooperate to interdict the trafficking of legal guns before they cross into the illicit sphere.*

## Handmade, modified and printed weapons

Guns can be produced cheaply in a number of ways: rudimentary handmade weapons can be manufactured, which expel a projectile using gas; gas-powered replicas can be modified into fully functional firearms; deactivated guns can be reactivated; and firearms (and their individual parts) can now even be 3D printed.

In Nigeria, locally manufactured firearms can be purchased by civilians, often in order to defend themselves against bandits, as well as by criminals and state-backed security forces. These types of weapons have not only facilitated widespread access to arms, but they have done so at affordable prices. A handgun can cost as little as €7 (€240 if imported) and a handmade AK-47 can be bought for €160 (€600 if imported).<sup>38</sup>

The price of illicit firearms can vary greatly depending on how far a weapon is from the source, if it is lawfully available within a territory, its characteristics (make, model and calibre) and its condition (new or used). Such variables can make this illicit market a very profitable one. For example, an assault rifle purchased in the United States can cost €500 to €600, but in northern Mexico can cost between €1 200 to €1 600, and this may increase as it makes its way south to around €2 000 to €4 000.<sup>39</sup>

The following table aims to provide a reference for the prices of illicit guns in different countries. South-eastern Europe has an overabundance of weapons leftover from the wars in Yugoslavia but also because of the presence in the region of a significant military weapons industry. As a result, pistols and assault rifles can be obtained at significantly lower costs in eastern Europe than in parts of the world where demand outstrips supply.

Country	Type of firearm	Price (€)
Balkan countries	Assault rifle	150–300
Balkan countries	Pistol	150–400
Somalia	Assault rifle	1 500–1 700
Canada	Pistol	2 200
Mexico	Assault rifle	1 500–2 500
Honduras	Assault rifle	1 500–3 000
Australia	Pistol	542–600

**FIGURE 2** Estimated prices of illegal firearms in different countries.

SOURCES: The Civil Society Observatory to Counter Organized Crime in South Eastern Europe, Risk Bulletin Issue 2, GI-TOC, October–November 2020; Jay Bahadur, The price of civil war: A survey of Somalia's arms market, GI-TOC, April 2022; Mia Sheldon and Matthew Amha, Black market guns: where they're coming from and how they get into the hands of criminals, CBC News, 12 May 2019; Wendy Roa, 'Si quieres una, yo te la vendo'; mercado negro de armas en la CDMX, *Excelsior*, 14 March 2018; *Tiempo*, El precio de las AK-47 en los mercados negros del mundo, 3 April 2017; Roderic Broadhurst et al, Illicit firearms and other weapons on darknet, *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 622.

In the Philippines, the Palawan archipelago is known for its vast natural resources and biodiversity, which have sparked the interest of poachers who attack forest rangers tasked with protecting wildlife. Homemade gas guns (which use compressed gas to propel a marble-sized object), which are normally used by poachers to hunt wild pigs, were used in attacks in 2017 and 2019 to shoot forest rangers to stop their patrolling activities.<sup>40</sup> These shootings are part of a wider trend in the Philippines that has seen an increase in violence against environmental officials since President Duterte came to power in 2016. Global Witness estimates that 166 land and environmental defenders have been killed across the country between 2016 and 2020.<sup>41</sup> Around 32 environmental law enforcers were attacked between 2001 and 2021, with some 40 per cent within Palawan.<sup>42</sup>



Rangers on patrol in Palawan, the Philippines. The region's rich ecosystem has attracted armed poachers who attack rangers tasked with protecting wildlife. © Alexis Rosenfeld via Getty Images

Since the attacks in 2017, there have been growing calls for forest rangers to be armed and a bill has been introduced to supply the necessary funding along with an array of other measures to increase the effectiveness of enforcement agencies. However, due to the Duterte government's penchant for military solutions, there are concerns that the arming of forest rangers could lead to increased casualties and the harassing and oppression of local communities.<sup>43</sup> In any case, the forest ranger murdered by loggers in 2019 was carrying his own .45 calibre rifle when he was attacked.<sup>44</sup> This suggests that the arming of rangers will not act as a deterrent but instead result in an escalation of violence as both sides look to firearms for protection against the other.

