



Firearms within Central America

If Central America's biggest problem is violence, and 77% of all murders in the region are committed with a firearm, then stopping the flow of weapons to criminals should be a top priority. The threat of firearm violence is also undermining governance in the region. Local police are apprehensive that they are out-gunned, that organized criminals have access to military arms left over from the civil wars, and there have been some dramatic acts of violence to back this apprehension up. This alleged imbalance of power is used to justify use of the military in policing. For these reasons, it is important to understand the nature of the regional illicit firearms market.

As has been well documented elsewhere, huge numbers of firearms were imported and disseminated within Central

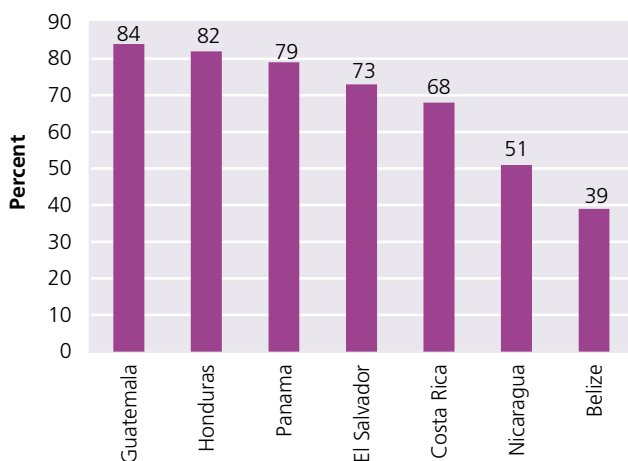
America during the three civil wars: Guatemala (1960-1996), El Salvador (1980-1992), and Nicaragua (1972-1991). Most of these were provided by Cold War allies, and were provided to both the states and rebel groups. In the latter case, smuggling also established routes for moving weapons around the region. Part of the counterinsurgency programmes of these countries, particularly in Guatemala, involved the arming of civil protection groups, so these weapons were disseminated across a broad area, and a relatively small number were ever collected.

Firearms are durable goods, and those that were imported remained in circulation when the wars ended. The modern assault rifle has not been significantly improved since the Cold War, so there is no need for updated technology. In addition to leftover caches, the militaries of the region were downsized radically under the peace accords, so surplus abounds.

There are no active insurgencies in Central America today. These firearms are mainly of interest to criminals, particularly those with military backgrounds and those who aim to control large areas of land, especially in rural areas. In general, assault rifles are not a big feature of urban crime - handguns are more concealable, easier to use in close quarters, and just as effective for almost every criminal task.

The sources of handguns are entirely different than those for assault rifles. Most handguns were purchased legally in the United States. While some are smuggled to the region, many more are licitly imported and only later diverted to illicit use. So the problem in Central America is about diverting handguns from both the licit civilian market and the armories of the local police and military.

Figure 49: Share of national homicides committed with a firearm, 2010 (or most recent year available)



Source: UNODC Homicide Database

What is the nature of this market?

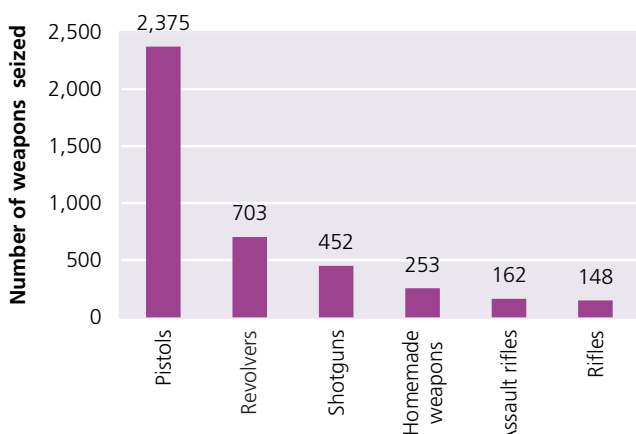
Despite the efforts of local governments and the international community, there were many weapons unaccounted for when the civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua ended. In El Salvador, it is estimated that about 360,000 military-style weapons were not handed over at the end of the war,⁷⁵ and it is alleged that arms caches were moved to neighbouring countries. Similarly, in Guatemala, only 1,824 firearms were handed over at the end of the conflict. In Nicaragua, only 17,000 firearms were surrendered, despite that fact that some 91,000 purported combatants were demobilized.⁷⁶ Nicaragua did eventually destroy over 100,000 firearms, but many more remain in the region. Although the exact number of unaccounted assault rifles remains unknown, estimates have been in the millions.

