

CHAPTER 3

THE NATURE OF FIREARMS TRAFFICKING

Chapter overview

This chapter analyses the nature of firearms trafficking, starting by considering the prices paid for firearms in illicit markets around the world. The illicit nature of firearms markets makes prices generally higher than for firearms bought regularly, although there are some exceptions for some types of firearms in certain geographical locations where the licit markets compete with lower prices in the illegal market. The chapter then looks at the different ways that firearms can be trafficked between different locations, both across international borders and within countries, before finally looking more closely at trafficking within some selected countries with known, sizable domestic firearms trafficking flows.

Due to the considerable risk and costs involved in supplying illicit firearms, in most parts of the world, the illicit prices of firearms are usually significantly higher than the licit price. There are, however, some notable exceptions. In some parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, the illicit prices were found to be lower than the licit price, specifically for handguns, which might be due to their easy availability in the illicit market. Looking at specific firearms types, user preferences also seem to play a role. For example, in some of these countries, revolvers are reportedly less expensive in illicit markets than pistols, and the primary reason appears to be that criminals prefer pistols.

Trafficking of firearms can be carried out by using different strategies, chosen on the basis of the perceived risk of detection, ease of concealment, feasibility of large payloads and geographical conditions. For transnational trafficking, the vigour of border controls along the trafficking route is another important factor. Regardless of strategy, seizures that are associated with trafficking tend to involve larger numbers of firearms per case than those not related to trafficking (and related to illicit possession, for example).

Seizures at borders comprise on average less than 10 per cent of firearms seizures at the national level. In other words, more than 9 in 10 seizures take place within the national territory.¹ Even though seizures at the borders are in the minority, they shed considerable light on transnational illicit flows. For example, they reveal that while the number of cases involving customs-related seizures from vessels is relatively low, each case involved nearly 20 seized weapons. On the other hand, seizures from vehicles accounted for three quarters of all the customs-related seizure cases, but fewer than two firearms were seized per case, on average. There is also a clear distinction between

1 Throughout this report, the term “within national territory”, in reference to seizures, excludes seizures made at borders. See also glossary.

the detection of incoming and outgoing flows. Most weapons are seized on an incoming, rather than outgoing, route, suggesting that the level of scrutiny exercised by customs authorities tends to be higher with regard to incoming firearms. It may also be indicative of existing forms of informal cooperation and information exchange between countries leading to seizures (and capture of suspects) in the country of arrival.

It appears that trafficking by land is the most commonly used mode of firearms trafficking. While information is scarce, several countries highlighted trafficking by land; either in road vehicles which may have been modified for this purpose, in packages or deliveries, or by persons on foot. Cross-border trafficking of firearms sometimes takes the form of so-called “ant-trafficking”, by which the illicit flow involves numerous individuals transporting one or a small number of firearms in order to lower the risk of detection. This mode may not be predominant at the global level, but it might be significant along certain routes.

Illicit movements of firearms within given countries can only be gleaned through sub-national-level seizure data. Such data were available for some countries in Central America, where it appears that violent crime is a key driver of demand for firearms. Moreover, seizures are also markedly higher in many border and port areas, as well as in

areas with high levels of trade activity. Sub-national data from the United States showed that more than 70 per cent of traced seized weapons had been purchased in the state where they were seized.

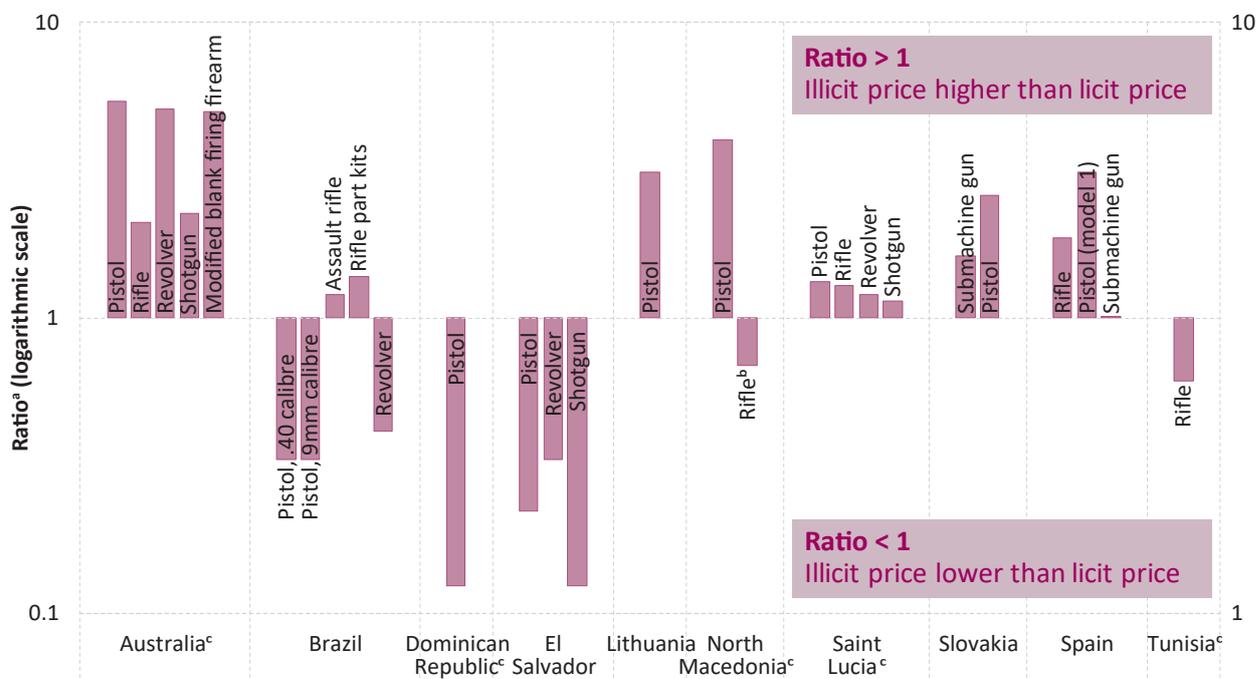
Based on seizures, transnational trafficking flows seem to be mostly concentrated within continents with the notable exceptions of inter-regional flows from Northern America and Europe. Northern America, Europe and Western Asia together accounted for almost all departure points of trafficking in 2016-17, while Central and South America together with West Asia accounted for more than 80 per cent of the trafficking destinations.

Prices of firearms in illicit markets

Further insight into firearms trafficking can be obtained from prices of firearms on the black market, as well as the way these relate to licit prices. Some countries provided prices of the same, or comparable, types of firearm in both the licit and illicit markets, and also - where possible - on distinguishing features, such as condition or model.

In most cases, the firearm price follows what happens in other regulatory markets: prices are distinctly higher in the illegal market than in the legal market. There are, however, remarkable exceptions in some geographical locations with firearm prices lower in the illegal market, suggesting that in these locations either the illicit supply is much higher

FIG. 1 Ratio of illicit to licit prices of firearms, by country, 2016-17



^a A ratio larger than 1 means that the price on the illicit market was higher than the corresponding price (for the same type of firearm) than the price on the licit market. A ratio smaller than 1 means that the price on the illicit market was lower.

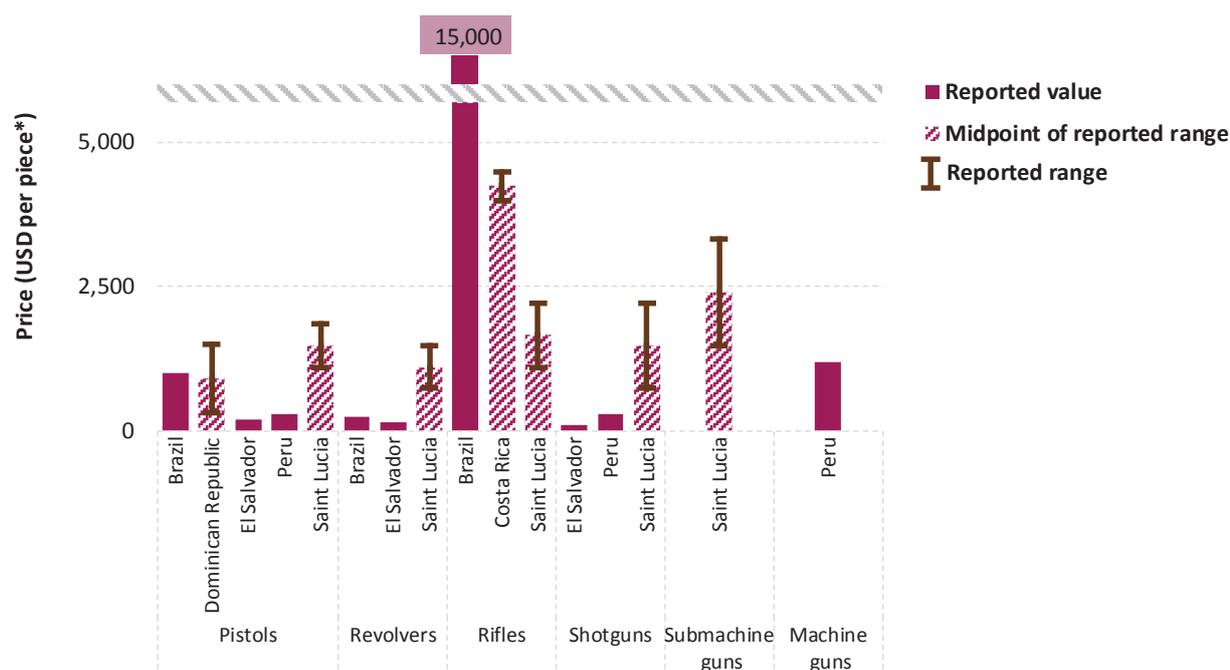
^b For North Macedonia, the same model of rifle was not available in the licit market; the comparison is based on a similar model.

^c For Australia, Dominican Republic, North Macedonia, Saint Lucia and Tunisia the ratio is based on the midpoint of the reported price ranges.

Note: Only data where price was available for comparable models of firearms in both the licit and illicit markets are included.

Source: UNODC IAFQ.

FIG. 2 Price of firearms in the illicit market reported by countries in the Americas, 2016-17



* Converted from original currency using UN exchange rates.

Source: UNODC IAFQ.

than the licit supply, or that there is not enough interdiction to raise the price in the illegal supply-chain. One example of these exceptions is the low price of certain types of firearm, mainly handguns, in the illegal market in Latin America and the Caribbean. In Brazil, this consisted mainly of .32 and .38 calibre revolvers manufactured between 1960 and 1997 (the year of the first law on firearms in Brazil) as well as 9mm and .40 calibre pistols. Brazil explained the relatively low prices in terms of the ample supply. The revolvers reportedly originated partly in Brazil and partly in the United States, while pistols were mainly trafficked into Brazil through Paraguay, following importation from several countries. In May 2018, imports of arms and ammunition into Paraguay were suspended.²

The higher comparative price of assault rifles in Brazil suggests that there is a certain demand there for this type of firearm. The reported black market price is significantly higher than in other countries, and also significantly higher than the price of other firearms in Brazil: around US\$15,000 for an assault rifle, and around \$12,500 for 5.56mm calibre part kits. However, these prices remained only moderately higher than the corresponding licit prices in Brazil. Such weapons and related part kits were only licitly available in Brazil to a restricted group of authorized individuals – shooters, hunters and collectors.

Comparing prices in illicit markets across countries, it appears that revolvers are less expensive than pistols in the three countries in Latin America and the Caribbean where the prices of both arms were available.

In general, firearms prices were relatively low in the illicit market in El Salvador and Peru.

In Africa, prices in the illicit market were relatively low in Kenya, including prices of high-powered weapons such as battle rifles and assault rifles. In Libya, the black market price of an assault rifle was uncharacteristically low in comparison with other types of firearms.

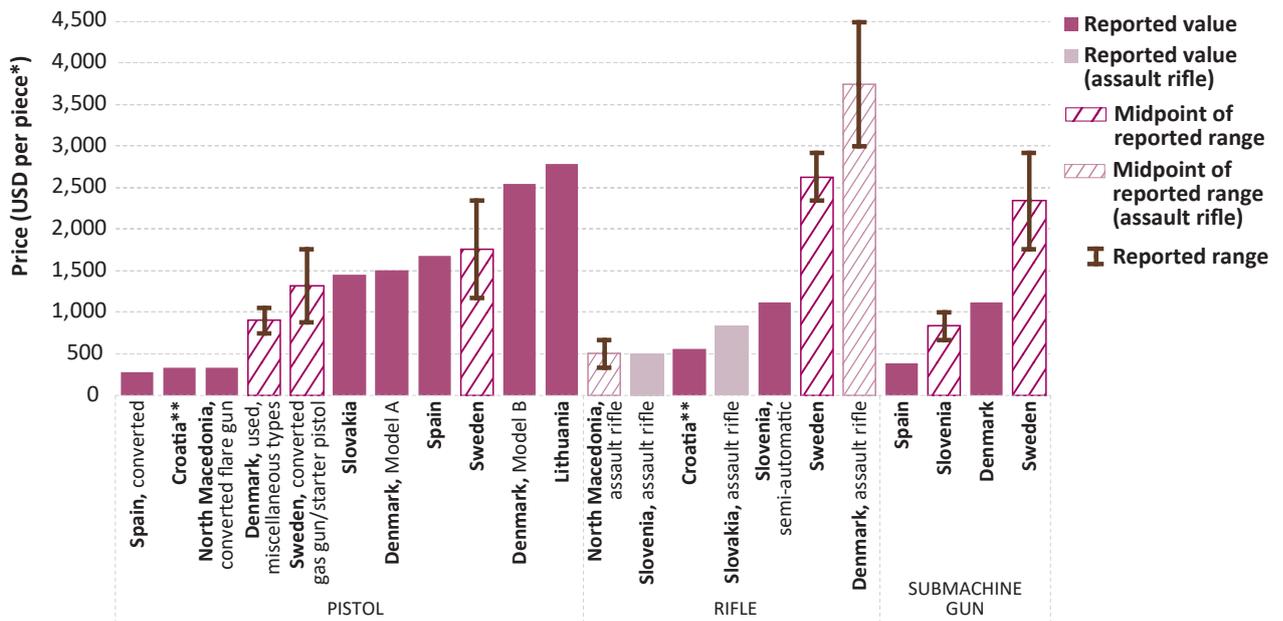
In general, the price data suggest that pistols are frequently available in the illicit market in a wide range of forms, and that, while criminals are willing to resort to converted firearms, they still have a preference for industrially manufactured firearms, with niche demand for different kinds of industrially manufactured pistols. This pattern was most pronounced in Europe. For example, a converted pistol in Spain was about six times cheaper than a reactivated pistol, suggesting lower demand for converted as compared to reactivated pistols. In Sweden, a converted starting/gas pistol was reported to cost approximately US\$870-1,750,³ as opposed to \$1,170-2,340⁴ for an original pistol. In Denmark, three different prices were reported for pistols, with

² Agencia de Información Paraguaya, Ministerio de Tecnologías de la Información y Comunicación, *Dimabel suspende importación de armas y municiones para controlar el mercado interno*, 23 May 2018 (available at: <https://www.ip.gov.py/ip/dimabel-suspende-importacion-de-armas-y-municiones-para-controlar-el-mercado-interno/>).