Manufacturing weapons is no longer a matter of craft, but also of technology. 3D printers have enabled criminals to access fully functional weapons that can be assembled in the privacy of their own home. The threat posed by this type of manufacturing is already on Europol's radar, as a growing number of printed firearms have been seized around Europe. In 2019, two people were killed in Germany using a weapon partly manufactured with printed parts, and in 2021, the Spanish National Police dismantled an illegal workshop in the Canary Islands that was producing 3D-printed firearms.<sup>45</sup>



A 3D-printed gun seen in a factory in Austin, Texas, 2018. © Kelly West/AFP via Getty Images



Bullet holes at a home in one of Brazil's many *favelas*. Armed crackdowns on criminal groups by the Brazilian government have not yielded positive results.  
© Vanderlei Almeida/AFP via Getty Images

## IMPACTS

### Illicit firearms intensify crime and violence

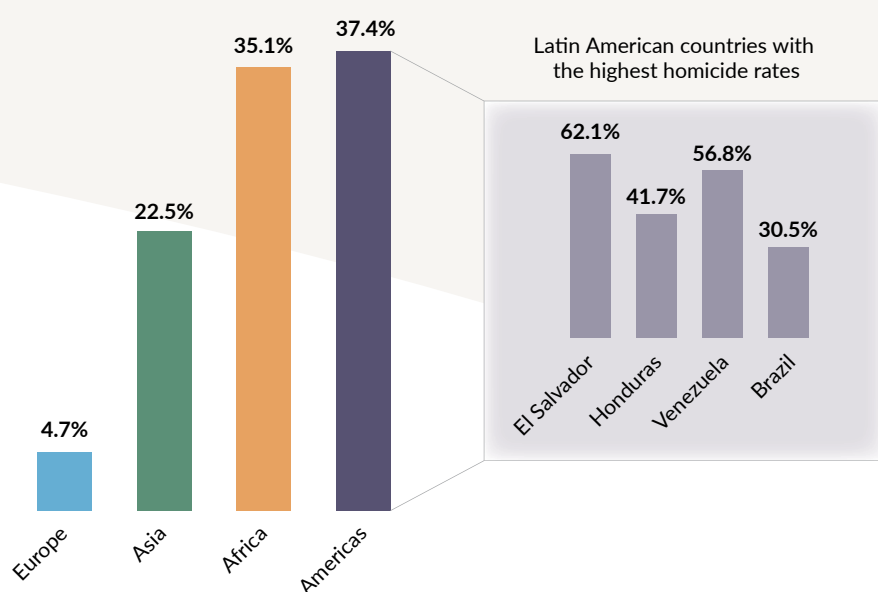
Firearms not only escalate existing conflicts but also weaponize confrontations between criminal organizations, extend criminal territories and enable further illicit activities. The supply and availability of illicit firearms have facilitated crimes such as kidnapping, extortion, armed robbery, assassinations and poaching.

In Mozambique, a rise in kidnappings has been reported since 2008. These abductions, often carried out in broad daylight by heavily armed groups, initially occurred in Maputo and Matola but have since spread to other urban areas, including Beira, Chimoio and Nampula. There is growing evidence that police and military officers work closely with kidnapping gangs, not only supplying them with firearms but also high-level protection.<sup>46</sup>

An average of 360 elephants are poached yearly in the country by networks mostly using weapons legally imported by state security services. For example, state-owned firearms that were later used in poaching (.375 and .458 calibre hunting rifles) were reported missing from the president's personal protection force during former president Armando Guebuza's time in office. Others were traced to a military training centre in Munguine, Manhica district.<sup>47</sup>

According to GI-TOC research, poachers in northern Mozambique who obtain firearms and ammunition from government sources (often police or border guards) generally pay a fixed price, although sometimes they agree to give a cut of their profits – sometimes agreeing as much as a 50/50 split with the weapon provider.<sup>48</sup>

