GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

COMBATING ILLICIT FIREARMS TRAFFICKING IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Towards a regional roadmap

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Contents

SUMMARY

The widespread availability and proliferation of illicit firearms in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of violence and organized crime in the region. The glut of modern, high-grade weapons has altered the market, lowering the cost of violence for criminal actors and fuelling an arms race that outpaces law enforcement and undermines governance, development and the rule of law. It is a vicious arms race: as criminal networks acquire potent weapons and ammunition, they tend to trigger militarized state responses, intensifying confrontations and deepening insecurity, which in turn feeds more criminal acquisition of firearms.

The impact on the region cannot be overstated. Firearms-related violence in LAC now accounts for approximately 70% of all homicides in the region, far above the global average of 54%.[1] The economic toll is staggering, with the direct costs of crime and violence reaching an estimated 3.4% of the region's GDP annually.[2]

Efforts to combat illicit firearms trafficking remain fragmented. Countries in the region face common threats but often act in isolation, constrained by limited technical capacity, inconsistent legislation and inadequate data systems.

Curbing illicit firearms trafficking and diversion goes beyond intercepting shipments. It requires dismantling networks of brokers and facilitators, investing in pricing intelligence to detect new patterns, integrating arms monitoring into disarmament and reintegration efforts, and ensuring that judicial responses are commensurate with the challenges posed by the political economy of organized crime.

This policy brief, developed through consultations with stakeholders led by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), is intended as a call to action to curb firearms trafficking in the region, advocating for a unified approach to dismantle the illicit arms economy that is destabilizing the region. It outlines a set of recommendations anchored in three pillars: strengthening national legislation and regulatory frameworks; investing in forensic capacity, data systems and cross-border coordination, including information sharing; and developing national and hemispheric prevention strategies that are gender-responsive, community-based and public health-informed.

Reducing the supply and demand of illicit firearms and ammunition, disrupting trafficking routes and building resilient institutions are not only security imperatives but preconditions for inclusive development and sustainability. Centring transparency, accountability and civil society engagement in this agenda will be critical. Only through sustained and collective action can the LAC region begin to reverse the tide of armed violence and organized crime, and reclaim space for democratic governance, human rights and the rule of law.

Recommendations

Reducing firearms violence in LAC requires the establishment of a robust regional strategy. Building on existing initiatives implemented by institutions such as the Organization of American States (OAS) with the Caribbean Firearms Roadmap,[3] the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS)[4], the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the UN Regional Centre for

Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNLIREC),[5] and Small Arms Survey, and expanding comparative frameworks to Central and South America, would enable countries to share intelligence and best practices, harmonize strategies and deploy practical tools to combat illicit firearms flows. The active engagement of major regional nations, including the US, is essential to dismantling organized crime networks and promoting prevention-oriented approaches to firearm deaths.

This paper calls for the creation of a more robust regional institutional strategy to tackle illicit firearms trafficking. This strategy should be developed around three core priorities: (1) evidence-based, political economy research and data generation to inform policy and operations; (2) targeted support for civil society organizations to enhance prevention and resilience; and (3) sustained coordination among governments, local and international stakeholders to ensure alignment and collective action.

Importantly, as identified in a pilot test implemented by the OAS with experts on firearms trafficking, there are cost-effective measures, such as improved coordination and risk analyses, that can be achieved in the short and medium term without the need for significant budget modifications.[6] This shows there are immediate actions that can be implemented to address violence related to firearms and ammunition trafficking.

1. Generate evidence-based research and data.

There is an urgent need to undertake field-based political economy research and analysis on firearms trafficking in the region, encompassing both institutional dynamics and the operations of criminal networks. Addressing data gaps, particularly in major source countries such as the US, is essential. Improved transparency on firearms purchases and trafficking routes, including flows from non-US sources such as Europe, Türkiye and Israel, will provide a more complete picture of illicit supply chains. In this regard, exporting countries must strengthen oversight of arms producers and enforce compliance, particularly given the risks of diversion linked to conflicts such as the war in Ukraine.[7]

Enhanced control at ports and land borders, through advanced x-ray systems and forensic capabilities, should be coupled with improved tracing systems and feedback loops to ensure that operational data directly informs enforcement and policymaking. Crucially, forensic evidence must result in arrests and prosecutions to disrupt trafficking and reinforce accountability.

2. Support civil society to enhance prevention and resilience.

A comprehensive strategy must engage civil society organizations, both as advocates for transparency and as essential actors in community-based prevention. Programmes aimed at youth engagement and local development can reduce demand for firearms. Understanding motivations behind gun acquisition and criminal recruitment, including through social media, further enhances the effectiveness of demand reduction strategies.