But while there has been some high-profile use of assault rifles, they are rarely encountered by the police. Since police most often seize weapons when they are used in connection with a crime, the profile of seized weapons should parallel the illicit weapons in use. If assault rifles were used in common crime, they would likely be well represented among seizures. In fact, they comprise a small minority of the weapons seized.

For example, firearms seizures in Guatemala have been remarkably consistent in the volume and composition over the last few years. Between 2008 and 2011, between 4,000 and 5,000 firearms were seized each year, of which between 58% and 60% were pistols. Assault rifles were also seized, but these comprised less than 4% of the total, consistently fewer than the number of homemade weapons seized.

The most popular pistol caliber is 9mm (61% of the pistol seizures), the most popular street round just about everywhere. The same is true in Honduras, where 63% of the pistols seized between 2008 and 2011 were 9mm.

Figure 50: Guatemalan firearms seizures in 2011

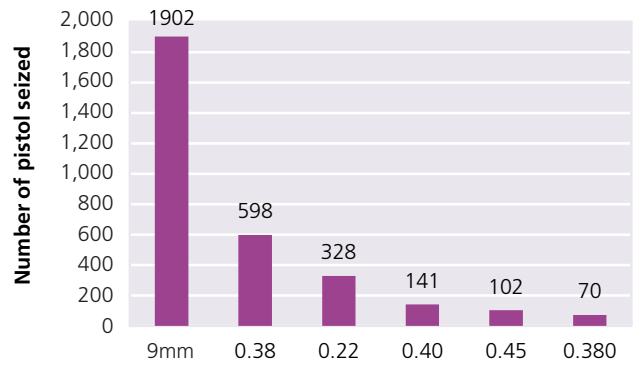


Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Guatemala

75 *Weapons Collection in Central America: El Salvador and Guatemala* (SAND Program on Security and Development, 2000).

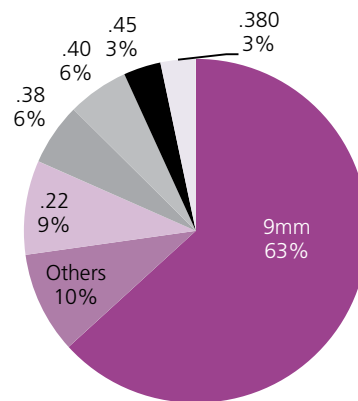
76 Source: MINUGUA, ONUSAL, ONUCA, BICC

Figure 51: Calibers of pistol seized in Guatemala in 2011



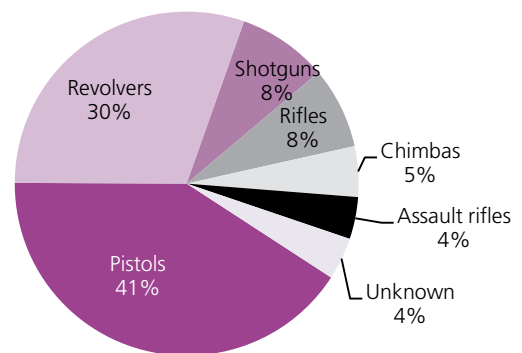
Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Guatemala
 .38 and .380 refer to similar diameter rounds that vary in length; they are not interchangeable

Figure 52: Calibers of pistol seized in Honduras, 2008-June 2011



Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Honduras

Figure 53: Types of firearm seized in Honduras in the first half of 2011



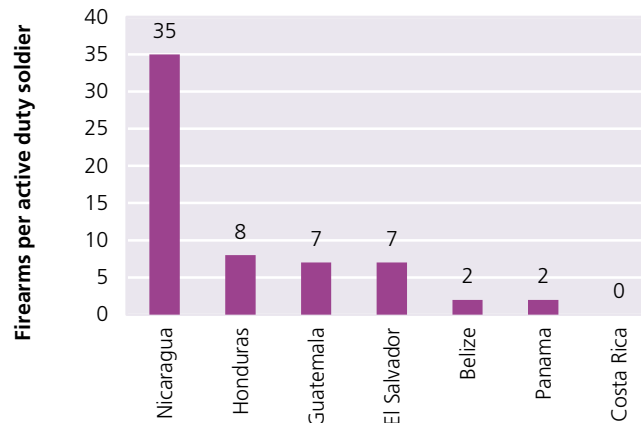
Source: Policía Nacional Civil, Honduras

Revolvers have maintained more popularity in Honduras than Guatemala, but assault rifles are equally uncommon (4% of seizures). So while the military weapons left over from the war are a concern, they are not really what the domestic firearms market is all about.