³ 7,500-15,000 SEK converted into US\$ dollars using average UN official exchange rates for 2016-17.

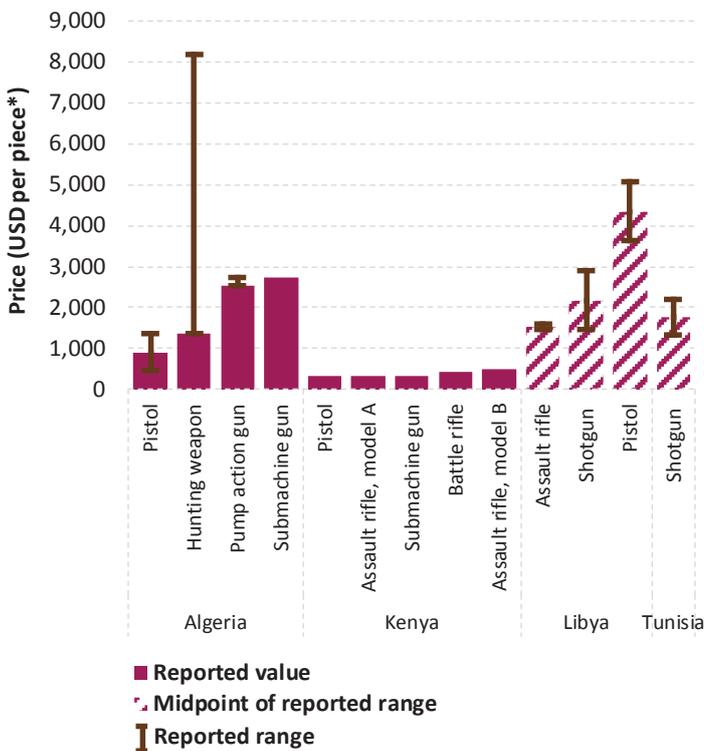
⁴ 10,000-20,000 SEK, converted into US\$ dollars using average UN official exchange rates for 2016-17.

FIG. 3 Price of firearms in the illicit market reported by countries in Europe, 2016-17



* Converted from original currency using UN exchange rates.
 ** Prices for Croatia represent a lower bound.
 Model A and Model B refer to two distinct models from the same manufacturer.
 Source: UNODC IAFQ.

FIG. 4 Price of firearms in the illicit market reported by countries in Africa, 2016-17



* Converted from original currency using UN exchange rates.
 Source: UNODC IAFQ.

used pistols being the least expensive and a specific, smaller model of pistol – which is easier to conceal and carry – the most expensive.

With regard to rifles, a notable difference could be seen between the prices of rifles (including assault rifles) in illicit markets in the Western Balkans and in Northern Europe, pointing to the potential of the Western Balkans as a source region for these firearms. Notably, the price of a rifle in the illicit Slovak market was lower than the price for a pistol in the same country.

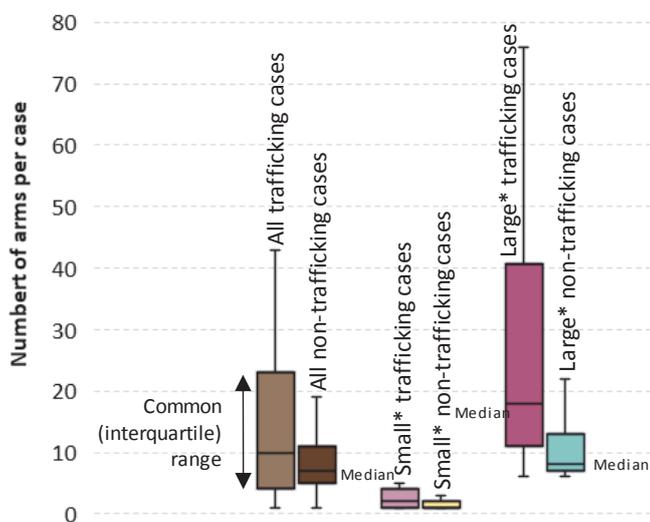
Beyond Europe, the wide range of prices for pistols is also conspicuous in the case of Australia, which reported a range of approximately US\$230-6,330⁵ for pistols on the illicit market, encompassing the illicit prices for all the other types of firearms (also reported as ranges), with the single exception of high prices of assault rifles reported from one jurisdiction in Australia.

Modalities of trafficking

Traffickers may resort to different strategies and techniques to transport firearms across borders or, domestically, from one location to another. Clearly many factors can influence these choices, such as the potential for detection, the ease of concealment, the degree of control exercised at borders, the feasibility of larger payloads and geographical convenience.

5 300-8,400 \$A, converted into US\$ using average UN official exchange rates for 2016-17.

FIG. 5 Number of arms seized in significant individual cases (common ranges¹), trafficking cases in comparison with other cases, 2016-17



¹ Interquartile range and full range, excluding outliers.

* A case is considered "small" if 5 arms or less were seized, "large" otherwise. This distinction is made in view of the fact that the threshold of more than 5 arms seized in a case was one of the criteria recommended in the questionnaire for the designation of a seizure case as "significant".

Note: Responses did not always specify whether the cases were trafficking cases or not. Such cases are not included.

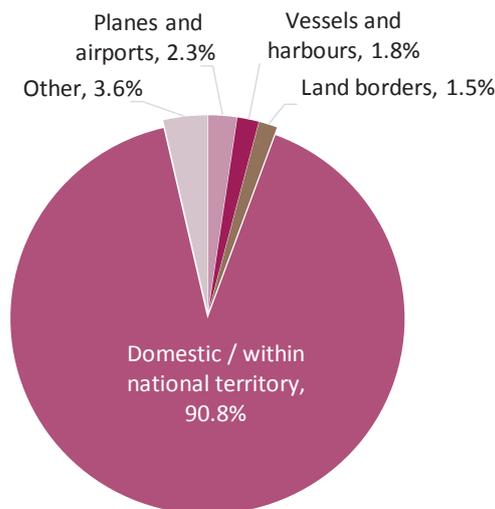
Source: UNODC IAFQ.

Seizures data can provide insights on these trafficking strategies, although it is important to bear in mind that not all seizures may be associated with trafficking or even with illicitly sourced firearms. Data on significant seizures reported on a case-by-case basis show that cases of trafficking tend to involve, on average, larger numbers of firearms per case than cases of firearms that may be stopped by the authorities for possession or other alleged offences. In general, the typical (median) number of arms per case was 10 for trafficking cases and 7 for non-trafficking cases. The difference is clearer when considering small (less than five firearms seized) and large (more than five firearms seized). For small seizures, the median of trafficking cases is 2 and for non-trafficking cases is 1. For large seizures the difference is more pronounced: 18 arms is the median for trafficking cases and 8 for non-trafficking cases (see Figure 59). However, the fact that the larger number of arms are seized may impact the likelihood that the seizure is designated as a case of trafficking.

Cross-border transportation (air/land/sea/mail) and modi operandi

Data reported on the type of location where arms were seized indicate that, on average, the overwhelming majority of arms are seized within the national territory (exclud-

FIG. 6 Average distribution* of arms seizures by type of location where they were seized, 2016-17



* Simple average of distributions for 51 countries, adjusted for seizures whose type of location was unknown or unclassified.

Source: UNODC IAFQ.

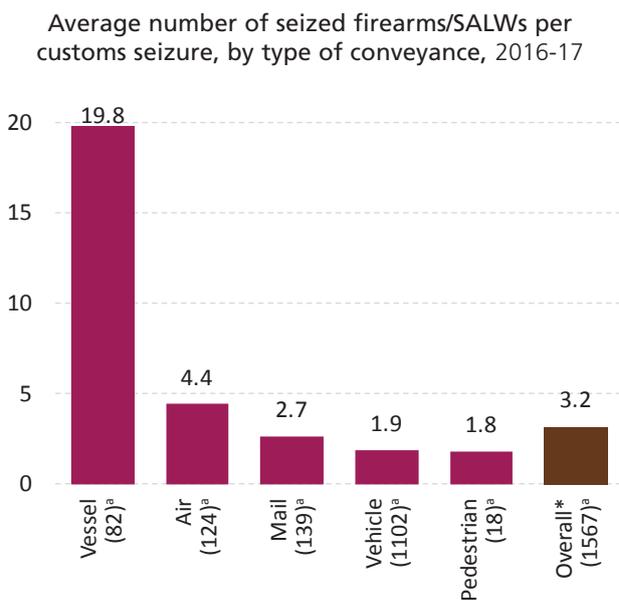
ing ports of entry). Cross-border seizures account, on average, for slightly less than 10 per cent, with the standard modes of air, sea and land transportation across borders typically each accounting for around 2 per cent of seizures. While some of these arms may have been trafficked into the country and only detected after having crossed the border, and some diverted domestically (as mentioned above) some seizures may not always be linked to trafficked, diverted or illicitly sourced firearms and, particularly for small seizures, they may relate to other offences, such as possession, which may be of an administrative nature.

Despite the fact that cross-border seizures are a minority of seized firearms, given their nature, they may be particularly revealing about transnational illicit flows. Based on seizures by customs authorities, there are clear differences across the types of conveyance in terms of the total number of arms seized per case, with seizures from vessels being on average more than five times larger than any other type of conveyance. At the same time, seizures from vehicles accounted for more than two thirds of seizure cases, suggesting that large illegal shipments tend to travel by sea while small shipments may be more common and tend to travel by land. Assigning resources to targeting vessels in law enforcement efforts could significantly impact the number of firearms intercepted.

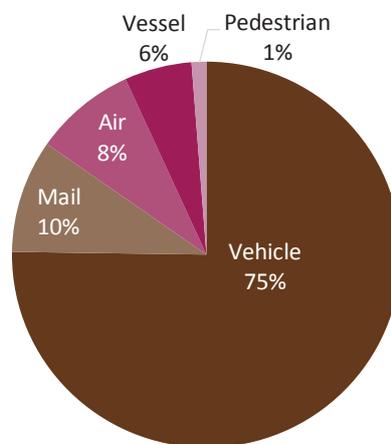
International firearms trafficking methods

More information on trafficking modes is available from the qualitative assessments provided by countries of the prevalent modes of transportation for trafficking across

FIG. 7 Type of conveyance in customs seizures in terms of size of seizure and number of seizure cases



Cases of firearms/SALWs** seized by customs authorities, by type of conveyance, 2016-17



* Includes 102 cases of other or unknown type of conveyance.

^a Number in brackets denotes number of cases.

Source: World Customs Organization.

** Cases of unknown type of conveyance are excluded.

borders. Countries distinguished land, maritime and air transportation, as well as mail and other forms of transportation.

In general, there is a clear distinction between the detection of incoming and outgoing flows, and most weapons are seized on an incoming, rather than outgoing, route. This suggests that the level of scrutiny exercised by customs authorities tends to be higher on incoming firearms.

Land borders

Trafficking by land was overall the mode of transportation most highlighted by countries. Libya, for example, reported that the most common routes for firearms trafficking was across its eastern, western and southern borders. Vehicles with false bottoms were used in Mexico and specific types of vehicles for firearms trafficking was reported by Costa Rica. Concealment and package delivery were mentioned as the most frequent modes of transportation in Paraguay. From Paraguay, firearms were trafficked to Brazil across the land border in cars, trucks and buses. Land border crossings were also used in Croatia, Slovenia and Denmark. Land borders were mainly crossed for trafficking purposes also in Albania, either by vehicles or on foot.

Planes and airports

Eight per cent of firearms seizure cases made by customs authorities involved trafficking by air with on average, 4 firearms per seizure. Out of 24 countries which reported

any cross-border seizures of arms, 16 had made some of these seizures in planes and airports. Brazil reported the detection of a large seizure case of 60 assault rifles, seized from incoming air freight. In Paraguay, all the arms seized in 2016⁶ were seized in connection with unauthorized importation attempts by air.

Vessels and harbours

A small number of countries mentioned cross-border trafficking by sea, but among these few reports, there were very large seizures. For example, Tunisia reported a seizure of 362 arms in the Port of La Goulette. Trafficking by sea could be done by hiding firearms in the vessels like was done in Tunisia where firearms were transported inside vehicles through seaports on board ships from the ports of Marseille (France) and Genoa (Italy). Another technique to cross the border avoiding the detection of customs was reported by the Philippines, whereby firearms were jettisoned from vessels at prearranged areas some distance from the shore and subsequently picked up by small boats. In addition, leakages in legitimate importations of firearms were used by traffickers, including some involving the use of private ports and wharves. In some cases, small boats were used to cross rivers and lakes like in Brazil where such border crossings reportedly happen across the Parana river and Itaipu lake. Another way to transport firearms across borders by sea was to use undeclared or mis-declared firearms, alongside other goods, addressed to fictitious names and addresses. In addition, parts and components of dismantled firearms could have been included within imported or exported metal items or parts of machinery.

