



Violence Policy Center

1730 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Suite 1014
Washington, DC 20036

202.822.8200 voice
202.822.8205 fax
www.vpc.org web

Why Military-Style Guns Flow From the United States to Mexico

What Is the Crisis?

Transnational criminal organizations are waging brutal wars for control of lucrative criminal trade throughout the Western Hemisphere. These violent criminals commit murder, kidnapping, extortion, and traffic in everything from drugs to human beings. Huge numbers of military-style weapons smuggled from the United States civilian market enable these outlaws to fight major battles in the streets against each other and to confront legitimate governments with indiscriminate and ruthless armed violence.

Mexico has suffered more than any other country from these criminal wars. Ordinary citizens are not only being killed and injured. They are being robbed of their basic human rights, the right to live in peace, with dignity and control over their lives, free from fear. Public institutions such as the news media are being beaten into silence. Young men and women are being enticed or forced into working for these criminals. The proud fabric of Mexican life is being destroyed.

Why Do Guns Come From the U.S.?

Military-style guns come from the United States because it is the easiest and cheapest place in the world to get them. The United States civilian gun market is an armory for violent criminals, terrorists, and extremists of every type operating in Mexico and throughout the Western Hemisphere. The combination of (1) a deliberate strategy of the U.S. gun industry to design and sell military-style weapons to civilians, and (2) weak gun laws, has made the United States the only country in the world where virtually anyone who is not a convicted felon can legally buy large numbers of newly manufactured military weapons and ammunition at low prices on the civilian market.

The gun industry – working through organizations like the National Rifle Association and the National Shooting Sports Foundation – has emasculated the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the federal regulatory agency in charge of gun regulation. The industry has cowed local, state, and federal politicians and other regulatory agencies into silence.

The result is that huge numbers of military style weapons quickly flow from their first legal purchase into the hands of violent criminal gangs, drug traffickers, and other transnational criminal groups. Organized smuggling rings – gun traffickers – are at the heart of this traffic.

According to ATF, the Government of Mexico recovered and submitted more than 99,000 firearms to ATF for tracing in the years 2007 through 2011. Of those, the vast majority – more than 68,000 – were sourced to the United States.

Which Weapons Are Most Coveted by Gun Traffickers?

Gun traffickers are outfitting criminal organizations for war: wars for control of criminal trade, confrontation against governments, and intimidation of the people. They thus seek out weapons designed for war. The types of guns and accessories most sought after in the United States by traffickers are:

- Semiautomatic assault weapons, including assault rifles and a new breed of assault pistols;
- High-powered 50 BMG sniper rifles;
- Armor-piercing and other high-capacity pistols; and,
- Large stockpiles of ammunition and high-capacity ammunition magazines.

What Are Assault Weapons and How Are They Different From Traditional Firearms?

Assault weapons – such as the AK-47 and the AR-15 – are semi-automatic (firing one bullet per trigger pull) versions of fully automatic (firing as many bullets as are contained in the ammunition magazine long as the trigger is depressed) guns that are designed for modern combat. They include specific features to enable the shooter to kill or wound large numbers of people at medium or close range by spraying or “hosing down” a killing zone. The key features of assault weapons are:

- Ability to accept a high-capacity detachable ammunition magazine (up to 100 rounds), which allows a single shooter to saturate an area without reloading and, if necessary, quickly reload with a full magazine.
- Rear pistol and forward grips (sometimes in the form of ammunition magazines, thumbhole stocks, and heat-shielding devices on the barrel). These allow the shooter to fire many rounds from the hip, as opposed to slower and more careful fire from the shoulder.

Traditional sporting guns, in contrast, typically hold only three to five rounds of ammunition, and are designed to be primarily fired from the shoulder at a slower and more precise pace.

In April 2012, ATF reported that “AK and AR variants with detachable magazines, are used more frequently to commit violent crime by drug trafficking organizations.”

What Are Sniper Rifles?