Rather, the problem is leakage. Guns leak from licit civilian use to illicit use. They leak from licit military and police use to illicit use. And they leak across borders, in every conceivable direction.

Key to leakage is surplus.⁷⁷ If every police officer and soldier had only the weapons needed for immediate use, explanations would be called for when a weapon went missing. Unfortunately, several countries in the region run rather large surpluses, the legacy of military downsizing during the peace process. Nicaragua, in particular, has a disproportionately large number of guns relative to its number of soldiers, and the country continues to import weapons.

Figure 54: Number of firearms per active duty soldier (or paramilitary member), 2010 (or most recent year available)



Source: Elaborated from IISS, *The Military Balance*, and Small Arms Survey

Over time, the leak has become larger than the source. There are an estimated 2.2 million registered firearms in Central America, of which 870,000 are registered to the security forces and 1.4 million are registered to civilians. In addition, there are an estimated 2.8 million unregistered firearms.⁷⁸ If these estimates are correct, then there are theoretically enough firearms in the hands of civilians to arm one out of every three men in the region.⁷⁹ In practice, however, many of these weapons are likely tied up in caches or private collections. And many of these weapons may be military weapons, not the 9mm pistols that are most in demand.

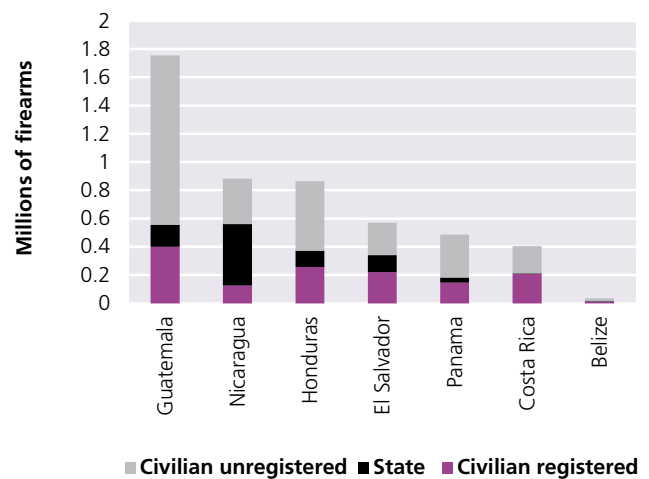
On its face, then, there is no real need to smuggle weapons into Central America. The weapons are already there. But the location of the firearms and the location of the demand are not always the same, so considerable cross border trade exists. It is not really a matter of one country with a surplus feeding another with a shortage; rather, it is a matter of borders becoming irrelevant when someone wants to buy a gun.

⁷⁷ There is some evidence that Mexican organized crime groups have acquired grenades and landmines from Central American countries, in particular El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. According to public sources, these arms were stolen from military deposits in Central America to be then sold in the black market by Mexican organized crime groups.

⁷⁸ *Latin America country data*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2012. There is broad consensus on the number of illegal weapons in Central America. The Oscar Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress in Costa Rica estimates that there are some 2.85 million illegal firearms in Central America. A recent UNODC meeting of experts in Mexico City put the figure at 3 million.

⁷⁹ There are just under 13 million men aged 15 to 64 in the seven countries of Central America.

Figure 55: Registered, state, and unregistered firearms in Central America, 2011 (or latest year available)



Source: Small Arms Survey, *Latin America country data* (Geneva, 2012)

This is problematic because firearms laws vary between countries. For example, the most popular guns in Guatemala and Honduras are 9mm pistols, which are banned for civilian use in Mexico. Weapons purchased legally in one country can be moved illegally to another for a profit. This kind of regulatory imbalance across borders creates opportunities for organized crime.

How is the trafficking conducted?

Given the overall surplus of weapons in the region, there are two sets of flows: movement of weapons within countries and across the borders within the region, and movement of weapons from Central America to other countries, particularly Colombia and Mexico. Military and police stockpiles in Honduras, El Salvador⁸⁰, and Guatemala⁸¹ have been identified as the largest sources of illegal firearms in the region.⁸² This is not surprising, given the levels of firearms violence in these countries. But two other countries are also important in this trade: Nicaragua and Panama.