In addition, governments must regulate the private sector. Oversight of licensing regimes, arms manufacturers, gun lobbies and private security firms must be geared towards preventing proliferation and limit the role of firearms in sustaining and bolstering organized violence.

Preventing gun violence also requires tackling its structural drivers. National advisory committees or working groups can help tailor interventions to local contexts, incorporating public health perspectives and fostering multisectoral collaboration beyond law enforcement.

3. Enhance coordination among governments.

A key component of the regional strategy involves the modernization of firearms legislation. Regulatory frameworks must be updated to reflect evolving trafficking tactics and technological developments in weapons production. Enhanced cooperation between law enforcement and communities – particularly in high-violence areas – is also essential. Evidence-based policies must address the nexus between firearms trafficking and other criminal economies, including drug trafficking and extortion. Regional arms control strategies should explicitly account for their intersection with broader criminal markets and social risks and take a whole-of-government approach.

Placing firearms trafficking high on the agenda of international and regional forums, such as summits between the EU and the Community of Latin America and Caribbean states, and Mexico and CARICOM, will help consolidate political will. Recognizing the societal and economic costs of gun violence, including its gender-specific dimensions and its role in subsidizing criminal groups, reinforces the urgency of action.

INTRODUCTION

In the LAC region, the growing availability of illicit firearms has significantly altered the nature and magnitude of criminal activity, lowering the costs of perpetrating violence for organized criminal groups.[8] Wider access to modern, higher-grade weapons has strengthened criminal networks, enhancing their firepower and operational capacity. This escalation has exacerbated humanitarian impacts and has had severe social and economic costs on affected communities.

The destabilizing presence of these weapons not only fuels violence but also significantly hinders efforts toward governance, development and the rule of law. As criminal groups intensify their firepower to outgun criminal competitors and overmatch public security forces, the latter respond by buying more powerful weapons and militarizing their forces. This fuels increasingly aggressive policies and deadlier confrontations, creating a complex and vicious cycle that is more and more difficult to break.

The economic consequences of this arms race is substantial. The direct costs of crime and violence are estimated at 3.4% of the regional GDP annually, with higher figures in countries experiencing elevated violence levels.[9] These costs extend beyond direct losses, representing nearly 78% of public education budgets, twice the expenditure on social assistance, and twelve times the funding allocated to research and development.[10]

While the impacts are widely felt, effective responses remain uneven, fragmented and, too often, reactive. As such, combating the trafficking of illicit firearms must be positioned as a central pillar in any comprehensive strategy to counter organized crime in the region. However, a central obstacle to crafting such policy is the persistent lack of reliable and actionable data. In many countries, authorities have only a limited understanding of the types of weapons used in violent incidents, the pathways through which they circulate or the broader criminal ecosystems that sustain them.[11] Investigative and prosecutorial bodies frequently operate without the necessary tools, records or institutional coordination to track firearms across their life cycle.

A significant asymmetry persists between civilian and military control over firearms data. Military records are

often classified and excluded from civilian oversight, creating gaps that compromise transparency and hinder effective decision-making. In the civilian market, the lack of tracing information is also problematic, given that only 12% of the approximately 857 million civilian arms held worldwide are properly registered.[12]

Compounding this challenge is the increasing proliferation of modern, higher-grade weapons, which has fundamentally transformed the nature of violence in the region. These weapons are more lethal and have been implicated in rising levels of violence in both urban and rural contexts. Yet, the systems designed to monitor and regulate their flow – whether in circulation, seized or stored – remain inadequate. For example, centralized, interoperable registries are either nonexistent or poorly maintained, making it difficult to map trends, identify sources and prevent diversion. Tools such as eTrace[13] and iARMS[14] offer some interim support, but reliance on external systems is neither sustainable nor sufficient.

These gaps in regulation and enforcement are exacerbated by weak legislative frameworks. While some countries mandate the reporting of homicides, broader data on the use of firearms in crimes – such as assaults or domestic violence – remains scarce or inconsistent. Victimization surveys and administrative data systems are underutilized, and where they exist, they often lack the granularity needed to inform policy or shape interventions. Strengthening legislation to mandate comprehensive data collection, improve coordination across institutions and promote inter-agency accountability is therefore a foundational step.

The urgency of these reforms is especially visible in the Caribbean, where states, often with limited resources, are contending with alarming levels of gun violence. In some countries, such as Jamaica, up to 90% of homicides are committed with firearms, many of which are trafficked through regional routes that include diversion from law enforcement and cross-border smuggling.[15] Adding to the complexity is the new phenomenon of artisanal, copy and 3D-printed weapons.