Sniper rifles are designed and carefully manufactured to be able to precisely hit relatively small targets at very long distances. The 50 caliber anti-armor sniper rifle is a uniquely powerful type of sniper rifle that is especially favored by criminal organizations and thus sought after by gun traffickers in the United States. The Barrett line of 50 caliber anti-armor rifles is the most popular among smugglers, but the rifles of other makers are also among those trafficked to Mexico.

The 50 caliber anti-armor sniper rifle was invented and specifically designed to destroy materiel targets – such as aircraft and light-armor vehicles – at very long ranges. These rifles are far and away more powerful than any other shoulder-fired rifle ever made. They can accurately hit and blast through an

inch-thick plate of steel from a distance of 2,000 yards. The bullets easily cut through law enforcement vehicles and body armor. They have been used to kill human beings at ranges of a mile and a half and more.

What Are Semiautomatic High-Capacity Pistols?

High-capacity pistols are semiautomatic handguns that are designed to hold more than 10 rounds of ammunition in a single loading. Typical capacities range from 14 to 21 rounds, usually by inserting an ammunition magazine (sometimes called a “clip”) into the grip of the gun. When a shooter empties such a magazine, he can quickly insert a new one.

What Are High-Capacity Ammunition Magazines?

High-capacity magazines are detachable ammunition feeding devices for handguns and assault rifles. They include banana clips and drums. Handgun magazines hold as many as 33 rounds, while rifle magazines can provide as many as 100 rounds of ammunition in a single loading.

Why Do U.S. Manufacturers Make Assault Weapons, 50 BMG Sniper Rifles, and High-Capacity Pistols?

The civilian firearms industry in the United States has been in decline for several decades. Unlike many other consumer product industries, the gun industry has failed to keep up with population growth. Between 1980 and 2000, the U.S. population grew by 24 percent. Over the same period, total domestic small arms production fell by 33 percent. Gun ownership is steadily declining in the United States, especially among younger age groups.

Faced with the fact of its declining markets, the gun industry has turned to military designs and high-pressure marketing to ignite interest in its products. Although its executives are well aware of the problems of gun trafficking and gun violence, this cynical industry has no concern for the havoc its products wreak as long as it continues to profit. In fact, many observers believe that the industry needs – and counts on – the illegal traffic in guns to boost its sales.

How Do Guns Come From the U.S. to Mexico?

The main way in which guns travel from the United States to Mexico is through the organized and widely dispersed practice of “straw buying.” Gun traffickers induce persons in the United States who can legally buy guns to purchase military-style guns from gun dealers. These people are called “straw buyers” or “straw purchasers.” A given straw buyer may buy many guns from a single store, or a small number of guns from each of many stores, or by both means. The straw buyer hands over the guns to a trafficker and is paid a small bounty. The trafficker then arranges for the guns to be smuggled into Mexico in a variety of ways.

The Violence Policy has an ongoing project analyzing federal court prosecutions describing the methods used by traffickers to obtain firearms and smuggle them across the border. Straw buying is the primary tactic employed by in the vast majority of the 121 federal trafficking prosecutions the VPC has analyzed to date (see www.vpc.org/indictedesp.htm for Spanish and www.vpc.org/indicted.htm for English).

What Can Be Done to Stop This?

There are a number of things the United States government can do to help stop this traffic and the violence it underwrites. The President could, without the need for congressional approval, ban the import into the United States of assault weapons and other military-style firearms from other countries, thus cutting off a stream of firearms which eventually ends in Mexico. Congress could enact a tough and effective ban on the manufacture and sale of all assault weapons. Congress and the President could take steps to strengthen overall regulation of the gun industry, including restrictions on specific gun designs. Much tougher laws on the sale of all guns would weed out “straw buyers” and the negligent or criminal dealers who sell to them. Enforcement agencies and prosecutors can be given improved and more effective tools to prosecute gun traffickers and their straw buyers, and to shut down corrupt gun dealers. Litigation targeting the worst actors in the gun industry is also an option for private individuals harmed by gun trafficking.

For more information on these and other gun violence issues, please visit the Violence Policy Center’s website at www.vpc.org and the “Gun Trafficking” section of the site at www.vpc.org/trafficking.htm.