Nicaragua's role in the gun trade is unexpected. The country had the most successful weapons destruction programme in the region, and its rate of homicide, and firearm homicide in particular, is low by regional standards. But not only does Nicaragua run the highest weapons surplus in the region, it has also been the destination of illicit weapons shipments.

⁸⁰ In April 2012, the Attorney General of El Salvador (Fiscalía General de la República) ordered the arrest of 8 military officials for illegal possession of weapons of war, storage and trade of illegal weapons. See: <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/lodeldia/256730-prision-preventiva-para-militares>

⁸¹ In December 2011, the Military Court of Guatemala started investigating cases related to the disappearance of rifles, pistols, machine guns, rocket launchers, grenades and military ammunitions from several military stockpiles.

⁸² Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG), *Armas de Fuego y Municiones en Guatemala*, (Guatemala, 2009); Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible (IEPADES), *El Tráfico Ilícito de Armas en Guatemala* (Guatemala, 2006).

For example, in November 2011, a shipping container bound from Turkey to Nicaragua was seized in Lázaro Cardenas port on the Pacific coast of Mexico. Nine hundred firearms were hidden inside the container, including pistols and shotguns.⁸³

Panama is important because of its allowance of duty-free arms purchases. North American weapons can be bought legally in these duty-free shops, and are then sent illegally to other Central American countries. This provides a convenient regional shopping center for the 9mm pistols that criminals demand.

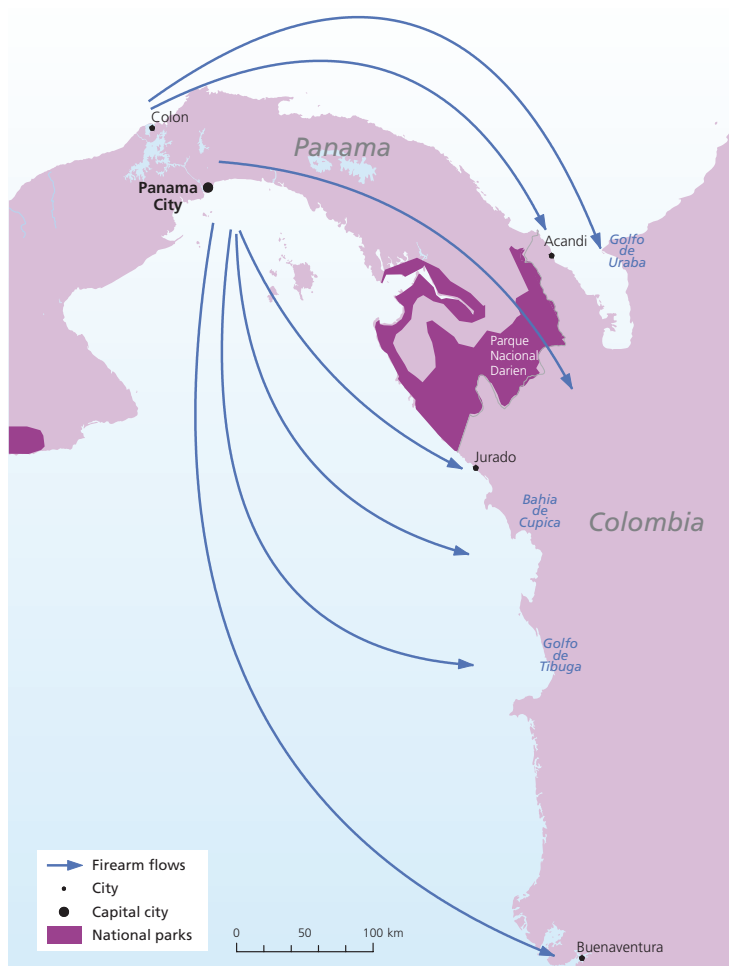
While these countries may supply local arms markets, the markets themselves are located throughout the region. For example, there are open sales of arms and ammunition in the border zone of San Cristóbal and Ocotepeque, on the Honduras-Guatemala border. This is also one of the most violent areas of the region.