6 Seizures in Paraguay amounted to 37 firearms in 2016. No data were available for 2017.

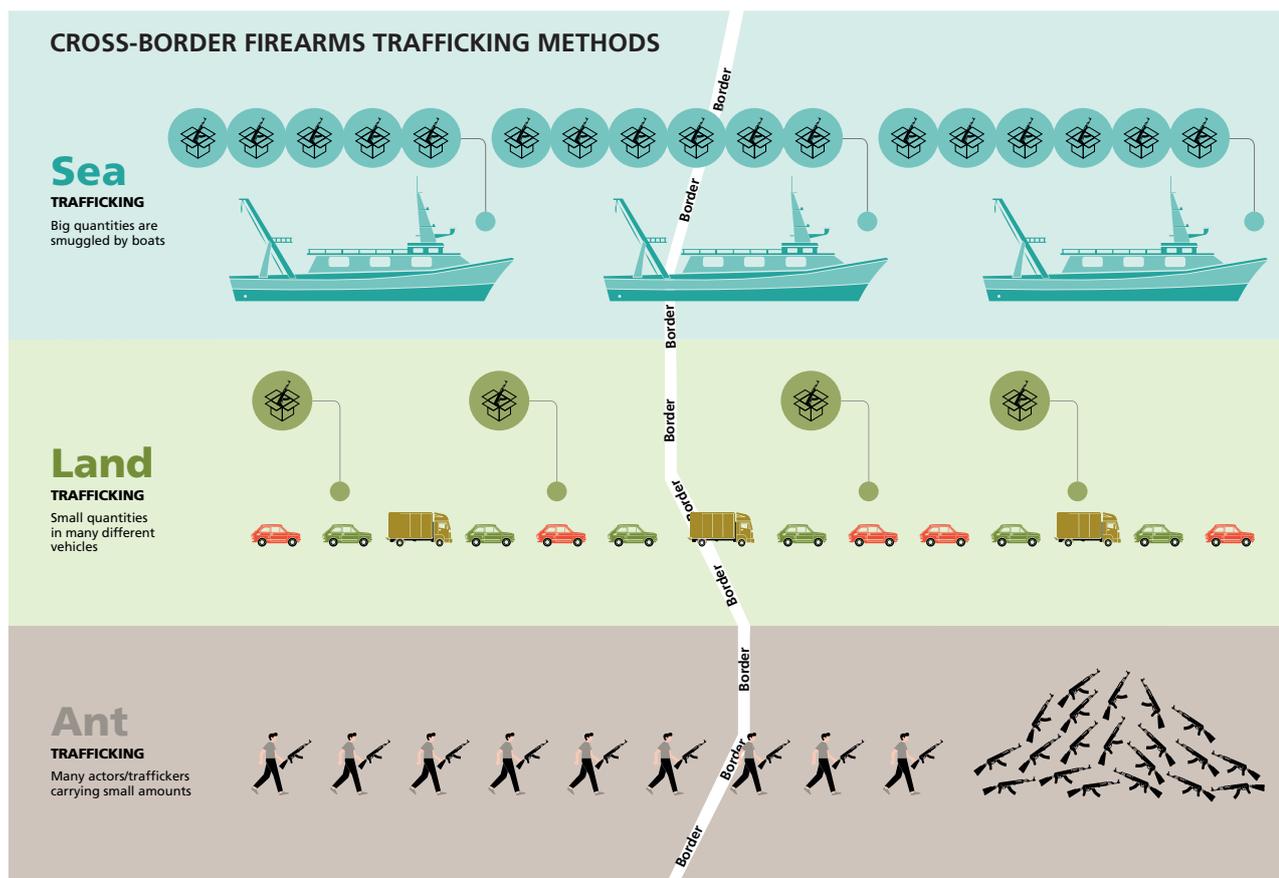
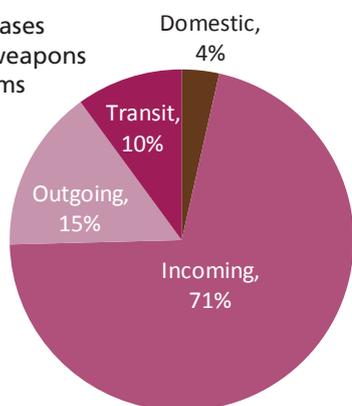
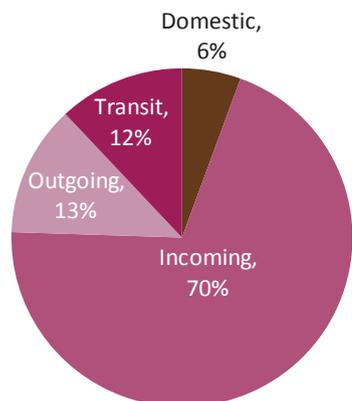


FIG. 8 Average distributions* of customs seizures, by type of routing, 2016-17

By number of cases of seizures of weapons and related items



By number of firearms seized



* Simple average of data for 59 countries. Source: World Customs Organization.

Mail and other methods

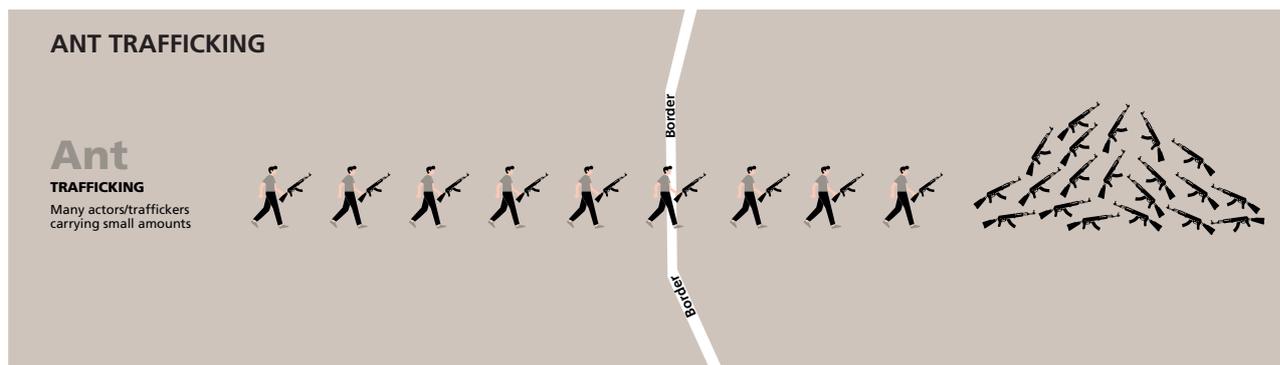
Traffickers also use methods in which their physical involvement is reduced and which may be seen as less risky. Mail was reported to be used for firearms trafficking in Albania, Slovakia and Lithuania. Traffickers in some countries used the open internet or the darknet for firearms trafficking. This included Slovakia, Spain, Libya⁷ and in particular Portugal, where illegal transactions originating in the European Union and conducted over the darknet or open internet were detected. Also, Lithuanian authorities indicated having received communication arising from foreign investigations on Lithuanian nationals suspected of acquiring firearms illegally on the internet.

Ant trafficking

Cross-border trafficking of firearms sometimes takes on the form of so-called “ant trafficking”; in other words, the illicit flow is facilitated by carrying or transporting very small quantities, possibly by numerous individuals. This phenomenon has been hypothesized and documented in various settings and regions, including Africa, Asia, Europe,⁸ and the border between the United States and

7 Some research suggests that the use of online sites and services for trade in arms in Libya has its beginnings between 2011 and 2013. See Small Arms Survey, *The Online Trade of Light Weapons in Libya*. Dispatch No. 6, April 2016.

8 Savona Ernesto U. and Mancuso Marina (Eds.) 2017. *Fighting Illicit Firearms Trafficking Routes and Actors at European Level. Final Report*



Mexico.⁹ Such a mechanism may or may not occur in a concerted fashion or be orchestrated by the final recipients of trafficked arms, but can also simply be a consequence of multiple individuals acting independently.

In some cases, cross-border trafficking in small quantities can be opportunistic and targeted to serve local or small-scale demand. For example, in its 2013 Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment,¹⁰ Europol assessed that trafficking in the European context occurred on a small scale and trafficked weapons were intended for personal use or to meet specific orders. A joint research initiative of Small Arms Survey and the African Union Commission¹¹ has documented smaller-scale trading of arms, facilitated by ethnic ties, by pastoralists, across the borders of Kenya, Uganda and South Sudan for the purposes of protection of their herds. This was also corroborated by Kenya in its reply to the Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire for 2016-17, which mentioned cattle raids as a context for arms seizures. In Asia, one instance of cross-border trafficking which has been described as “ant trade” is the cross-border trafficking into eastern Nepal.¹²

Although “ant trafficking” occurs in small individual consignments, it can result in sizeable illicit flows and accumulation of illicit firearms, and may also be the result of an organized strategy or the outcome of a supply and demand mechanism functioning at a larger scale. One technique which may be used for this is the use of “mules”, including migrants and refugees.¹³ In its reply to the Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire for 2016-17, Libya reported that arms trafficking routes were often the same as those used for irregular migration.

Another systematic technique to illicitly procure firearms is the use of straw purchases. This involves an individual, usually with a clean criminal record, legally buying a firearm with the intention of illegally passing it on to a person who would otherwise be precluded from owning a firearm, or whose profile would raise suspicion if they were to attempt such a purchase themselves. Often the serial numbers would be erased and the firearm reported as stolen. It has been claimed that fake “stealing” of firearms was an important channel used by organized crime groups in Italy to secure “clean” weapons for homicides and other crimes.¹⁴

Considering that firearms are available on the licit market, which is regulated to various degrees, it is often more effective for criminals to acquire and subsequently divert firearms from the licit market as an alternative to large-scale trafficking of illicitly sourced firearms. The need to be discreet – not attracting too much attention from law enforcement – and to operate (at least in appearance) within the rules would be compatible with the small numbers of weapons procured and moved in single instances, and would also confirm that the initial procurement may need to be done by individuals without a criminal record. Such a mechanism may function both within a given country and across borders.

The land border between the United States and Mexico likely represents the earliest instance where the “ant trade” was observed by scholars.¹⁵ One of the aspects which suggest that this trade is done in an organized fashion is that, despite the fact that the firearms are moved in smaller batches, the sources may be more concentrated.¹⁶ Moreover, a single straw purchase may involve larger quantities of firearms, and the same individuals may be involved in multiple straw purchases and multiple border crossings.¹⁷

of Project FIRE, p. 54, 2017.

9 See, for example: UNODC, *The Globalization of Crime – A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment*, 2010.

10 Europol, *EU Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment 2013*.

11 Small Arms Survey, *Weapons Compass, Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*, January 2019.

12 Small Arms Survey, *The Highway Routes. Small Arms Smuggling in Eastern Nepal*. Issue Brief No. 4, November 2014.

13 Small Arms Survey, *Weapons Compass, Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*, January 2019.

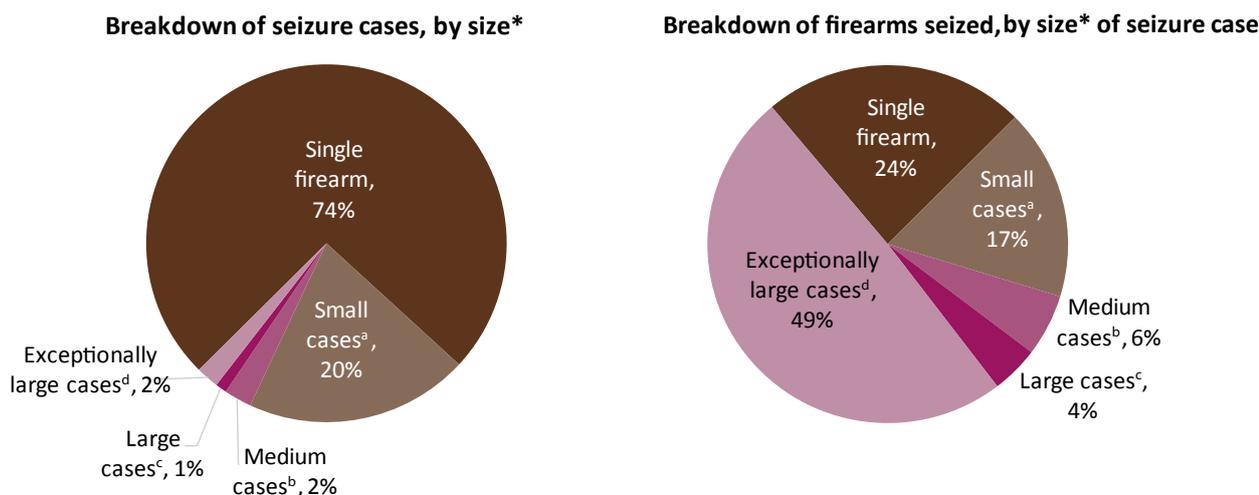
14 Massari, M. (2013) “Guns in the family. Mafia violence in Italy”, in LeBrun E., McDonald G., Alvazzi del Frate A., Berman E.G., and K. Krause, *Small Arms Survey 2013*, Cambridge University Press.

15 Lumpe, L., ‘The US Arms Both Sides of Mexico’s Drug War’, *Covert Action Quarterly*, 61: 39–46, 1998.

16 Cook, Philip J., Cukier W. and Krause, K., ‘The illicit firearms trade in North America’, *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 2009; 9: 265–286.

17 Lumpe, L., ‘The US Arms Both Sides of Mexico’s Drug War’, *Covert Action Quarterly*, 61: 39–46, 1998.

FIG. 9 Breakdowns of customs seizures, by size* of seizure case



* The size of a seizure case refers to the number of firearms seized in that particular instance.
^a A case is considered “small” if between 2 and 5 firearms were seized in that particular instance.
^b A case is considered “medium” if between 6 and 10 firearms were seized in that particular instance.
^c A case is considered “large” if between 11 and 17 firearms were seized in that particular instance.
^d A case is considered “exceptionally large” if at least 18 firearms were seized in that particular instance.