The circulation of firearms also lead to an expansion in lethal violence. In 2017, 54 per cent of homicides in the world involved a firearm.<sup>49</sup> In 2020, Latin America was one of the most affected regions: globally, El Salvador (14.2), Honduras (27.5) and Jamaica (37) had the highest gun-related homicide rates per 100 000 inhabitants.<sup>50</sup> In Mexico, they have increased dramatically, as gun-related killings leapt from 15 per cent before the year 2000 to 70 per cent in 2021.<sup>51</sup>



**FIGURE 3** Shares of homicide victims, per region.

SOURCE: UNODC, Global Study on Homicide, 2019, <https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet2.pdf>

The common thread between these increases has been the wide availability of firearms across Latin America. Firearms can be purchased through messaging apps,<sup>52</sup> and criminal groups can easily exchange them for drugs.<sup>53</sup>

However, gun violence still occurs even in countries with more stringent firearms laws. Sweden, for example, a country known for its high living standards and social cohesion, has a gun homicide rate of .44 deaths per 100 000 inhabitants – higher than the European average.<sup>54</sup> This is primarily linked to conflicts among criminal organizations.<sup>55</sup>

Yet, illicit guns are not only a threat to civilian safety when in the hands of criminal groups. Illegal possession and misuse of firearms is also directly linked with interpersonal, domestic and gender-based violence, which poses a serious risk to public safety. According to SEESAC, in 2021 firearms were involved in 156 killings, 45 suicides, the threatening of 521 people and injuries to another 365 across the Western Balkans.<sup>56</sup> Of these, women accounted for 11% of the victims but only 1% of the perpetrators.<sup>57</sup>

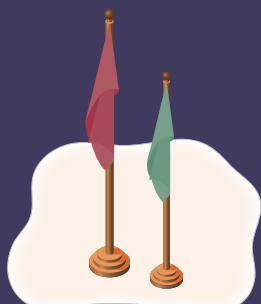
## Shooting, the preferred killing method

Worldwide, thousands of people fall victim to targeted killings, including those who take a stance against organized crime and corruption. The GI-TOC's Global

Assassination Monitor has recorded more than 2 700 cases of assassinations and attempted assassinations from 2019 to 2020.<sup>58</sup> Some of the project's main findings are:



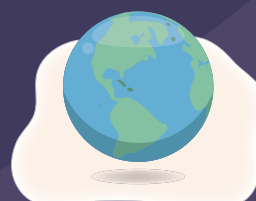
**71%** of all victims were shot dead.



In **63%** of the cases, the killing was politically motivated. In **23%** of the cases, the motive was related to organized crime.



Of all victims, **216** were civil society members; **182** held public office or were linked to a public entity; and **116** worked in the state or private security sector.



**37%** of all assassinations took place in the Americas, followed by **33%** in Asia, **24%** in Africa and **6%** in Europe.



Of the **280** assassinations registered in the Americas, **52%** occurred in South America and **41%** in Central America.



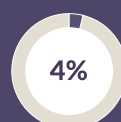
Shot



Not reported



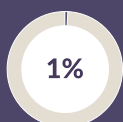
Bombed



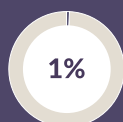
Stabbed



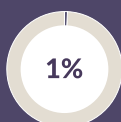
Beaten



Poisoned



Suffocated



Beheaded



Tortured



Burnt

**FIGURE 4** Methods used for targeted killings, 2019–2020.

SOURCE: Global Assassination Monitor, GI-TOC

## Criminal organizations change their operations

Illicit firearms shape the activities of criminal networks and groups, giving them more power, as well as transforming criminal landscapes and enabling other criminal markets to thrive.