Firearms also play a significant role in gender-based violence, domestic abuse and psychological violence, issues that remain under-reported and insufficiently addressed by current policy frameworks. Integrating a public health lens and a gender-responsive approach to organized crime responses is therefore critical, both to fully understand the human costs of violence and to design interventions that reflect the lived experiences of affected communities.[16]

Amid these challenges, there is growing recognition of the need for institutional capacity-building, particularly in areas such as stockpile management, gender-responsive enforcement and the development of national legislation aligned with international norms. Several countries have expressed readiness to engage with multilateral initiatives and share best practices, signaling a window of opportunity for more coordinated and ambitious action.

To support this momentum, a number of strategic priorities have emerged: the development of regional frameworks, the creation of comprehensive monitoring systems, the disruption of trafficking routes and supply chains, and the regulation of private security actors and militias. In addition, a broader definition of what constitutes controlled firearms and ammunition (including components, silencers and digital fabrication tools) must inform legislation and enforcement to keep pace with evolving threats.

Ultimately, transparency and accountability remain the cornerstones of any effective policy response. The consistent withholding of data, particularly by defence institutions, undermines efforts to build trust and analyze trends. Pressing for access to data, empowering civil society to contribute to monitoring efforts, and fostering open collaboration between governments and non-state actors are essential steps toward meaningful reform.[17]

This policy brief examines the region's firearms-related challenges and outlines a set of actionable recommendations rooted in the insights shared during GI-TOC stakeholder engagement activities and consultations with experts organized in Mexico City in February 2025.

A REGION FLOODED WITH ILLICIT GUNS

In the Americas, the prevalence of firearm-related violence far exceeds global averages, with approximately 70% of homicides involving firearms, compared to 54% worldwide. Mexico and several Caribbean nations are particularly affected. Although the number of weapons seized represents only a fraction of those circulating illegally, tracing efforts consistently identify US sources.[18] Mexico's foreign affairs ministry estimates that between 70% and 90% of traced illicit firearms were either sourced from or transited through the US.[19] Similarly, in 2021, between 80% and 99% of firearms seized and submitted for tracing by the Bahamas, Dominican Republic and Haiti were found to have originated in the US, according to the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) National Tracing Center (NTC).[20]

Historically, countries in LAC have had some of the strictest laws in the world regulating purchasing and possessing firearms. Yet, easy access to weapons from a market as large and deregulated as that of the United States has transformed the leverage that criminal groups have with regard to the civilian population and security forces. The low costs and ease of purchasing weapons in the US have effectively fuelled criminal and extra-legal actors in the region, contributing to the commission of crimes and serious human rights violations.[21]

In 2020, the UNODC's Global Study on Firearms Trafficking described the main global transnational firearms trafficking flows. Among several routes and trends, it found a pattern of arms trafficking that went from the US to Mexico, and then spread to other Central American countries and several Caribbean islands.[22] Based on the number of firearm seizures, the UNODC found that Central and South America, together with parts of West Asia, account for more than 80% of firearms trafficking destinations.[23]

One of the UNODC's key findings was that, although the arms trade is a largely intercontinental business, transnational trafficking flows appear to be concentrated within continents. In the Americas, North America tends to be the main departing subregion, flooding Central America and the Caribbean with firearms that also leak to South American organized crime. The study also found that Europe was the only subregion where most firearms were predominantly intended for intercontinental trafficking. This means that the role of the Caribbean as a destination for trafficked or diverted weapons is largely unexplored.

The trends above pose a problem for which current domestic policies may find important limitations. In addition, cooperation to address the issue of firearms trafficking and diversion has been largely underdeveloped in regional and global frameworks. The main global frameworks that address the issue of arms transfers as a source of trafficking are the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT); the Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials (CIFTA); and the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their

Parts and Components and Ammunition (Firearms Protocol), supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC).

The Firearms Protocol imposes more robust and mandatory obligations on cooperation and control of arms trafficking. The ATT and CIFTA are weaker in enforcement and mostly encourage cooperation, often conditioned by national sovereignty or laws (see Figure 1).

