



PACIFIC COUNCIL ON  
INTERNATIONAL POLICY

**MEXICO INITIATIVE**

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# **THE U.S.- MEXICO DOUBLE FIX:**

# COMBATING THE FLOW OF GUNS TO TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. and Mexico are grappling with daunting security crises stemming from the trafficking of hundreds of thousands of guns over the U.S. southern border every year. These weapons are empowering Mexican transnational criminal organizations and inflicting substantial suffering in both countries. This report underscores how reducing cross-border gun trafficking is crucial for achieving the goals of the U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities —a bilateral security agreement announced nearly two years ago. By implementing our recommendations, the U.S. and Mexico can more effectively combat illicit gun flows, saving lives and improving prosperity.

## THE STAKES

U.S.-to-Mexico gun trafficking fuels many of the major security challenges faced by both nations. It has contributed to drug trafficking and abuse, leading to an unprecedented number of U.S. drug overdose deaths in 2021. In Mexico, U.S. guns have undermined legitimate government authority and facilitated historic levels of armed violence, with the number of reported murders skyrocketing 75 percent between 2015 and 2022. The violence precipitated by the recipients of these guns has enabled human traffickers as record numbers of people from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean are forced to flee their communities and seek haven in the U.S.

## ADVANCING THE AGENDA

Since opening a new era of security cooperation under the Bicentennial Framework, the U.S. and Mexico have pledged to work together to disrupt and apprehend arms traffickers within U.S. borders. The U.S. has increased prosecutorial resources, moved to curtail ghost gun proliferation, and passed the

landmark Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which made gun trafficking and straw purchasing federal crimes. Mexico has created a presidential commission and a new law enforcement unit dedicated to strategic enforcement against firearms trafficking.

## CRITICAL GAPS

Interviews with U.S. and Mexican stakeholders made clear that there remain serious impediments to reducing U.S.-to-Mexico gun trafficking under the Bicentennial Framework. These impediments include constraints and limited information-sharing in relation to the tracing of recovered crime guns, weak U.S. restrictions on assault weapons and .50-caliber rifles, and insufficient resources for U.S. gun dealer compliance enforcement. The U.S. must intensify efforts against gun industry members complicit in illegal cross-border gun flows, and Mexico needs to curtail the diversion and illicit distribution of guns downstream. Metrics to evaluate bilateral efforts against gun trafficking are lacking, and this has hindered necessary evaluation. Because stakeholders in the U.S. often lack comprehensive knowledge about the areas of responsibility of agencies in Mexico, and vice versa, there is a risk of confusion, miscommunication, and overlapping efforts.

## COUNTER-ARMS TRAFFICKING TOOLS

Effectively combating gun trafficking requires the U.S. and Mexico to avail themselves of a range of strategies. One crucial approach is the follow-the-guns methodology, which involves tracing recovered crime guns back through their supply chains to uncover routes, channels, and methods used in U.S.-to-Mexico gun trafficking. A whole-of-government approach requires the U.S. to create a central authority to ensure a shared strategic vision, effective prioritization, innovation, and systematic coordination to address gun trafficking. Subnational participation in both countries is key for streamlining the implementation of federal programs and effecting tailored solutions that address regional challenges. Export and import controls — including end-use monitoring — need to be strengthened to prevent legal U.S. gun exports to Mexico from being diverted to criminals and rogue security forces.

Additionally, adopting a comprehensive approach that includes Central American and Caribbean countries is essential, as they face interconnected challenges related to illicit U.S. arms flows and TCOs. Aligning with human rights norms and global arms instruments is also vital, as U.S. gun policies have impacts beyond its borders, and committing to international agreements can help prevent illegal guns from reaching the wrong hands globally. Finally, case studies on arms trafficking challenges can inform policy-making and foster stronger U.S.-Mexico cooperation.



IMAGE VIA AFP/GETTY IMAGES

## LOOKING FORWARD

The U.S. and Mexican governments have pledged to consider new methods, tools, and technologies for addressing bilateral security challenges. During the Bicentennial Framework’s policy process, both countries should prioritize transparency and the public release of data to ensure opportunities for academics, civil society organizations, and other external stakeholders to provide recommendations against illicit arms proliferation and ensure efficient implementation of gun trafficking prevention initiatives.

External stakeholders should consider engaging in collaborative activities — such as open-source monitoring and reporting — to increase understanding of firearms trafficking, diversion, and misuse. Collaborative activities could play a pivotal role in capacity-building efforts and assistance for institutional reforms and transparency. By promoting accountability and the rule of law, external stakeholders can help thwart the diversion of guns to criminals and rogue security forces, curtailing the pervasive influence of corruption and impunity.



*A cross reading “No Mas Muertes” (No More Deaths) marks an unknown grave site in Terrace Park Cemetery in Holtville, California. The cemetery holds the remains of hundreds of unidentified migrants who died while making the treacherous journey from Mexico. Photo by Tish Lampert.*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

To reduce U.S.-to-Mexico gun trafficking, both countries must address four core responsibilities:

1. Foster robust alignment and coordination among relevant policy, enforcement, and intelligence agencies within each nation to ensure effective binational collaboration.
2. Enhance forensics, data sharing, and analysis capabilities to facilitate targeted interventions against criminal networks involved in arms trafficking.
3. Intensify efforts to increase accountability in the U.S. gun industry and address contributing factors to arms diversion throughout the entire arms supply chain.
4. Robustly support preventative strategies that encourage the active participation of subnational-level actors, civil society, and the private sector.



*A husband and wife embrace after Border Patrol guards open a gate along the U.S. southwest border so families torn apart by deportation can spend a few minutes together as part of the “Door of Hope” program in November 2017. Photo by Tish Lampert.*

# CONTACT

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