Drugs and firearms markets tend to benefit and reinforce each other. The availability of weapons in some regions has led to an arms race in which criminal groups invest their profits into 'out-gunning' their rivals and security forces. As gang bosses recognized there were profits to be made in the illicit firearm market, they began setting themselves up as middlemen dealers – using profits from the drug trade to buy and sell firearms not only to their members but also other criminal groups at huge mark-ups. In some cases, this can be as high as between 50 to 150 per cent, making for a profitable business.<sup>59</sup>

In Mexico, the proliferation of illegal firearms has enabled smaller gangs to compete with rivals and security forces and led a transformation in the crime scene. From a drug market controlled by only a handful of criminal organizations in the late-1990s, organized crime has become much more fragmented, diverse and violent with 37 cartels now recognized by the government.<sup>60</sup> Although Mexican criminal organizations were always well armed, since 2004 the supply of high calibre weapons greatly expanded with the expiration of the US federal assault weapons ban.<sup>61</sup> This bolstered the supply of assault rifles south of the US border and contributed to the increase in violence.<sup>62</sup>

In Brazil, armed crackdowns on criminal groups by the Brazilian government have been the norm. However, the state's militarized response has not yielded positive results. On the contrary, academics have found that after three decades of employing repressive tactics to try to regain government control, state violence has merely resulted in drug cartels investing more heavily in weapons.<sup>63</sup> As a result, groups such as the Comando Vermelho (Red Command) in Rio de Janeiro, one of the most active and long running organizations in the country, have for over 30 years been able to resist raids by security forces deploying armoured cars and even snipers shooting from helicopters into densely populated *favelas*.<sup>64</sup>

European countries have also been affected by the symbiotic relationship between the drug market, particularly the cocaine trade, and firearms. According to the UK's National Firearms Targeting Centre, 99 per cent of firearms seizures are linked to drug wars.<sup>65</sup> Spanish police sources also blame drug trade disputes for the bulk of the homicides in the country.<sup>66</sup>

The demand for guns has not only intensified the drug trade but has also led to an expansion of illicit-gun supply routes across Europe to fuel other criminal activities. In December 2018, the French foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, said in a press conference with his German counterpart that 'millions of light weapons circulating in the Western Balkans pose a great threat to European security'.<sup>67</sup> The UK's National Crime Agency has warned that weapons from the area are at the forefront of illicit gun trade and fear they might be used in a terrorist attack.<sup>68</sup> In Germany, efforts have been made to control criminal groups (such as the Culum brothers or the Bandidos) involved in trading arms from the Balkans. Despite this, these organizations continue to flourish, supplying firearms and drugs throughout Austria and Switzerland.<sup>69</sup>

	Arms trafficking	Human trafficking	Human smuggling	Flora crimes	Fauna crimes	Nonrenewable resources	Heroin	Cocaine	Cannabis
Arms trafficking	-								
Human trafficking	.643*	-							
Human smuggling	.619*	.748*	-						
Flora crimes	.320*	.400*	.301*	-					
Fauna crimes	.264*	.392*	.264*	.684*	-				
Nonrenewables	.558*	.579*	.440*	.495*	.410*	-			
Heroin	.202*	.368*	.451*	.283*	.231*	.290*	-		
Cocaine	.254*	.042	.120	.121	.011	.108	.066	-	
Cannabis	.480*	.383*	.425*	.143	.078	.318*	.194*	.466*	-
Synthetic drugs	.327*	.392*	.459*	.198*	.288*	.337*	.545*	.054	.275

**FIGURE 5** Correlation between arms trafficking and other criminal markets.

NOTE: \*  $p < 0.01$ . A Spearman correlation examined the relationship between arms trafficking and nine other criminal markets. Arms trafficking was found to be significantly correlated to all other forms of crime, marked by an asterisk(\*) at a significance level of 1%, indicating a relatively high strength of evidence in probabilistic terms.

SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index 2021, GI-TOC.



## REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

The UNTOC's Firearms Protocol provides a framework for states to control and regulate legal arms and arms flows, prevent their diversion into the illegal economy and facilitate the investigation and prosecution of related offences. Although the protocol has been in effect for over 15 years and has been signed by 121 parties, it is estimated that only 12 per cent of the nearly 857 million civilian-held firearms are registered with state authorities.<sup>70</sup> The wide registration gap reflects the flaws and inadequacies in the data stored by governments and the need to develop their capacity to register gun ownership in their territories.<sup>71</sup>

Since December 2014, the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) has been guiding the efforts of 111 state parties (and 30 states that have signed but not ratified the treaty) to regulate the licit and eradicate the illicit trade of weapons by establishing standards for transfer of arms.<sup>72</sup> The ATT provides a framework that member states can use to adapt their national laws and regulations, and an approval process for the flow of weapons across international borders, to establish common international standards before the export process begins.

These two multilateral treaties seek to improve national legislation and facilitate international cooperation, as well as develop a platform for technical assistance and capacity building. It is important to evaluate if adopted standards are adequately implemented so that improvements can be achieved in areas of data recording and exchange of information. But due to the late adoption of the UNTOC Review Mechanism – which assesses states' implementation of the UNTOC and associated protocols – its slow progress, limited transparency and lack of external oversight, it is not possible to accurately assess how far the Firearms Protocol has been given effect. Thorough analysis, including by civil society and the private sector, is needed to evaluate the impact both have had in the registration of weapons and in controlling illicit arms trafficking and its role in catalyzing conflict.

US law enforcement officers confiscate weapons during a gang crackdown, Los Angeles, May 2009. Assessing country compliance with international regulatory frameworks is crucial to control illicit firearms flows. © David McNew via Getty Images

*It is important to evaluate if adopted legal standards are adequately implemented.*

Assessing country compliance with the Firearms Protocol and the ATT is paramount to control licit and illicit flows of firearms and ammunition, in order to curb the expansion of criminal markets and organizations. To do so, it is important to measure not only the level of compliance across borders, but also to strengthen local and regional enforcement of domestic gun laws and regulations; to better register and license arms and ammunition, as well as to combat corruption among state and private institutions.

Recognizing the importance of the UN Firearms Protocol and ATT, a summit held in London in July 2018 resulted in a Franco-German-led initiative to curb the Balkan arms trade. The 'Roadmap for a sustainable solution to the illegal possession, misuse and trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and ammunition in the Western Balkans', aims to transform this region from an exporter and enabler of illicit flows of arms, to a model in how to control the market. By ensuring arms control legislation is in place and harmonized with EU regulation, it aims by the year 2024 to ensure that arms control policies in the Western Balkans are evidence based and intelligence led; and a significant reduction in illicit flows of firearms, ammunitions and explosives in the region and beyond, as well as in the supply, demand and misuse of firearms.<sup>73</sup>

## Ammunition

Tackling firearms trafficking is an extremely complex endeavour. Registering, licensing, controlling repositories, reporting, tracing and disabling or destroying seized weapons are only some of the responsibilities of law enforcement actors. Ammunition, however, is often overlooked.

The UNTOC Firearms Protocol considers ammunition as one of the elements that state parties need to control but requires no specific action to register or regulate its sale. On the other hand, article 3 of the ATT states that, 'each State Party shall establish and maintain a national control system to regulate the export of ammunition/munitions fired, launched or delivered by the conventional arms covered under article 2'.<sup>74</sup>

Despite these provisions, some parties to the conventions have struggled to keep track of and safeguard ammunitions. In June 2021, 7 million bullets were stolen in Guanajuato, Mexico, while on their way to Texas, guarded by a private security company.<sup>75</sup> In South Africa, in August 2019, the police minister told Parliament that the SAPS had lost more than 9.5 million rounds of ammunition during the previous six financial years.<sup>76</sup>

Ongoing access to ammunition is, of course, key for any criminal network. In fact, some will seek out particular types of firearms based on the availability of ammunition for that make and model. Although some of this ammunition comes from civilian sources, it can also be acquired from state armouries. It is difficult to estimate accurately how much ammunition is lost by state institutions, as most of the losses go undetected and unreported. One way of resolving this issue, as has been done in Brazil, would be to require manufacturers to mark ammunition in the same way as firearms. This need not involve a serial number but a head stamp or chemical taggant.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

**T**he illicit firearms and ammunition trade enables other criminal markets to flourish and intensifies violence. To contain firearms flows, a holistic and coordinated response, involving cooperation among states and national law enforcement agencies, is essential.