Source: World Customs Organization.

Using cross-border seizures as a proxy for trafficking, one indicator which may give further insight into the phenomenon of ant trafficking is the extent to which weapons are seized in smaller quantities, bearing in mind that this may also be influenced by law enforcement strategies.

The question may arise whether the “ant trade” is the predominant form of international trafficking. The evidence from customs seizures does not clearly support the hypothesis of that international firearms trafficking is generally an “ant” trade. Customs seizures recorded in the World Customs Organization’s CEN database in 2016-17 show that firearms trafficking across borders happened at all levels, including trafficking of individual firearms, a few firearms and large shipments.

Approximately three quarters of all cases involved only one firearm, and less than 6 per cent involved more than 5 firearms at a time. However, in terms of numbers of firearms seized, the top 2 per cent of cases (cases of at least 18 firearms or more) accounted for approximately one half of all seized firearms. These included 4 cases in which more than a hundred firearms were seized (see Figure 9). It should be borne in mind that the small seizure cases may include many instances which were unrelated to trafficking. On the other hand, the sporadic nature of the very large instances, in addition to the lack of background information, makes it hard to reliably interpret their overall importance in the big picture of trafficking. While the characterization of trafficking as an “ant” trade depends on a subjective threshold of what constitutes a “small” shipment, this evidence does not warrant describing inter-

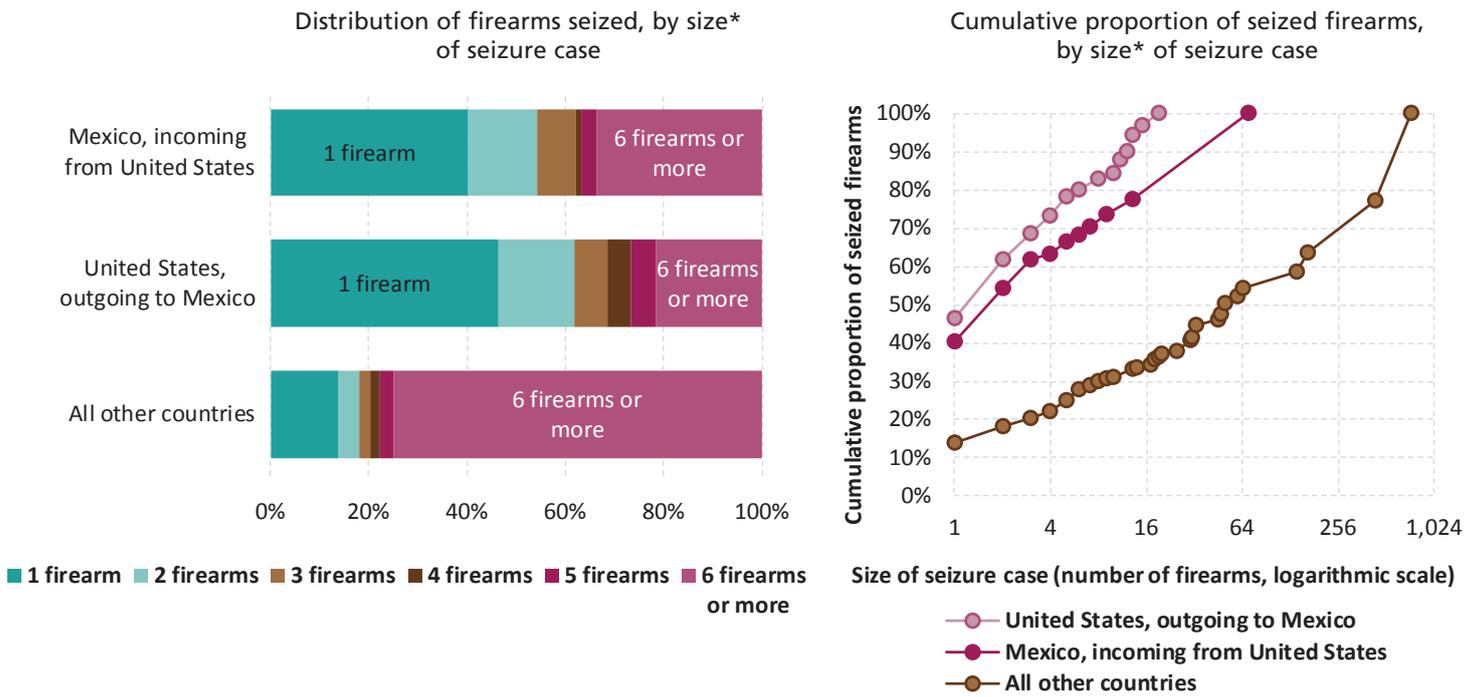
national firearms trafficking in general as predominantly an “ant” trade.

However, a focus on seizures made specifically by customs authorities in the United States and in Mexico brings out a striking distinction between such seizures and customs seizures in general, and confirms that seizures across this border tend to be significantly smaller than usual. In particular, cases of 5 firearms or less accounted for two thirds of firearms seized by Mexico as they crossed the border from the United States, and an even higher proportion (78 per cent) of firearms seized by the United States at the same border (on their way to Mexico). This is in sharp contrast with customs seizures in other countries, among which only a quarter of firearms were seized in cases of 5 firearms or less. Moreover, the similarity of the patterns (see Figure 10) which emerge independently from seizures by authorities in Mexico and the United States further corroborates the assumption that these patterns reflect a real characteristic of flows across this border.

Thus, the comparison between customs seizures in general and those made specifically en route from the United States and Mexico does support the hypothesis of ant trafficking between these two countries, in the sense that this flow appears to occur in smaller individual batches than the general global pattern.

A comparison of the types of arms seized in the United States and Mexico also reveals an interesting pattern, with the share of rifles rising progressively from those recoveries made in the United States in general (14 per cent), to

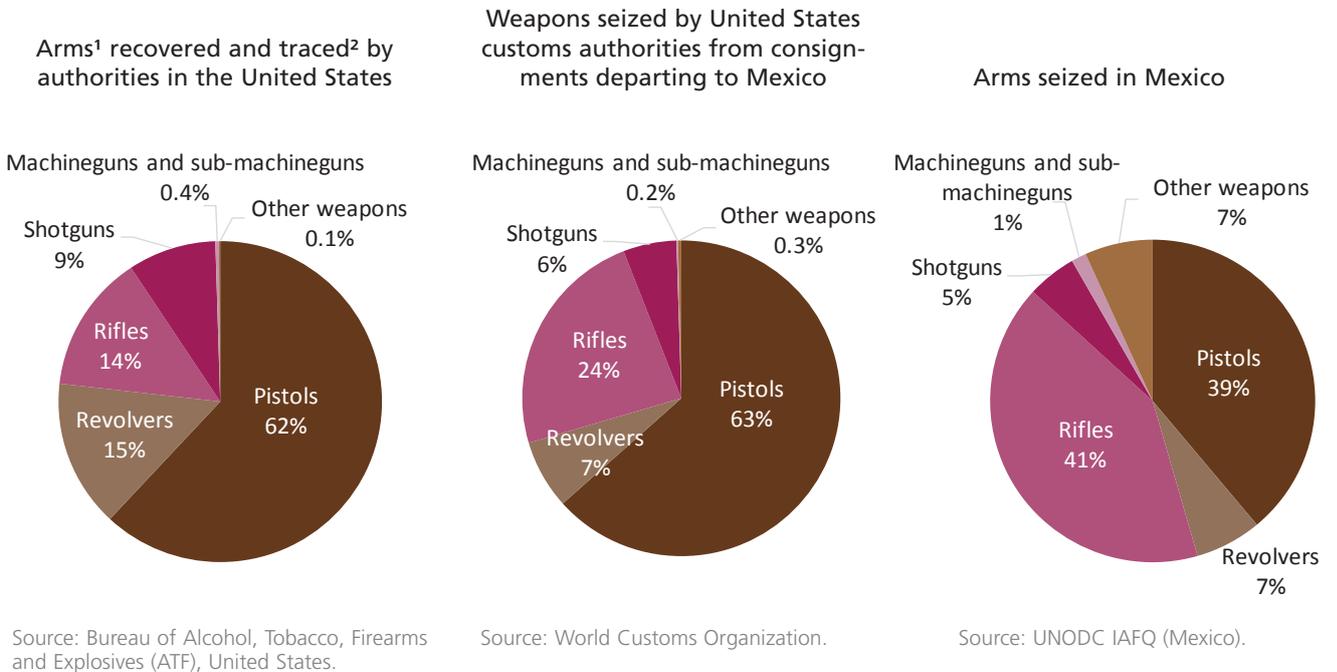
FIG. 10.... Size* of customs seizures from the United States to Mexico in comparison with customs seizures made by all other countries



*The size of a seizure case refers to the number of firearms seized in that particular instance.

Sources: Mexican Customs (data for Mexico); World Customs Organization (data for the United States and all other countries).

FIG. 11.... Comparison of the distributions of arms or other weapons seized along the route from the United States to Mexico, 2016-17



¹ Includes, under the category "Other weapons", the following categories as classified by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives: tear gas launchers, destructive devices, combination guns, flare guns and "any other weapon". Derringers are included under "pistols". Silencers and receivers/frames are not included.

² Includes firearms submitted for tracing to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives by a law enforcement agency, resulting from seizure as well as abandonment, buy-back program, or other recovery method. Moreover, only firearms submitted for tracing are included. Firearms submitted for tracing after recovery do not represent the entire set of all seized firearms.

cross-border customs seizures made by authorities in the United States (24 per cent) and again to seizures in Mexico (41 per cent). This increasing share is mainly offset by the smaller share of pistols, but the progression in terms of the share of pistols is less clear. One possible interpretation for this pattern is that the illicit market in Mexico exhibits a strong demand specifically for rifles which may be fed by flows from the United States. Another interpretation is an uneven priority given to rifles between the United States and Mexico at the border.

Domestic trafficking

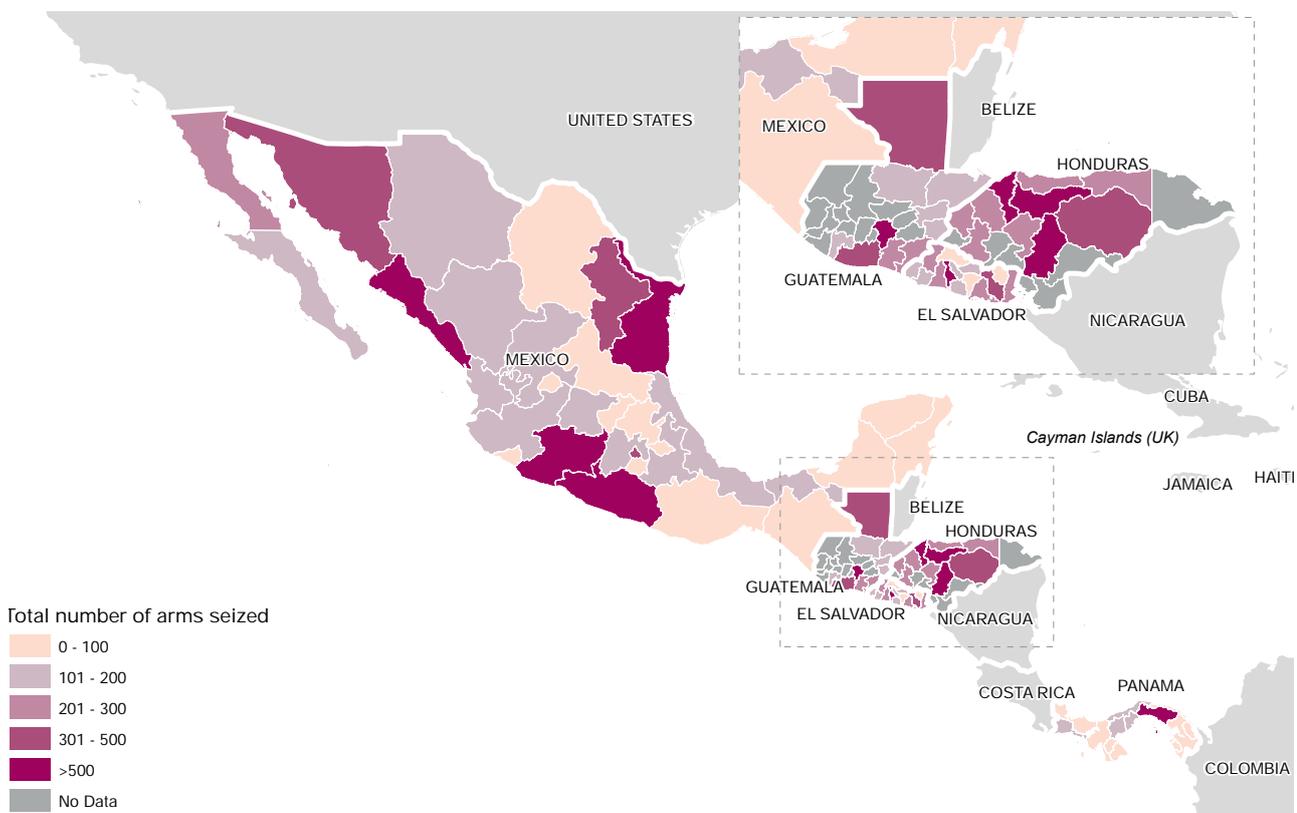
In general terms, firearms trafficking is understood as the unauthorized trade, purchase and transportation of firearms. As all other forms of trafficking, firearm trafficking can happen within and across borders, so trafficking can be analysed and researched as a domestic and a transnational phenomenon. From a legal perspective, according to the United Nations Firearms Protocol, “illicit trafficking” of firearms entails a physical movement from the territory of one state to that of another state;¹⁸ some countries, as well as international instruments, refer to broader concepts such as “illicit proliferation”¹⁹, “diversion” and “illicit transfers” or “illicit arms flows”(the SDG 16.4), with a

view to capture also the domestic aspect of trafficking of weapons, regardless of their possible or potential subsequent crossing of international borders. Some national legislations, such as Uruguay, for example, have also explicitly introduced separate offences for internal and international trafficking.

