

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-223](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Violent crimes committed by drug trafficking organizations in Mexico often involve firearms, and a 2009 GAO report found that many of these firearms originated in the United States. ATF and ICE have sought to stem firearms trafficking from the United States to Mexico.

GAO was asked to undertake a follow-up review to its 2009 report ([GAO-09-709](#)) addressing these issues. This report examines, among other things, (1) the origin of firearms seized in Mexico that have been traced by ATF, (2) the extent to which collaboration among U.S. agencies combating firearms trafficking has improved, and (3) the extent to which the *National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy* measures progress by U.S. agencies to stem firearms trafficking to Mexico. To address these objectives, GAO analyzed program information and firearms tracing data from 2009 to 2014, and met with U.S. and Mexican officials on both sides of the border.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Attorney General of the United States take steps to formally monitor implementation of the 2009 MOU between ATF and ICE. GAO also recommends that ONDCP establish comprehensive indicators that more accurately reflect progress made in efforts to stem arms trafficking to Mexico. The Departments of Homeland Security and Justice, and ONDCP agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-16-223](#). For more information, contact Jessica Farb at (202) 512-6991 or farbj@gao.gov.

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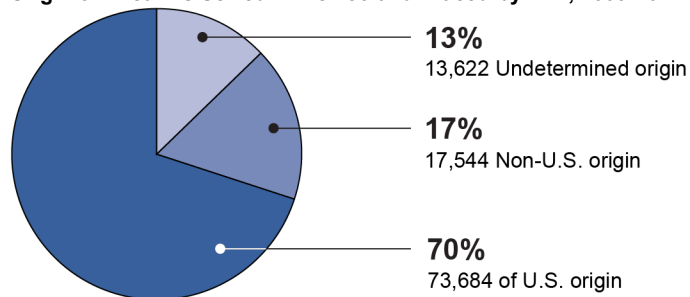
FIREARMS TRAFFICKING

U.S. Efforts to Combat Firearms Trafficking to Mexico Have Improved, but Some Collaboration Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

According to data from the Department of Justice's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), 73,684 firearms (about 70 percent) seized in Mexico and traced from 2009 to 2014 originated in the United States. ATF data also show that these firearms were most often purchased in Southwest border states and that about half of them were long guns (rifles and shotguns). According to Mexican government officials, high caliber rifles are the preferred weapon used by drug trafficking organizations. According to ATF data, most were purchased legally in gun shops and at gun shows in the United States, and then trafficked illegally to Mexico. U.S. and Mexican law enforcement officials also noted a new complicating factor in efforts to fight firearms trafficking is that weapons parts are being transported to Mexico to be later assembled into finished firearms, an activity that is much harder to track.

Origin of Firearms Seized in Mexico and Traced by ATF, 2009-2014



Source: GAO analysis of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. | [GAO-16-223](#)

Note: These figures reflect firearms seized by Mexican authorities and traced by ATF, not all firearms seized in Mexico.

In 2009, GAO reported duplicative initiatives, and jurisdictional conflicts between ATF and the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). That year, in response to GAO's recommendations on these problems, ATF and ICE updated an interagency memorandum of understanding (MOU) to improve collaboration. ATF and ICE have taken several steps since then to improve coordination on efforts to combat firearms trafficking, such as joint training exercises and conferences to ensure that agents are aware of the MOU and its jurisdictional parameters and collaboration requirements. However, GAO found that ATF and ICE do not regularly monitor the implementation of the MOU. In the absence of a mechanism to monitor MOU implementation and ensure that appropriate coordination is taking place between the two agencies, GAO found that gaps in information sharing and misunderstandings related to their roles and responsibilities persist.

The indicator used to track U.S. agencies' efforts to stem firearms trafficking to Mexico in the Office of National Drug Control Policy's (ONDCP) *National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy*, by itself, does not adequately measure progress. ONDCP tracks progress based on the number of arms seized in Mexico and traced to the United States; however, this number does not reflect the total volume of firearms trafficked from the United States, and it does not take into account other key supporting agency actions and activities as measures.