LEGAL FRAMEWORK	LEGAL NATURE AND SCOPE OF OBLIGATIONS	COOPERATION AND INFORMATION SHARING	ENFORCEMENT AND COMPLIANCE
Firearms Protocol	▪ Legally binding with relatively strong obligations for state parties. ▪ Requires states to criminalize illicit manufacturing and trafficking. ▪ Demands marking, record-keeping, and licensing systems for transfers.	Mandatory cooperation and information exchange, especially in law enforcement contexts (Articles 12–13).	Part of the broader UNTOC framework, with stronger reporting and peer review mechanisms.
Arms Trade Treaty	▪ Legally binding, but more focused on the regulation of international transfers (exports, imports and transit). ▪ Encourages responsible behavior rather than strict prohibitions.	▪ Cooperation and information exchange is only required 'where appropriate and feasible' (Article 11[3]). ▪ Cooperation is encouraged but subject to national laws, i.e., not mandatory.	Has a voluntary reporting mechanism and encourages best practices, but lacks enforcement power.
CIFTA	▪ Regional treaty, legally binding for OAS members. ▪ Similar in structure to the Firearms Protocol, but with a regional scope.	▪ Calls for exchange of information, cooperation and technical assistance, but the wording is less prescriptive than the Firearms Protocol. ▪ Conditioned by domestic legal frameworks.	Has some institutional follow-up (e.g., meetings of state parties), but no binding enforcement.

FIGURE 1 The main global legal frameworks for arms trafficking and their approach to cooperation.

The scale and dynamics of illicit firearms trafficking across LAC underscore both the inadequacy of domestic regulatory approaches and the persistent gaps in regional and global cooperation. Existing instruments, while normatively significant, remain uneven in implementation and weak in enforcement, leaving national authorities and regional organizations ill-equipped to respond to the scale of the challenge. These structural limitations highlight the urgent need for more coherent, coordinated, and actionable policy responses – both at the national and multilateral levels. The following section will address this through concrete recommendations.

Trends and challenges

The proliferation of illicit firearms in Latin America and the Caribbean has become a central driver of insecurity. While national contexts vary, the region is shaped by a number of shared dynamics, as explored below.

Spillover from permissive firearms regimes

The expiration of the US federal ban on assault weapons and large-capacity magazines[24] in 2004 has had ripple effects well beyond the country's borders. Domestically, mass shooting fatalities were 70% less likely during the federal ban period.[25] And internationally, US-origin firearms – many purchased legally and trafficked within a year – now fuel insecurity throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

In Mexico, where legal access to firearms is tightly restricted, in 2023 nearly 70% of homicides involved guns.[26] Between January and July 2024, 57% of US-sourced firearms recovered in Mexico originated in Arizona.[27] By contrast, states such as California, which have stricter gun laws, generate fewer recently purchased weapons that end up across the border.[28]

In Central America, US-origin arms are also prevalent. From 2015 to 2019, they made up 17.5% of firearms recovered and traced in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Belize. Guatemala alone accounted for 42% of the region's legal firearms imports in 2008, and US exports of pistols to the country nearly quadrupled between 2015 and 2023.[29]

In the Caribbean, the problem is just as acute. According to data from the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, 99.2% of firearms seized in the Bahamas were traced back to the United States.[30] In Haiti, nearly all illicit weapons are of US origin. However, regional neighbours, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and the Dominican Republic, also serve as transit points or secondary sources.[31]

Diversification of criminal economies through armed violence

The increased availability of firearms enables criminal organizations to diversify far beyond drug trafficking. For example, in Tijuana, Mexico, extortion and racketeering are sustained by the capacity to credibly threaten violence. Guns are tools not only of enforcement, but of reputation, used to maintain dominance over victims and territory.[32]

In Central America, extortion and human trafficking and smuggling are all bolstered by firearm access.[33] This diversification is closely tied to political volatility, as armed groups gain influence where the state is weak or absent.

In the Caribbean, the interconnection between the drug trade and firearms trafficking is stark. Trinidad and Tobago has become a key trans-shipment point for drugs – particularly cocaine – headed to Europe.[34] Exchanges of guns for drugs between Haiti and Jamaica further entrench these dual economies.[35]

In Haiti, this convergence has culminated in the collapse of state authority. Armed gangs, empowered by superior weaponry, have outmatched Haiti's police forces and the Multinational Security Support mission led by Kenya, driving Haiti to the brink of chaos.[36]

Institutional erosion and regulatory gaps

Firearms trafficking is exacerbated by weak institutions, ineffective regulation and the proliferation of unregulated actors. In Guatemala, the private security sector exemplifies this dynamic. Alhough official estimates cite 45 000 private guards, the real number may exceed 150 000 – far outpacing police forces.[37] These groups are lightly regulated and often armed, representing a diversion risk and a security liability.

In the Caribbean, border control remains a key weakness. Few states possess sufficient maritime capabilities to intercept arms traffickers using private yachts, fishing vessels or charter boats. Only the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas maintain relatively strong interdiction forces.

Meanwhile, artisanal and locally modified firearms are increasingly common in both rural and urban areas, particularly where legal enforcement is weakest. This compounds the threat posed by transnational flows, creating hybrid markets of legal, diverted and improvised weapons.