It is difficult to analyse trafficking of firearms by separating its national and international dimensions. National legislation may not differentiate trafficking that remains within national borders and trafficking that comes from abroad or is destined for abroad, so information related to trafficking, such as seizure data, cannot be disaggregated to reflect these two aspects separately. Looking at trafficking that crosses borders in isolation from domestic trafficking would be misleading because domestic trafficking is often the beginning of the illicit transnational supply chain of firearms. Hence starting with addressing domestic trafficking is a way to counter transnational illicit arms flows.

In order to shed light on the illicit movement of firearms within the territory of a given country, it is useful to examine seizures at sub-national level (region, state, department, province, et cetera). A certain level of detail was available for some countries in Central America.

MAP 1 Number of arms seized in Central American countries, at sub-national level, 2017



Source: UNODC IAFQ.

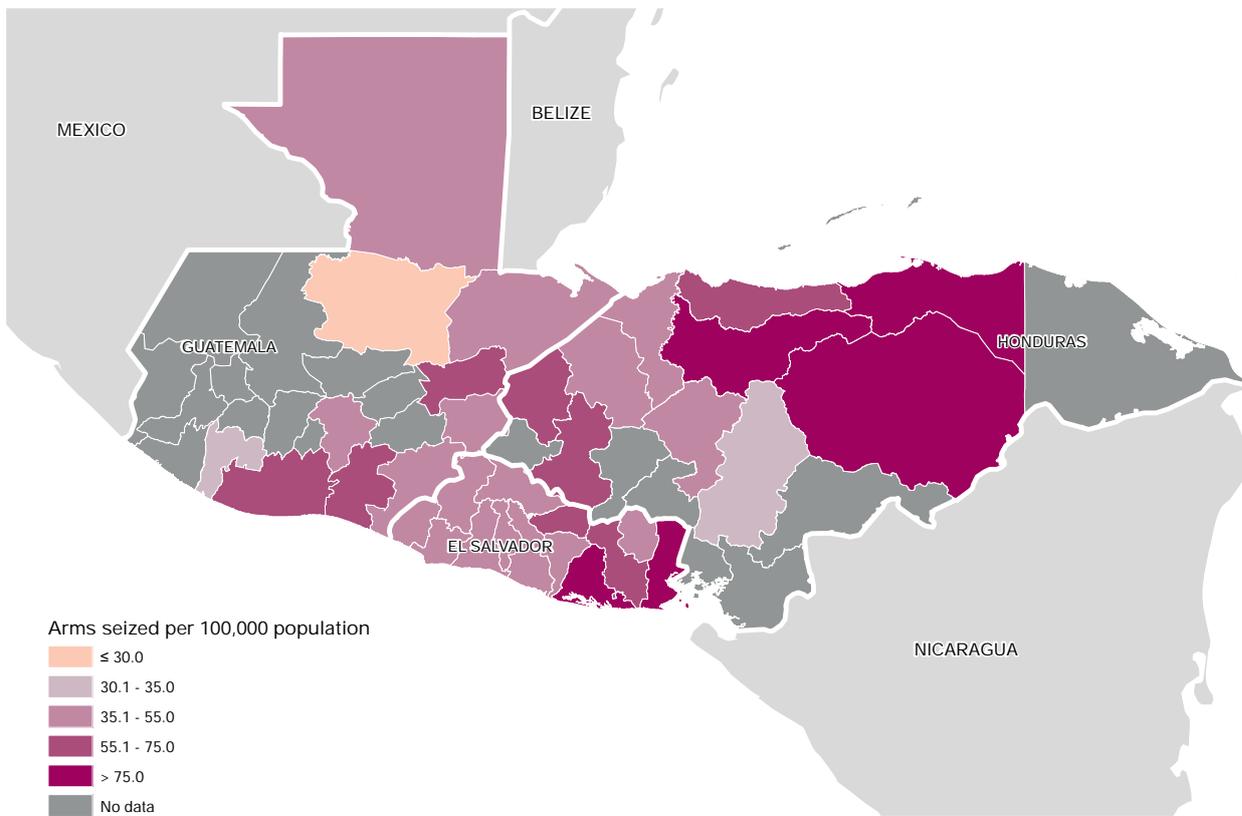
The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

18 See Box 'International and national definitions of firearm trafficking'.

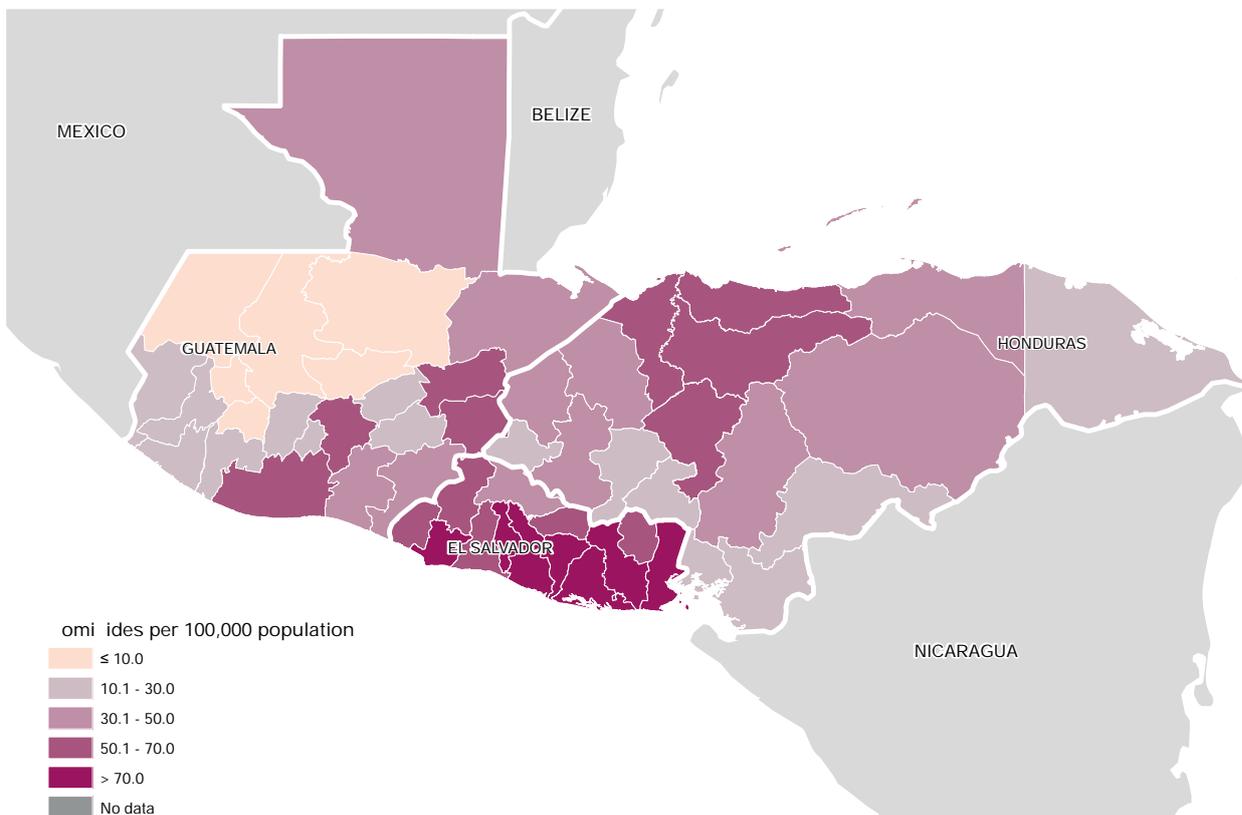
19 Programme of Action to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons

MAP 2 Rate of arms seizures per population in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, in comparison with homicide rates

Rate of arms seizures per 100,000 population, 2017



Homicide rates per 100,000 population, 2017/16



Source: UNODC IAFQ; UNODC Homicide Statistics.

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Within the neighbouring countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, seized arms, as measured in absolute numbers, tended to concentrate around some of the most violent areas suggesting that seizures may be broadly linked with the demand for firearms generated by violent crime.

Data from Guatemala indicate that, in 2017, 80 per cent of seized arms²⁰ were seized in the suspected context of violent crime. For El Salvador, the criminal context was more frequently assessed to be related to trafficking as opposed to violent crime²¹, but El Salvador also indicated that the data pertaining to illicit trafficking included transfer or movement of items within national borders, as well as cross-border trafficking. Hence these figures do not allow to distinguish between international movements of firearms and the final stages of the domestic illicit supply chain (close to the final “consumers”).

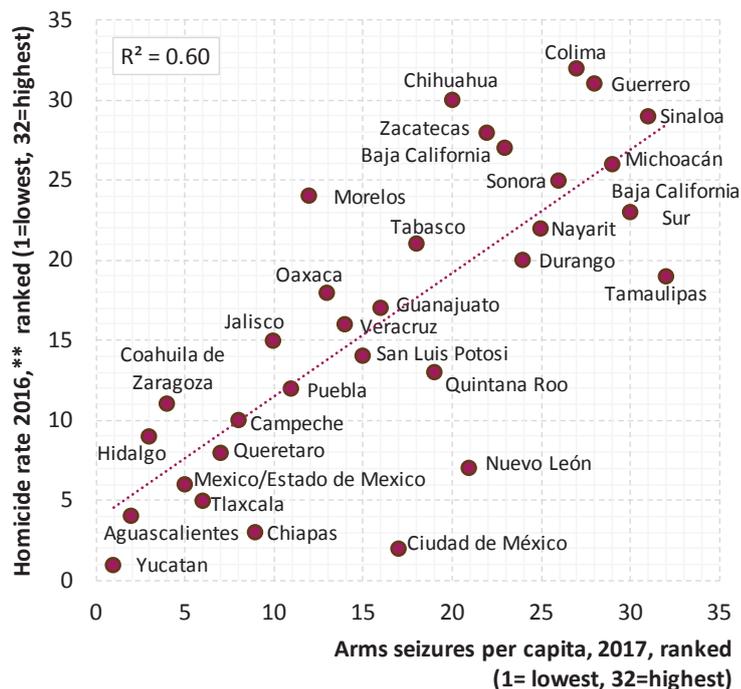
Some of the largest significant seizure cases reported by these countries also occurred in urban centres. El Salvador reported a seizure of 110 handguns in Santa Ana. Of the 8 significant cases reported by Guatemala, 5 occurred in Guatemala City or Guatemala Department, 2 in a port and 1 on a highway – the largest being a seizure of 29 firearms in Guatemala Department. Of the 7 largest cases reported by Honduras, 5 were made in San Pedro Sula or Tegucigalpa, Distrito Central (the capital); this included a seizure of 68 arms in San Pedro Sula. The largest case, involving 91 arms, occurred in the municipality of El Progreso – a smaller city but an important logistical hub. The concentration of seizures in urban areas may suggest a combination of factors: higher demand of firearms related to violent crime, concentration of trafficking hubs, and higher presence and capacity of law enforcement.

When expressed in rates per capita, the most pronounced seizure levels shift perceptibly from the more populated areas towards the land and sea borders, with higher rates registered for example in the departments of La Unión (El Salvador) and Colón, Copan and Olancho (Honduras). Border areas are also affected by the highest level of homicide. The presence of trade junctions or logistical hubs may also play a role, as in the case of Yoro department in Honduras (including the municipality of El Progreso) and the two departments, on the Pacific coast of Guatemala, of Escuintla (with its major port of Puerto Quetzal) and Santa Rosa (also close to the land border and including the municipality of Chiquimulilla). Thus, the seizure levels expressed per capita are more likely than the absolute values to reflect the transnational movement of firearms among these countries as well as neighbouring countries. El Salvador reported sending and receiving large numbers of tracing requests from neighbouring countries.

20 3,651 out of a total of 4,686.

21 Out of 3,103 weapons seized, only 345 were suspected to be linked to a context of violent crime, compared to 1,898 weapons linked to a context of trafficking.

FIG. 12.... Homicide rates and arms seizures per capita in administrative regions* of Mexico, 2016/17 (ranked correlation)



* 31 states and 1 federal district.