The UNTOC Firearms Protocol and ATT have not yielded the expected results. Enhancing national capacities to adopt legislation; removing domestic and regional loopholes; and generating data and analysis to understand flows and their links to other criminal markets, will be of the utmost importance. Like many illicit trades in normally legal goods, the solutions are not straightforward and require collaboration across public and private sectors, and multiple points of regulation along the supply chain. To this end, the following recommendations are made:

- A global arms registry is required, possibly underpinned by blockchain or another indelible unique recording system, for all guns legally manufactured, which also records licence and sale. In lieu of such, gun manufacturers should be prevailed on to adopt voluntary track-and-trace systems, which will allow them to properly monitor the circulations of their products. Non-registered weapons, including those from artisanal production can be seized and disabled.
- Breaking the cycle of impunity of state officials and military and law enforcement personnel (public and private) involved in the illicit gun trade is paramount.
- Anyone involved in actions that could lead to weapon diversion, including failures to report seizures, should be held accountable. The whole chain of actors involved in arms-trafficking rings should be thoroughly investigated and prosecuted. This includes purchasers, smugglers, sellers and those involved in laundering the proceedings of illegally sold weapons, ammunition or components. Particular emphasis on integrity efforts must be placed on existing stockpile management.

Nigerian military commanders inspect arms and ammunition recovered from Boko Haram jihadists, July 2019. © Audu Marte/ AFP via Getty Images

- Law enforcement and state actors need more granular knowledge of the complex connections between the firearms trade and other criminal markets in order to tailor laws, regulations, protocols, and their implementation to differing domestic and regional criminal landscapes. This process should involve insight from affected communities, as well as academic, state and private sector experts, who can provide context-based solutions to illicit firearms flows.<sup>77</sup>
- State and federal law enforcement agencies must improve weapons registration (including make, model, serial number, calibre, country of origin) and licensing processes to institutions and individuals, as well as enhance stockpile management to avoid leaks to the illicit market. Seized and recovered weapons through other means (such as mandatory buyback programmes) must be enhanced to ensure they are swiftly and completely disabled, while adequately saving all pertinent registry information of the firearms. By doing so, all registries are kept for law enforcement purposes.
- Governments should improve information sharing on legally acquired, seized weapons and trafficking rings. The latter is not an easy task, as it requires continuous collaboration. Understanding how weapons flow from licit environments to illicit markets, who is involved (licit and illicit actors) and how arms trafficking rings operate, can only be done by adequately tracing the lifecycle of weapons. A firearm is a durable good which requires proper registration details and identification of licenced owners or users to create a complete transaction history.<sup>78</sup> By sharing this information among law enforcement agencies and through available multilateral mechanisms, better policies can be developed and implemented.
- Ammunition and modifications to firearms must become a more important element in efforts to curb trafficking. Implementing tools such as the UN's Manual of Ammunition Management should be improved, and member states should be required to introduce legislation to only import ammunition with markings that identify make and country of origin.<sup>79</sup> GI-TOC research in Somalia has shown that tracking country and year of manufacture, calibre, number of events and countries in which ammunition cases have been documented, could provide invaluable tracing information. This will enable understanding which countries are suppliers of ammunitions for which regions, as well as taking specific measures to contain these flows.
- The variety of modified and home-manufactured weapons and the speed at which they can be produced around the world also requires greater attention from stakeholders and law enforcement. 3D printing of guns is still in its early stages, so there is a valuable opportunity to tackle this technology by introducing software that recognizes gun-blueprint files. To contain the spread of mainstream and modified weapons, there is a need for stricter control of the sale and purchase of firearms parts that can enhance the fire capacity of weapons or enable printed plastic elements to make functional firearms (e.g. springs, pins, metal sliders).

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# GLOBAL INITIATIVE

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

## ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with 500 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

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