There are apparently enough arms in Central America to allow substantial export, particularly of military arms. Colombia has traditionally been one of the main destination markets for these weapons. A study produced this year by UNODC estimates that 36% of the illegal firearms trafficked to Colombia originate in Central America, particularly from Nicaragua and Panama. One route involves Nicaraguan firearms transported by land or sea, often together with other merchandise, to Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia.⁸⁴

There has also been considerable evidence of trafficking of Central American arms to Mexico. It has been alleged that half the military grade weaponry recovered in Mexico originated in Central America.⁸⁵ Many of the hand grenades used by the Mexican drug trafficking organizations come from Guatemalan military stocks. Heavy arms recovered in Mexico have been traced to United States sales to the Honduran military. Thousands of firearms and ammunition, as well as hand grenades, have been recovered in Chiapas, right over the Guatemalan border. Hand grenades have also been recovered in large numbers in Guatemala and El Salvador. The Guatemalan Pacific coast (particularly the San Marcos province) is also believed to be an important trafficking point for firearms coming from Panama and heading to Mexico.⁸⁶

Within the region, since guns are available virtually everywhere, there is no particular pattern or technique for

Map 11: Firearm flows from Panama and Central America to Colombia



Source: UNODC, elaborated with information from UNODC Field Office in Bogotá, Colombia

moving them, any more than there is one particular pattern or technique for moving automobiles. Sellers look for buyers and buyers look for sellers, without much regard to national boundaries.

Although there is a wide range of weapons available and prices cited are generally very low, not everyone can afford to access them. Street gangsters, particularly in the poorer countries, often arm themselves with *armas hechizas*, also

Armas hechizas collected in Nicaragua



Source: Róger Olivas R., *El Nuevo Diario*, Managua (Nicaragua)

83 EFE. "Mexican authorities make record arms seizure". 28 November 2011.
 84 Stohl, R. and D. Tuttle *Small Arms Trade in Latin America*. Washington D.C., North American Congress on Latin America, 2008.
 85 Ibid.
 86 Ibid.

known as “*chimbos*” in the region. These are usually bits of pipe welded or strapped to handles with a firing pin, designed to fire a single shotgun shell, and prone to blowing up. The situation in Central America is similar to the situation in West Africa, where, despite a surplus of military weapons, the poor often rely on “craft weapons” of this sort.

Who are the traffickers?

Just as there are no clear trafficking routes when guns flow every direction, there is also no clear trafficker identity. People of all sorts can become involved in moving guns for profit on a full time or a part time basis. But there is also strong evidence of involvement by both corrupt officials and territorial organized crime groups.

The core role of the police and military in supplying guns to criminals is not unusual – in many developing regions, unpaid or underpaid police and military officers sell or rent their firearms as a way of supplementing their income. The risk is particularly acute where there are large military stocks relative to the number of active duty military. In Honduras, all firearms sales are controlled by the military. This has not, however, prevented criminals from accessing guns.

There have been repeated allegations that drugs are being traded for guns, but the two are rarely found in the same place at the same time. At one time, relations between the Colombian FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) and Nicaraguan groups were believed to be a key conduit for weapons for drugs exchanges, but there is little recent evidence of this trade. The Armed Forces of Honduras have found weapons of the same type and origin in the possession of both Zetas-linked traffickers and *mara* members. Although this was taken as evidence of collaboration, it could be nothing more than a common source of weapons.⁸⁷

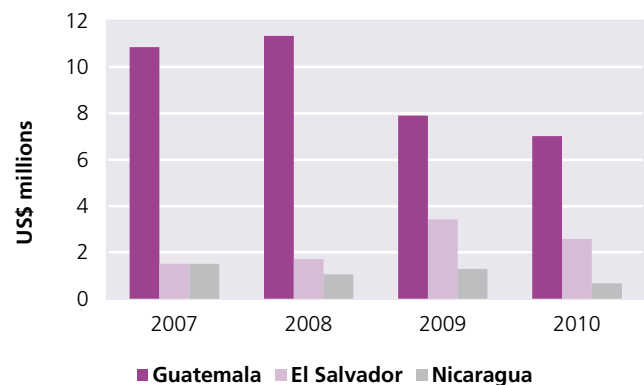
How big is the flow?

Prices for illicit firearms vary, but tend to be exceedingly low, suggesting a saturated market. Though prices vary between countries, recent research found that an AK-47 could be had for between US\$200 and US\$400.⁸⁸ Smaller arms may sell for considerably less. With 2.8 million illicit arms, this suggests the sum value of all the illegal arms in the region would not exceed US\$500 million. The annual trade is likely to be some small fraction of this.