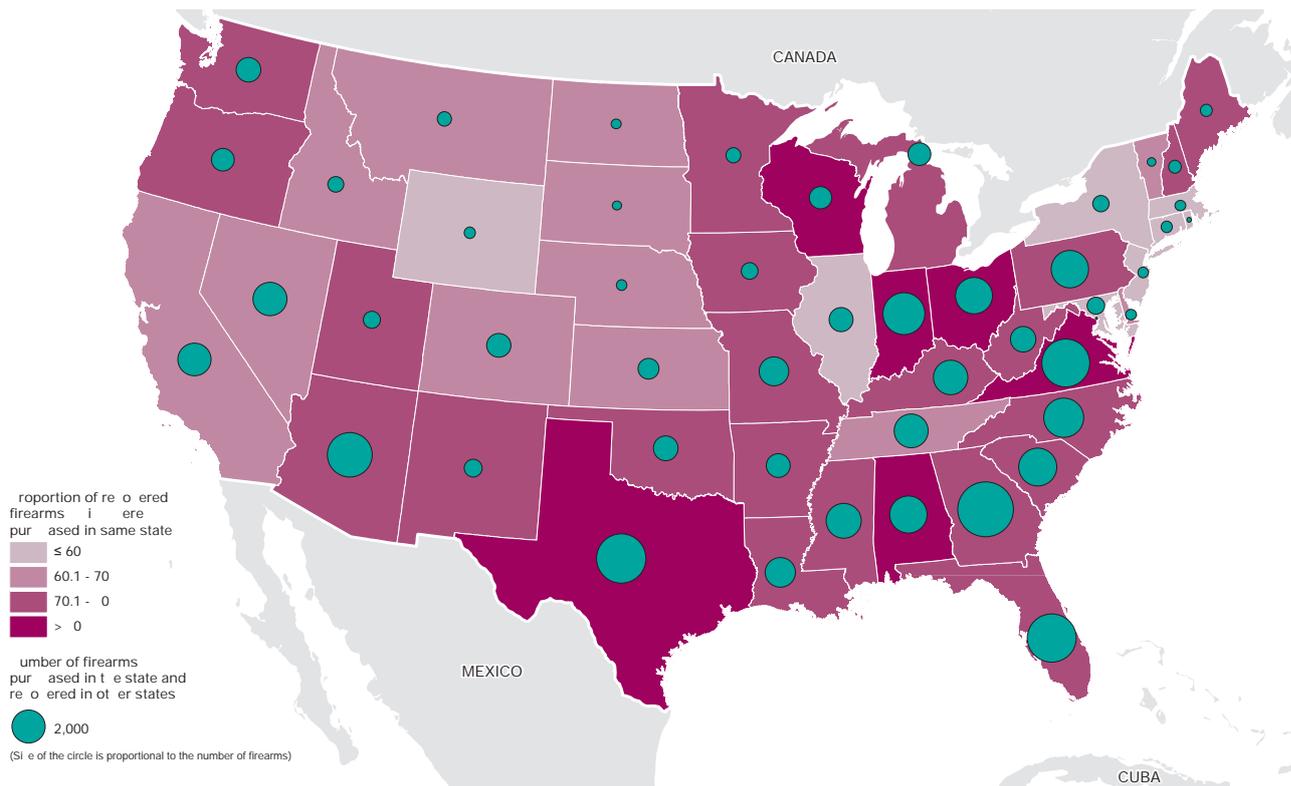
** Data for 2017 were not available.

Sources: UNODC IAFQ; UNODC Homicide Statistics.

In Mexico, among the 32 administrative regions (31 states and one federal district), the highest numbers of arms seized in 2017 were seized in Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Michoacán and Guerrero. All four states were also among the top five (along with Baja California Sur) when ranked in per capita terms. In general, there appeared to be an association between homicide rates and seizures of arms per capita (see Figure 12). Overall, this suggests a link to the presence of organized crime groups and inter-cartel violence. There are some exceptions to this general pattern as in the case of Tamaulipas, which was the most prominent in both absolute and per capita seizure terms, but with comparatively moderate levels of homicidal violence; the proximity to the border with the United States may bring about a significant role in firearm trafficking. Tamaulipas and Guerrero were also the location of large significant seizures reported by Mexico: 101 rifles seized in Tamaulipas, and 48 arms seized in Guerrero (the only other significant case reported by Mexico was, however, even larger, involving 109 arms seized in Nuevo León).

Some detailed data at sub-national level were also available for the United States, in particular information on the states to which recovered weapons could be traced. These data enable a quantification of the extent to which recovered weapons had been sold in a specific state, both among that state’s own recoveries as well as recoveries in other states. These two independent measures result in similar outcomes in terms of the importance of states relative to

MAP 3 States in the contiguous United States,¹ as sources for domestically traced firearms,² 2017



¹ District of Columbia is also included. Alaska, Hawaii, Guam, Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands are not included as they do not share a land border with other parts of the territory of the United States.

² May include tear gas launchers, destructive devices, receivers/frames, silencers and any other weapons classified as “firearms” by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), United States.

Note: Purchases refer to the legal market. Based on a subset of traced firearms for which it was possible to identify a purchaser and the state in which the final dealer was located. Firearms submitted for tracing to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives by a law enforcement agency may result from a seizure as well as abandonment, buy-back program, or other recovery method. Firearms submitted for tracing after recovery do not represent the entire set of all seized firearms.

Source: Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), United States.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

each other. In other words, those states which emerge as the most prominent on the basis of their own recoveries – in the sense that they recovered relatively high proportions of firearms originally sold within the same state – tended to be the same ones which emerged most prominently as the location of purchase of firearms recovered in other states. The fact that these independent metrics by and large tally strengthens their interpretation as a measure of the varying degrees to which firearms involved in crime can be sourced from a given state. States with a higher proportion of firearms recovered within the state and high number of firearms purchased in the same states are more likely to be the source of domestic trafficking (see Map 3).

Overall, among firearms for which it was possible to identify a purchaser and the state in which the final dealer was located, around 71 per cent had been purchased in the same state where they were recovered.

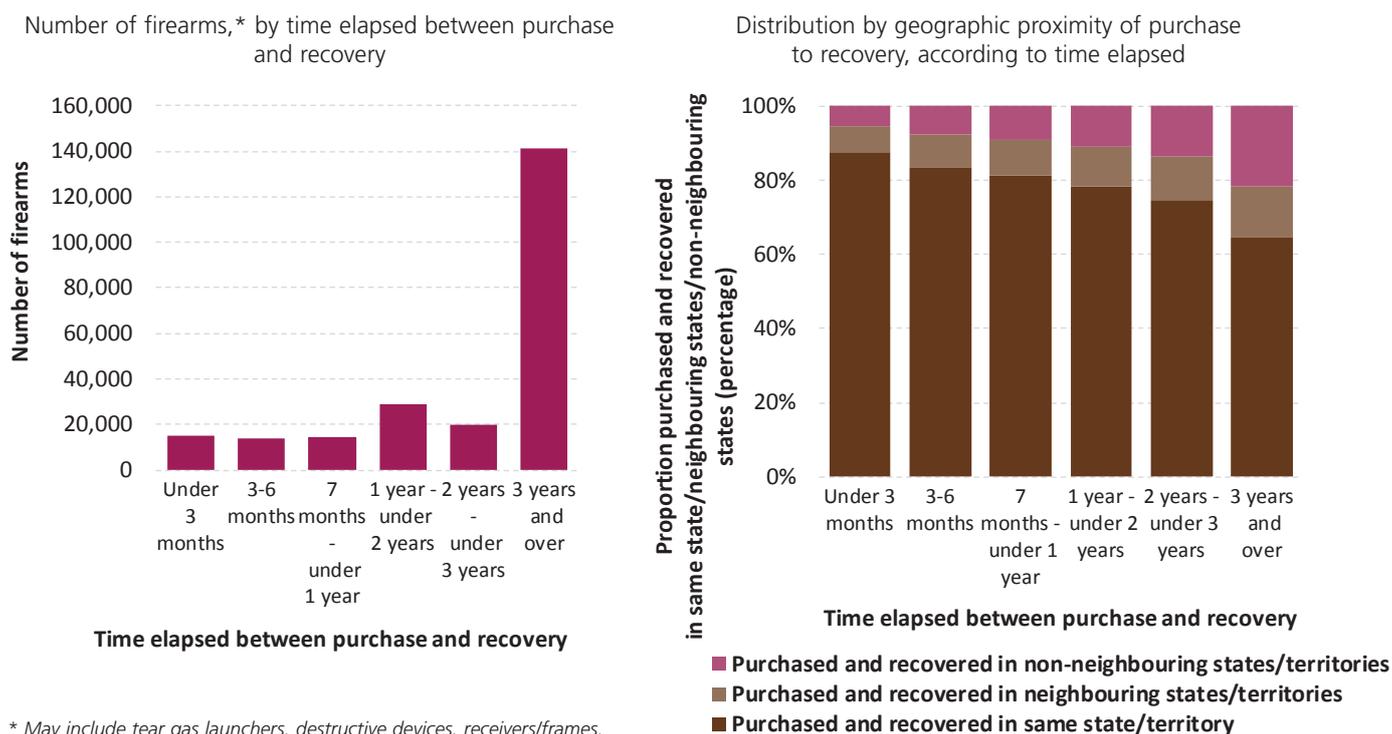
Information on the time elapsed in the United States between the first retail purchase of a recovered and traced firearm and the moment it is recovered indicates that several years may pass from the time when a firearm is legally

purchased until it is seized, depending on the geographical distance between the States where the firearm is purchased and intercepted. Data indicate that, among traced firearms for which it was possible to identify the first retail purchase (including the date of purchase), around 60 per cent had been sold more than three years before being recovered. Moreover, the proportion of firearms which were recovered in a state other than that in which they had been sold increased steadily with the time elapsed between sale and recovery. These data suggest that, not only can firearms last a long time in circulation before they are used and detected in a crime, but also that the longer they are in circulation, the more they are likely to move geographically, at least within the same country.

Transnational trafficking flows

Respondents to the Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire provided information about the routes that were observed in seizures related to illicit trafficking of firearms. Information about the countries of departure and intended destination of seized consignments was also included in the Customs Enforcement Network database maintained by

FIG. 13... Firearms* recovered in the United States and traced domestically to first retail purchase, 2017



* May include tear gas launchers, destructive devices, receivers/frames, silencers and any other weapons classified as "firearms" by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), United States.

Note: Purchases refer to the legal market. Based on a subset of traced firearms for which it was possible to identify a purchaser and the state in which the final dealer was located, and to determine the time elapsed between purchase and recovery. Firearms submitted for tracing to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives by a law enforcement agency may result from a seizure as well as abandonment, buy-back program, or other recovery method. Firearms submitted for tracing after recovery do not represent the entire set of all seized firearms.

Source: Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), United States.

the World Customs Organization. Although these data were of a different nature, their combined coverage could be used to build a picture of illicit trafficking flows. In general, the information about incoming seizures and flows was more comprehensive than information about outgoing seizures.

Northern America, Europe and Western Asia emerged prominently as points of departure for illicit flows – in different ways. Northern America was important both in terms of trafficking to other parts of the Americas, notably Central America, as well as inter-regional flows. The role of Europe as a source was more pronounced in terms of inter-regional flows. Considering inter-regional flows only, illicit flows departing from Northern America and Europe together were estimated to account for the vast majority of the global total, with Western Asia the only other sub-region accounting for a non-negligible share (see Map 5 and corresponding figure in the Methodological Annex).

Western Asia (along with South America) was important mainly in terms of trafficking within the subregion, but also stood out in terms of the diversity of the destination regions where it was identified as a source for illicit flows. The same characteristic was even more marked for Northern and Western Europe and was also striking—despite

the overwhelming intra-regional component—for Northern America.

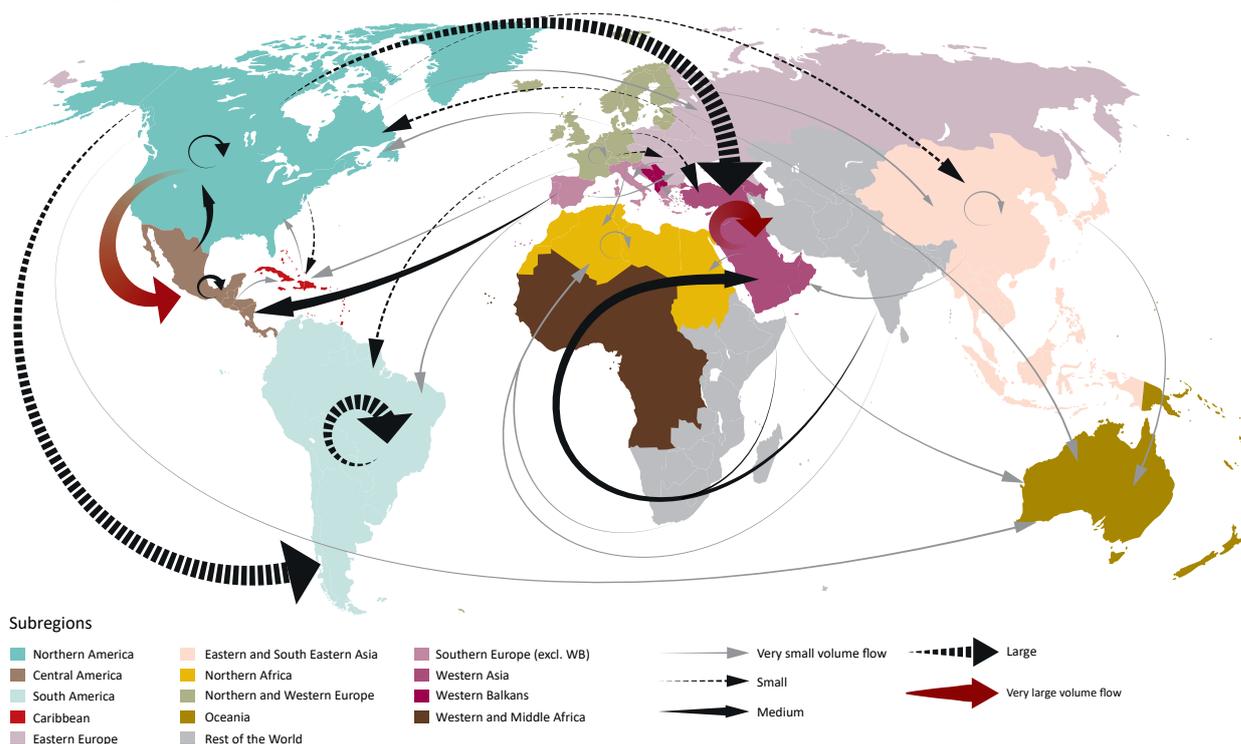
The most important areas of destination were Central America and, taking into account trafficking within sub-regions, Western Asia and South America. These main destination areas are known for high levels of criminal violence or conflict.

Overall, illicit flows appeared to have a certain localized character. For most regions, the inter-regional component of incoming flows (that is, illicit flows originating within the same region) accounted for the large majority of incoming illicit flows, with the exception of Eastern and South-East Asia, Oceania and Western and Middle Africa.^{22, 23} In some subregions—namely Northern and Western Europe, South America and Western Asia—the localized character was even more pronounced, in that a majority of incoming flows were detected on their way from countries within the same subregion.

22 Once more, for these exceptions, the inter-regional flows originated mainly from the three main source regions of Northern America, Europe and Western Asia. It should, however, be borne in mind that coverage from Asia and Africa was relatively limited.