New technologies enabling the manufacture of 3D-printed guns – in both commercial and artisanal settings – have also upended the regulatory landscape. While this phenomenon is already well-documented in the US, emerging evidence indicates that it is beginning to spread to parts of the Caribbean.[38] This dynamic coincides with an even more alarming trend: the increasing influx, at minimal cost, of conversion devices from the US that enable handguns to be modified into fully automatic weapons.

Humanitarian and gender-based impacts

Firearms trafficking has devastating human consequences, particularly for vulnerable populations. The Caribbean records some of the highest violent death rates globally.

Gender-based violence is rising alongside overall insecurity. In CARICOM countries, the violent death rate among women was 1.7 per 100 000 in 2019, far exceeding the global average (0.54).[39] Firearms serve as tools of coercion and control in intimate settings. Their presence significantly increases the risk of psychological, physical and sexual violence, and increases the likelihood of intimate partner violence taking place in private and public spaces.

In Haiti, the expansion of criminal groups has given rise to mass sexual violence and feminicide, with armed gangs using rape as a weapon of terror and control.[40] In Jamaica, states of emergency and military deployments are now regular responses to gang-related violence, including gender-based violence and femicide.[41]

There is especially a need to focus on the impact of firearms trafficking on women in non-conflict areas given that armed violence has differentiated and adjacent non-lethal impacts on women, such as sexual and psychological violence, or the perpetuation of gender stereotypes associated with notions of manhood based on women's subordination.[42]

This humanitarian toll is aggravated by entrenched gender norms and systemic impunity. In many LAC contexts, laws and institutions fail to adequately respond to violence against women, normalizing cycles of abuse and reinforcing criminal power.

Outdated legislation and porous borders

Many national firearms laws are outdated, leaving countries ill-equipped to address the rapidly evolving methods of trafficking and the use of new devices. Governments must focus on investigating key entry points (ports, maritime routes and land crossings) and improve their ability to trace firearms. Enhancing forensic capabilities with advanced technologies, such as x-ray systems, is also essential.

Looking at gun violence through the lens of public health is gaining traction in the Caribbean, helping to shift the focus toward preventive measures.[43] While firearm seizures are common, arrests often lag, leaving trafficking networks largely untouched. Stronger forensic investigations and law enforcement action are necessary for addressing this issue effectively.

Addressing the root causes of gun violence and the broader supply-and-demand dynamics is also important. Acknowledging the importance of international cooperation and tailored solutions that account

for each country's unique context are key. Building advisory committees at the national level could help ensure that these solutions are relevant and effective.

Collaboration between countries is necessary to ensure the effective use of firearms tracing data. Collecting information is valuable, but without transparency on how this data is applied, it becomes less effective. Strengthening the process by which this information disrupts trafficking networks and dismantles criminal groups is fundamental.

Lack of accountability in the private sector

The private sector plays a crucial role in the firearms trade. Private security companies and the broader arms commerce sector must be held accountable for their contribution to fuelling violence. Arms trade practices must be transparent, regulated and held to high standards to prevent illegal activities. Governments should hold private companies accountable for any involvement in the illicit trade, as these organizations often influence the flow of firearms into criminal networks. Moreover, European countries must be held accountable for their role in the firearms trade.[44] This is a global issue, and European manufacturers and companies must be held responsible for their involvement in supplying firearms to criminal networks in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Reporting obligations are not always complied with and often include vague and imprecise information. Moreover, many of these reports are published late. Late reporting renders any attempt to challenge an export licence useless, in cases where a single shipment can change and fuel conflict-affected areas or entire communities. Some states report information promptly or report on a monthly basis, yet this information will often miss key data such as the identity of the end-user or the arms exporter, or the authorization for re-export to other destinations, blurring the supply chain and the corporate actors profiting from arms transfers.

BUILDING A REGIONAL ROADMAP

No single country or organization can resolve this issue alone. Building on existing work by the OAS, CARICOM IMPACS, UNLIREC and Small Arms Survey, the recommendations set forth in this brief seek to inform a unified regional solution. By tackling the trafficking of firearms and their diversion, violence can be reduced, and the cycle of crime that drains the region's resources and stymies development can be broken. By cultivating partnerships between governments, civil society, law enforcement and the private sector, the region can begin dismantling the criminal networks that threaten its future.

As this brief outlines, such progress is possible and within reach. A foundation already exists in regional cooperation mechanisms, growing civil society engagement and political momentum in key countries. What is now needed is the sustained commitment to operationalize this vision, through shared responsibility, inclusive governance and a concerted push to build a path toward sustainable security.

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