The number of licit arms Central America continues to grow, and with it, the potential for diversion. Despite

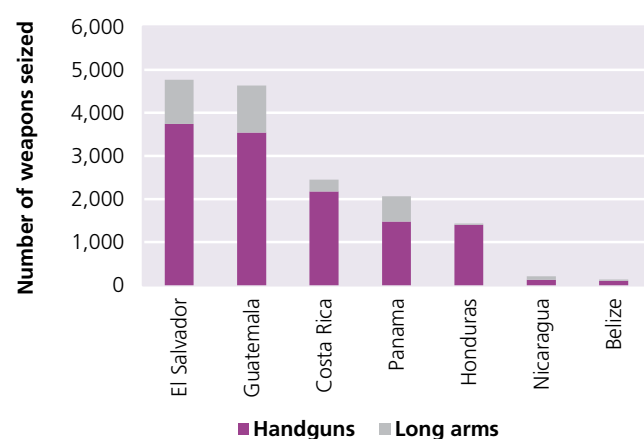
having an impressive number of arms, some countries in the region continue to import firearms. The amounts are generally small: total imports for Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua in 2010 amounted to about US\$11 million. If the illicit trade tracked the licit trade proportionate to the relative sizes of licit and illicit markets, this would suggest illicit imports of around US\$4.5 million. This would be a sub-set of the total market, which is also comprised of a lot of internal trade. Based on UN COMTRADE data, most of these imports came from the United States.

Figure 56: Declared value of firearms imported in 2010



Source: Sistema de Estadísticas de Comercio de Centroamérica

Figure 57: Firearm seizures in Central America in 2010



Source: Comisión de Jefes (as), y Directores (as) de Policía de Centro América, México y el Caribe. Anuario Estadístico Regional, 2010

If everyone who wanted an illicit firearm had one, then new purchases would be necessary only to replace lost weapons. Nearly 16,000 firearms were seized in Central America in 2010, over 80% of which were handguns. This is about 1,000 more than in 2009. At an outside price of US\$200 per weapon, this would suggest an annual market value of US\$3.2 million. But it is likely that the market is, in fact, growing, as users of homemade weapons seek to upgrade to formal firearms.

The regional police chiefs' commission estimates that firearms trafficking is worth between US\$24 million and US\$25 million, but this estimate includes Mexico and the

87 “Central America: Mexican cartel “Los Zetas” use “Mara Salvatrucha” gangsters as soldiers in drug war”. The Americas Post. See: <http://www.theamericaspostes.com/3172/central-america-mexican-cartel-los-zetas-use-mara-salvatrucha-gangsters-as-soldiers-in-drug-war/>

88 This is the same price cited in Colombia. Small Arms Survey, ‘What price the Kalashnikov? The economics of small arms.’ *Small Arms Survey 2007*. Geneva: SAS, 2007, chapter 8.

Dominican Republic.⁸⁹ If seizures were proportionate to market share, then this estimate can be scaled down to about US\$14 million for Central America. Based on the discussion above, this seems a reasonable estimate for the region. At US\$200 per firearm, this would represent some 70,000 arms annually.

Implications for responses

As stated by the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, an important step would be to have a proper accounting of all the weapons in the region. Most of the data used in this chapter are estimates, including those of official state holdings. It is presently impossible to tell whether a particular illegal weapon was once part of state stocks, because some countries do not record the serial numbers of the weapons they hold. This is not uncommon in developing countries but, given the state of firearm violence in the region, this informational disarray should be addressed.

Secondly, as detailed in the Firearms Protocol, ammunition flows need to be regulated. Even if it is impossible to control all the weapons currently in circulation, each active gun requires a continual inflow of bullets. Rather than trying to clean up the legacy of the past, it might be more effective to put in place procedures whereby all ammunition is registered, imports accounted for, and purchases centrally recorded.

In time, though, further efforts need to be made to reduce the number of illegal arms in circulation. Police in region are presently seizing 16,000 guns per year. Even if no more firearms were to enter the market, it would take 188 years to remove all the guns from the streets at this rate. In Honduras, for example, there are almost four times as many firearm homicides as there are firearms seized. Further targeted operations should be conducted with the aim of disarming the most violent areas.

Finally, military holdings need to be rationalized in some countries. In the Northern Triangle and Nicaragua, there do not appear to be enough soldiers to justify the standing weapons holdings. The international community can help in disposal efforts, such as the Organization of American States (OAS) mobile arms destruction machine. This device uses mechanical grinders to destroy the produce of local weapons collection efforts on site.

⁸⁹ Comisión de Jefes (as), y Directores (as) de Policía de Centro América, México y el Caribe. Anuario Estadístico, 2010, p. 49.