23 It should however be borne in mind that coverage from Asia and Africa was relatively limited.

MAP 4 Main transnational firearms trafficking flows (as defined by routes of seized firearms), 2016-17



The breakdown into subregional groupings is based on the standard UN classification (M49), adapted to take into account the availability of data and regions of special interest of the study. Please see Methodological Annex for details.

Arrows represent flows between subregions (not specific countries).

Source: UNODC elaboration of data from Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire and World Customs Organization.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

This local character could also be observed in the reports of specific countries. For example, Sudan reported incoming routes from five different countries, all of which share a land border with the country. Sudan reported 32 significant cases for which the country of departure was believed to be Libya (the largest three seizures made in Sudan arriving from Libya involved 234, 86 and 53 firearms). Algeria also detected and seized firearms which had departed from bordering countries, including Libya – although countries outside Africa were assessed to account for larger shares of incoming flows.

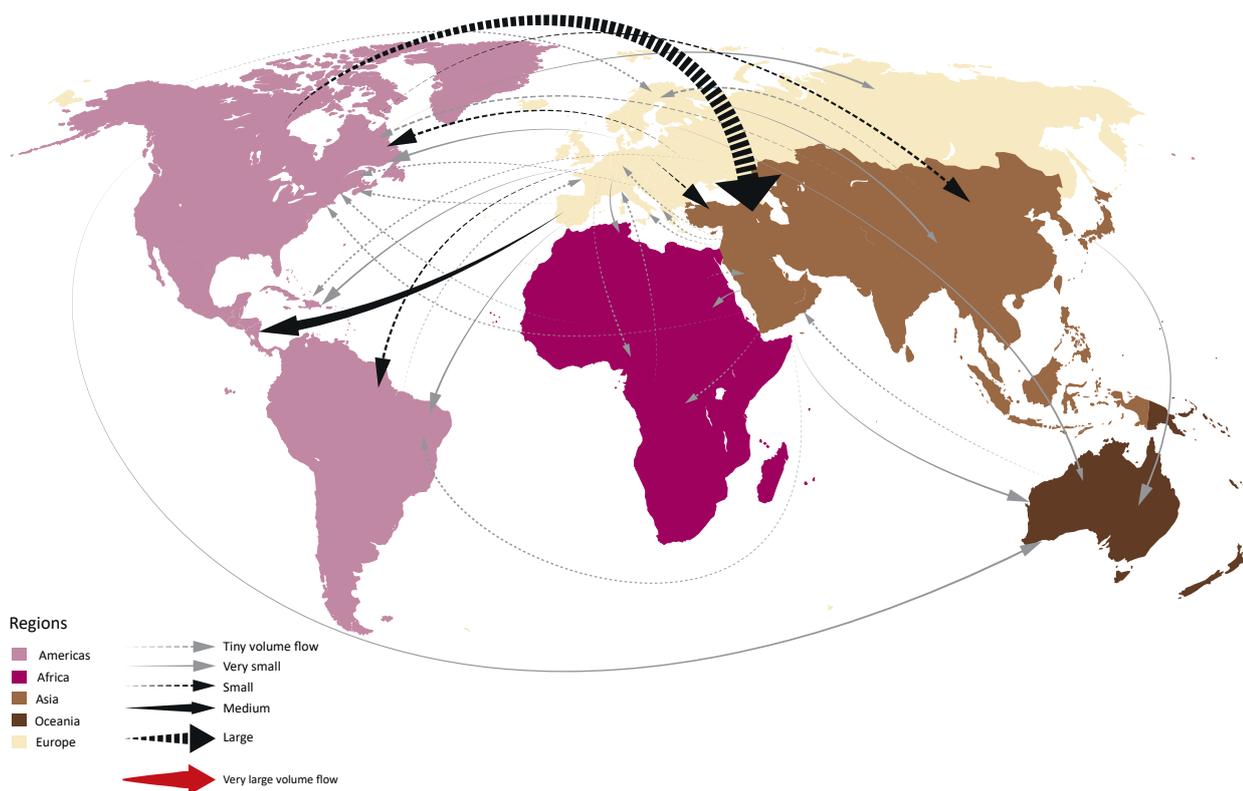
Although the available seizure data do not provide solid evidence of large illicit flows of arms affecting Africa, this may also be a reflection of lower capacity to intercept and record transnational shipments. It should also be borne in mind that, for some countries, the proliferation of arms and their ample supply on the black market may potentially render transnational trafficking, especially inter-regional trafficking, largely unnecessary as a way to illicitly source firearms.²⁴ Nevertheless, it appears that Libya may be an important source country for arms trafficked to neighbouring countries.

²⁴ See Small Arms Survey, *Weapons Compass, Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa*, January 2019, p. 38.

Another example of the local character of trafficking is the case of Brazil, although in this case it is the interplay with the licit sphere which brings in an inter-regional element. Brazil identified a number of countries in South America as the country of departure in seizures related to trafficking, most prominently Paraguay. The routes into Brazil involved neighbouring countries in various ways, including diversion from holdings of state authorities, importation from third countries for the purposes of diversion and trafficking into Brazil, and also trafficking originating in the United States going through Paraguay as a transit country. While trafficking of firearms into Brazil appeared to be mainly done alongside drugs and contraband, in their illicit shipments, there were also groups mainly dedicated to firearms trafficking. Some groups based in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro – the two most important destinations for trafficked firearms within Brazil – also set up bases in Paraguay to receive drugs from the Andean countries and also manage the firearms trafficking from Paraguay.

Brazil reported several significant seizure cases of firearms believed to have entered the country from Paraguay, including 4 cases of more than 30 firearms each²⁵ – mainly pistols – as well as a case of 61 rifles trafficked from the United States. Moreover, two significant seizures were made in the

MAP 5.... Inter-regional firearms trafficking flows (as defined by routes of seized firearms), 2016-17



The breakdown into subregional groupings is based on the standard UN classification (M49), adapted to take into account the availability of data and regions of special interest of the study. Please see Methodological Annex for details.

Arrows represent flows between subregions (not specific countries).

Source: UNODC elaboration of data from Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire and World Customs Organization.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

city of São Paulo in which the seized firearms (9 and 19) were believed to have entered Brazil from the Plurinational State of Bolivia and were seized alongside large quantities of cocaine (882 kg and 273 kg respectively).²⁶

Brazil also reported on a pattern in trafficking which has in recent years been successfully countered and largely reduced through efforts undertaken by the state. The pattern involved firearms being legally exported to neighbouring countries and subsequently trafficked back into the country; the introduction in 2001 in Brazil of a tax on exports to some countries in South America appears to have made it less viable for traffickers to use this strategy, although there may remain instances of “triangulations”, in which firearms are legally exported to a third country outside South America and subsequently re-enter Brazil through neighbouring countries. The latter modality however appears to occur on a small scale and to fall within a broader pattern of channelling firearms from licit sources into the Brazilian black market through or

from neighbouring countries, predominantly from the legal market of third countries outside the region but also directly from the stockpiles held by authorities of some neighbouring countries.

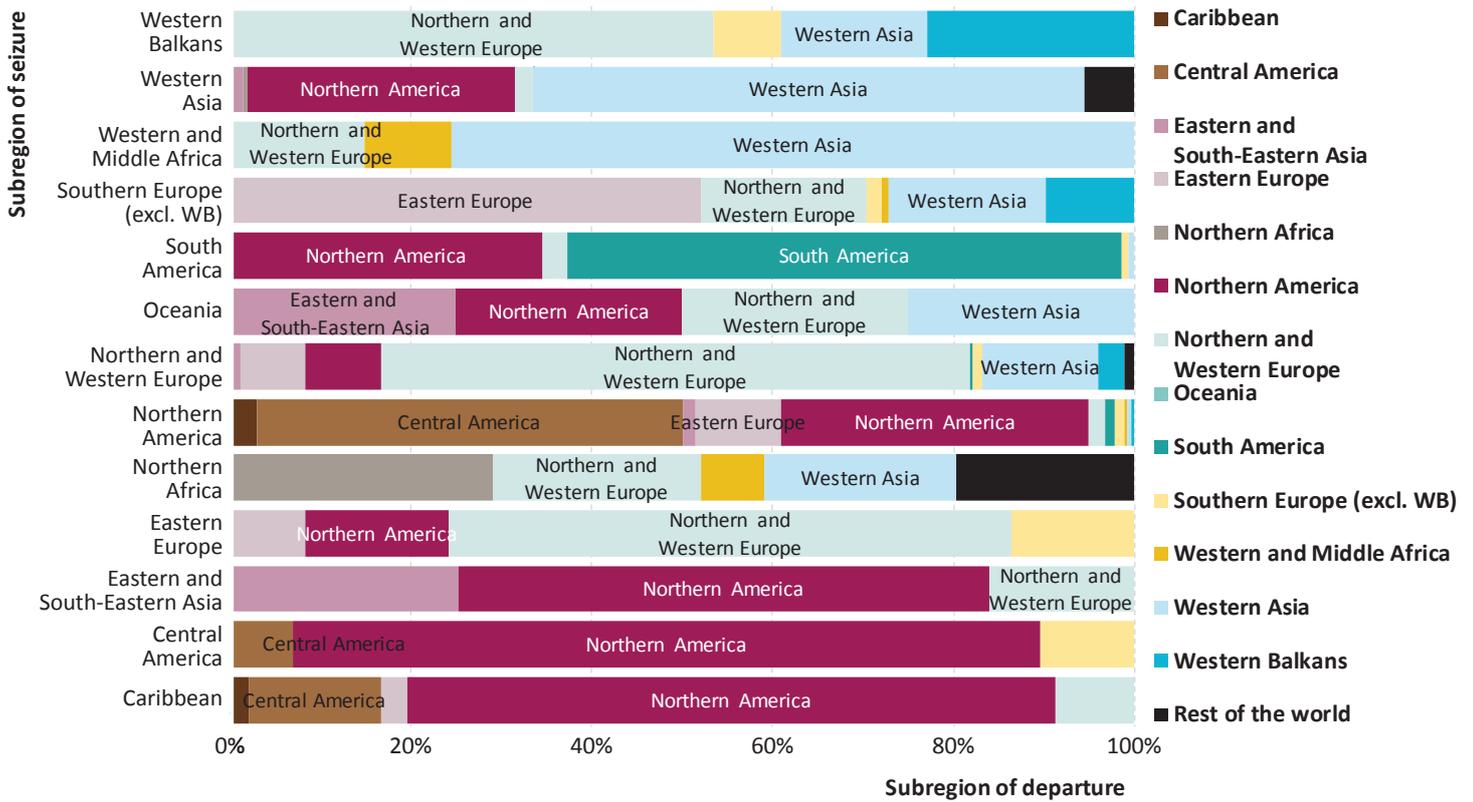
Reports of trafficked firearms departing from the Western Balkans and detected outside this subregion were limited and mainly restricted to neighbouring countries (Slovenia and Croatia), in addition to Sweden. In terms of seizures made by countries in the Western Balkans themselves,²⁷ customs seizure data provided additional, but still limited, evidence of flows departing from the Western Balkans to other regions (4 cases amounting to 34 firearms in 2016-17).

25 One of these cases, involving firearms held in a private home on behalf of a drug trafficking organization, was not designated as a case of trafficking.

26 These two cases were not designated as trafficking cases.

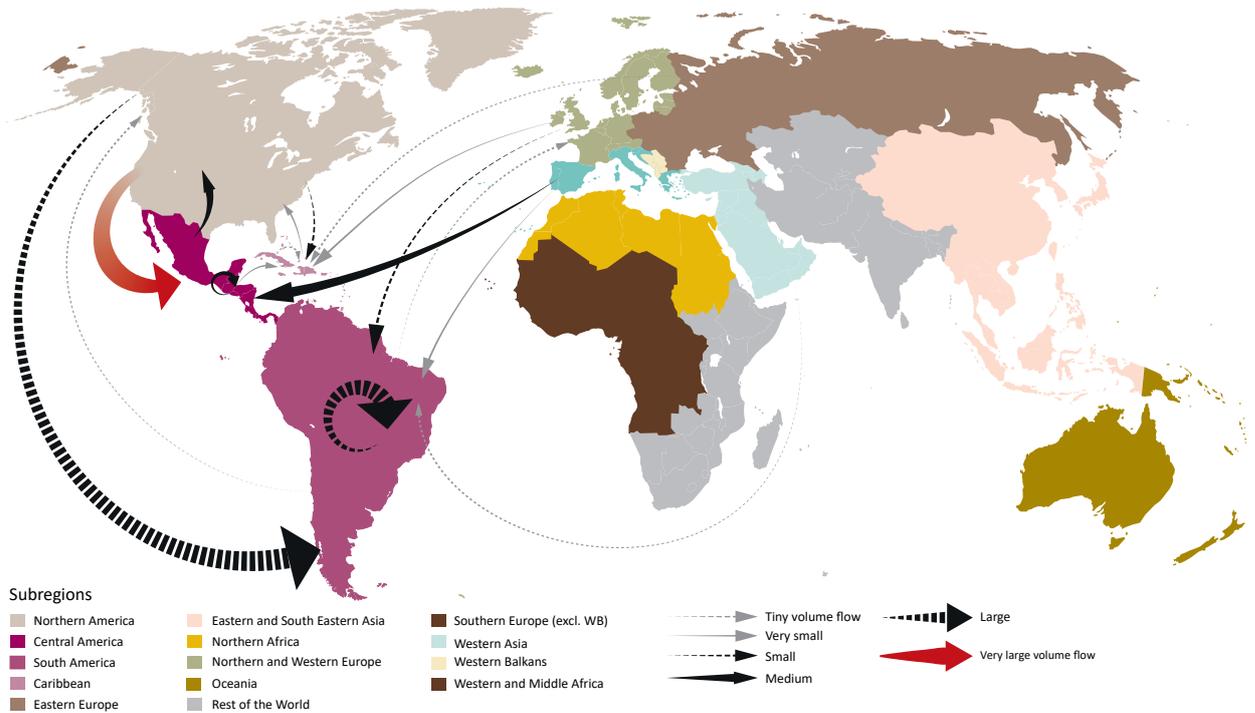
27 In its reply to the Illicit Arms Flow Questionnaire for 2016-17, Albania also reported seizures to unspecified destinations.

FIG. 14.... Estimated breakdown of firearms seized from incoming consignments by subregion of departure, according to subregion of seizure, 2016-17



Source: UNODC elaboration of data from Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire and World Customs Organization.

MAP 6.... Transnational firearms trafficking flows affecting Latin America and the Caribbean (as defined by routes of seized firearms), 2016-17



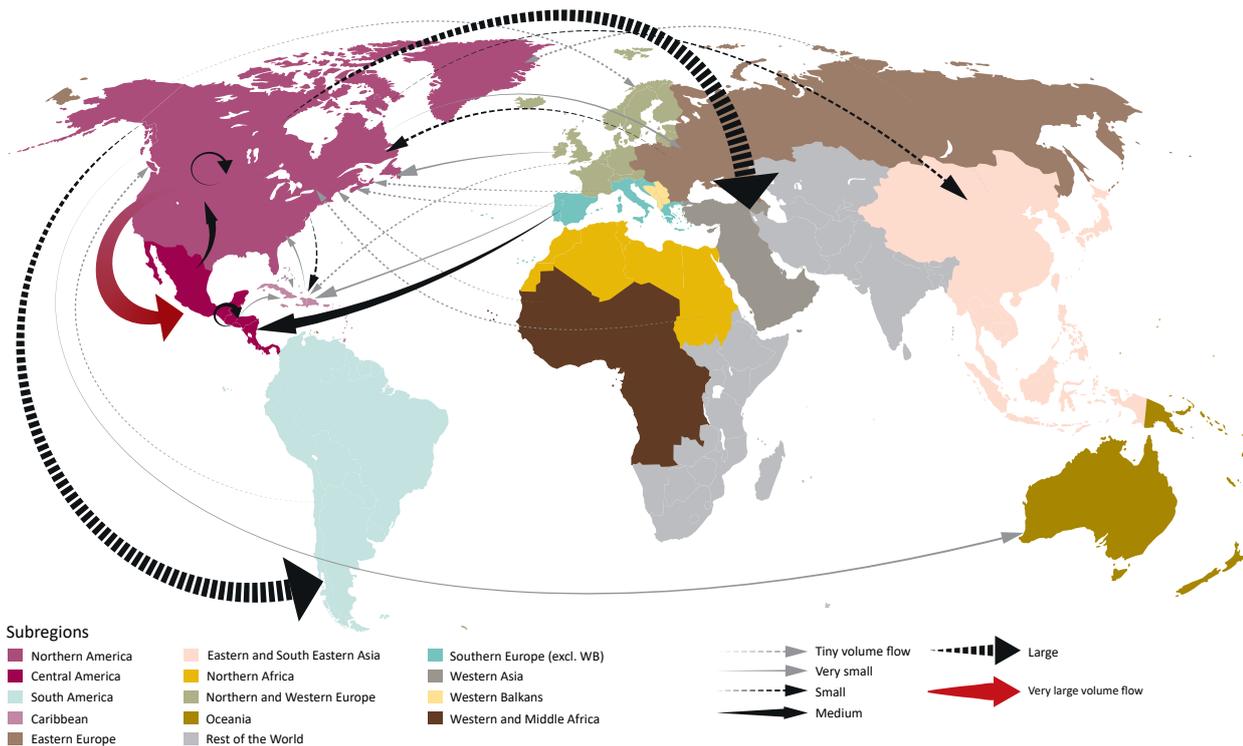
The breakdown into subregional groupings is based on the standard UN classification (M49), adapted to take into account the availability of data and regions of special interest of the study. Please see Methodological Annex for details.

Arrows represent flows between subregions (not specific countries).

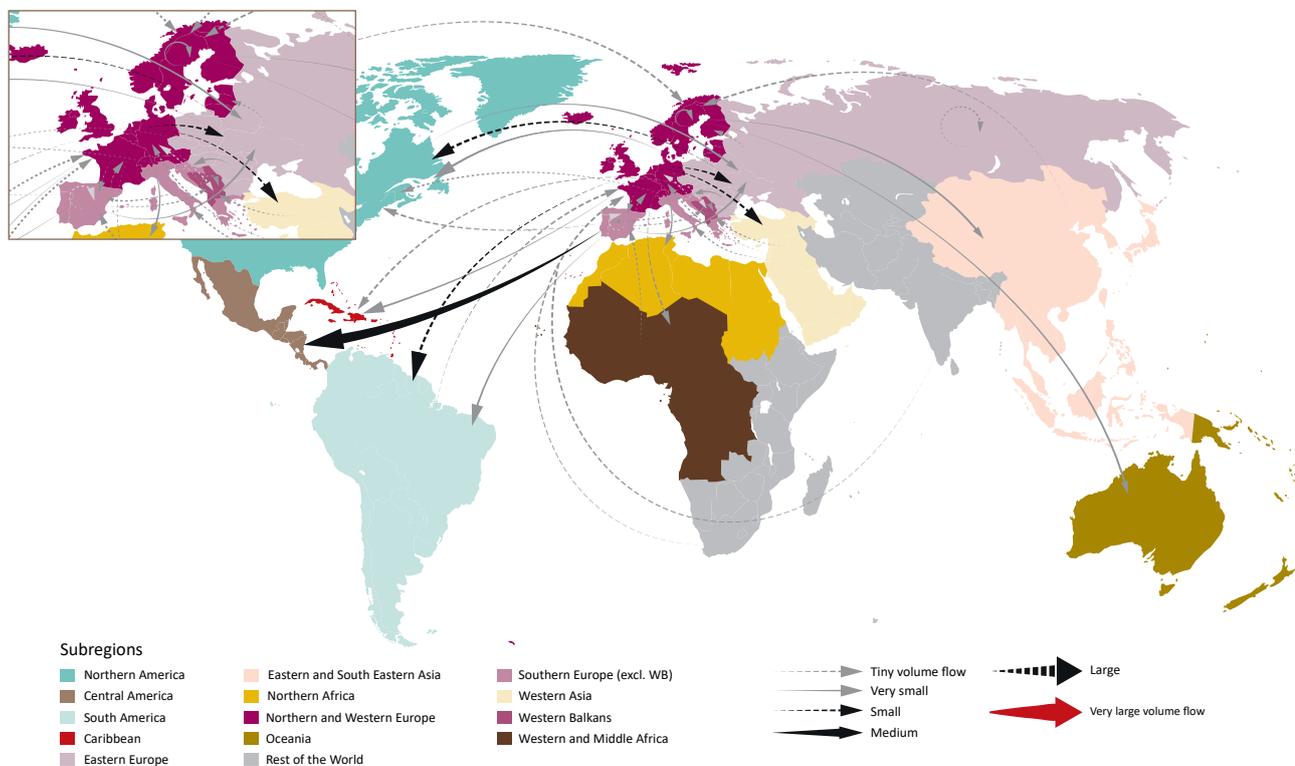
Source: UNODC elaboration of data from Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire and World Customs Organization.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

MAP 7 Transnational firearms trafficking flows affecting Northern and Central America (as defined by routes of seized firearms), 2016-17



MAP 8 Transnational firearms trafficking flows affecting Europe (as defined by routes of seized firearms), 2016-17



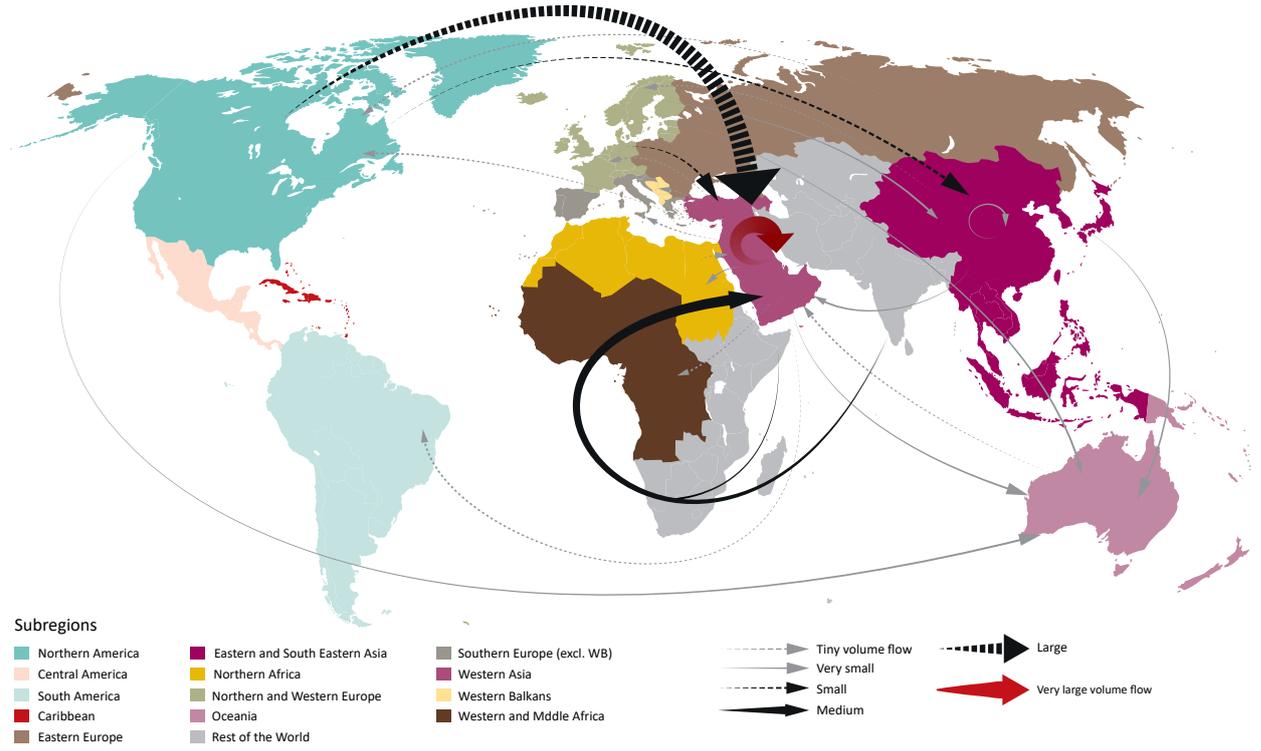
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Arrows represent flows between subregions (not specific countries).

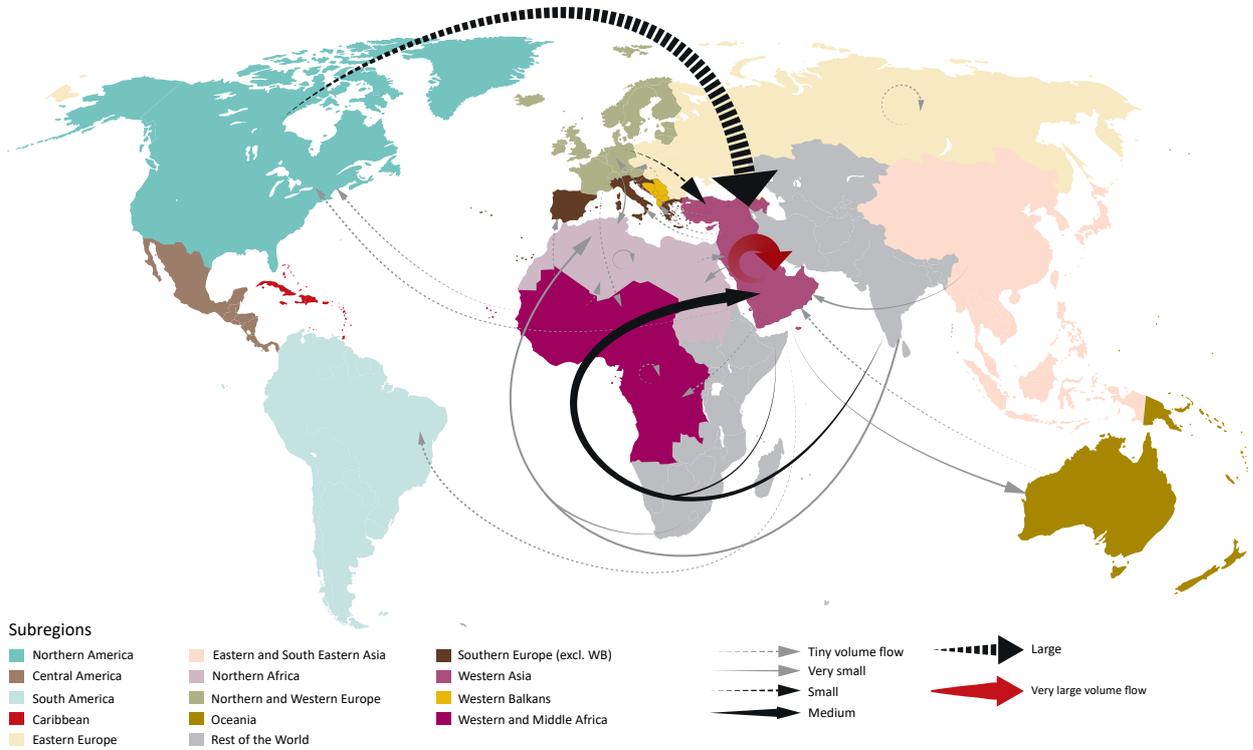
Source: UNODC elaboration of data from Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire and World Customs Organization.

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MAP 9 Transnational firearms trafficking flows affecting Asia and Oceania (as defined by routes of seized firearms), 2016-17



MAP 10... Transnational firearms trafficking flows affecting Africa and Western Asia (as defined by routes of seized firearms), 2016-17



The breakdown into subregional groupings is based on the standard UN classification (M49), adapted to take into account the availability of data and regions of special interest of the study. Please see Methodological Annex for details.

Arrows represent flows between subregions (not specific countries).

Source: UNODC elaboration of data from Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire and World Customs Organization.

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