

Drips and Drabs

The Mechanics of Small Arms Trafficking from the United States

Introduction

There are over 550 million firearms in worldwide circulation. That's one firearm for every 12 people on the planet. The only question is: How do we arm the other 11? (Lord of War, 2005)

This iconic line from the 2005 film *Lord of War* conveys widely held assumptions about international arms traffickers: that they are ambitious, well-connected, globe-trotting entrepreneurs who single-handedly arm criminals and militias throughout the world. The film's fictional protagonist, Yuri Orlov, is based on five actual arms dealers, including Russian businessman Viktor Bout, whose vast global network of shell companies and unsavoury clients earned him the moniker 'the Merchant of Death' (Gilchrist, 2005). The composite image of Bout and his peers has become the archetypal arms trafficker, the image that comes to mind whenever the illicit arms trade is discussed. Yet most arms traffickers bear little resemblance to that image.

The 'merchants of death' do indeed fuel conflicts and stock the arsenals of dictators,¹ but there is little evidence to suggest that they dominate the illicit arms trade. Most arms trafficking is less flashy, less centralized, and even more difficult to stop. The following Issue Brief analyses this side of the illicit small arms trade, which receives far less attention than the multi-ton shipments arranged by rogue brokers. To this end, the Small Arms Survey compiled a database from hundreds of pages of documentation on 159 prosecutions of arms smugglers in

US courts. These documents reveal, often in great detail, the modes of transport, concealment methods, and smuggling techniques employed by the arms traffickers studied, few of whom conform to the 'merchant of death' stereotype.

The main findings of this Issue Brief include the following:

- Robust arms export licensing regimes are necessary but not sufficient for stopping small arms trafficking. Many of the traffickers studied did not apply for arms export licences or attempt to exploit licensing exemptions; they simply bypassed the licensing system entirely. At the same time, recent examples of attempted and successful diversion of authorized small arms exports highlight the continued need for rigorous licensing and post-shipment end-use monitoring.
- Arms trafficking from the United States goes well beyond gun-running to Mexico. Traffickers in the 159 cases studied shipped weapons, parts, ammunition, and accessories to at least 46 countries and foreign territories on six continents. Intended recipients of these items range from Honduran farm workers to a Finnish motorcycle gang.
- The illicit trade in parts and accessories for small arms is more significant than commonly assumed. Networks that traffic in firearms parts are among the most prolific and geographically expansive of the smuggling operations studied.
- Partnerships between law enforcement and the private sector are

essential to preventing arms trafficking and to dismantling trafficking networks. In many of the cases studied, trafficking schemes were first detected by shipping companies, firearms retailers, or other commercial entities.

This Issue Brief begins by providing brief summaries of the data and methodology applied in this research. It then offers an overview of the types of small arms trafficked in the cases studied, followed by an examination of the modes of transport, concealment methods, and smuggling techniques used by traffickers. The Brief concludes with a policy-relevant analysis of the implications of these cases. Box 1 presents key terms and definitions.

Data and methodology

The data used in this study was collected from documentation on 159 criminal cases tried in the United States from 2010 to 2015.² The cases were identified through a systematic review of US government websites that feature information on US arms trafficking cases, including summaries of arrests, indictments, and convictions posted online by the US Attorney's Offices in 94 federal districts. Additional documentation on these cases is available through Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER), an online repository of documents from US federal courts. The Survey's database does not include cases that consist solely of domestic trafficking or those in which the trafficked items were not shipped from or through the United

Box 1 Terms and definitions

This Issue Brief analyses trafficking in small arms, light weapons, their parts, accessories, and ammunition.

The term **small arms** refers to the following items:

- revolvers and self-loading pistols;
- rifles³ and carbines;
- shotguns;
- sub-machine guns; and
- light machine guns.

The term **light weapons** refers to:

- heavy machine guns;
- mortar systems of calibres of 120 mm or less;
- hand-held, under-barrel, and automatic grenade launchers;
- hand grenades;
- recoilless guns;
- portable rocket launchers, including rockets fired from single-shot, disposable launch tubes;
- portable missiles and launchers, namely anti-tank guided weapons (ATGWs) and man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS);
- landmines; and
- improvised explosive devices (IEDs).⁴

The Small Arms Survey defines an **accessory** as 'an item that physically attaches to the weapon and increases its effectiveness or usefulness but, generally speaking, is not essential for the basic, intended use of the weapon' (Grzybowski, Marsh, and Schroeder, 2012, p. 245).

In keeping with Survey practice, the term **illicit weapons** refers to small arms and light weapons that are produced, transferred, held, or used in violation of national or international law. This Brief refers to these weapons as 'illicit' rather than 'illegal' to account for cases of unclear or contested legality (Schroeder, 2014, p. 246).

The terms **trafficking** and **smuggling** are used interchangeably and refer to the illicit transfer of weapons across national borders.

intercepted shipments for which there are no court records.⁹

There are several advantages to using data collected from court documents. Due to the high burden of proof that must be satisfied for successful prosecutions, the transfers documented in court cases are more likely to be illicit and intentional—that is, the exporter knowingly and wilfully violated export laws—than seizures documented in other data sources.¹⁰ In addition, court documents are compiled by trained law enforcement personnel, are carefully vetted by prosecutors, and contain key details¹¹ about illicit arms exports that are seldom available in other sources. These details include trafficking routes, modes of transport, smuggling techniques, and concealment methods. Media accounts, academic literature, and other government data sources rarely provide this level of detail.¹²

The mechanics of small arms trafficking from the United States

This section provides a brief overview of the types of weapons trafficked from the United States, which range from 9 mm cartridge casings shipped to Ukraine, to a sample 'landmine' illegally exported to a factory in Egypt.¹³

The vast majority of trafficked materiel identified in the cases studied consisted of firearms and their parts, accessories, and ammunition. Light weapons and their parts were trafficked in only four cases. Firearms were among the items smuggled in two-thirds of these cases and were the only items smuggled in approximately one-third of the cases—that is, they were smuggled without ammunition, parts, or accessories.

Among the most notable trafficking patterns evident from the data are the differences between firearms trafficked to Mexico and those smuggled to other countries. In nearly half of the cases involving Mexico, all of the smuggled firearms were rifles. In contrast, cases of trafficking solely in rifles comprised only 8 per cent of trafficking to other regions (see Figure 1).

States. Also excluded were cases for which key information was unavailable, and certain cases involving undercover operations.⁵

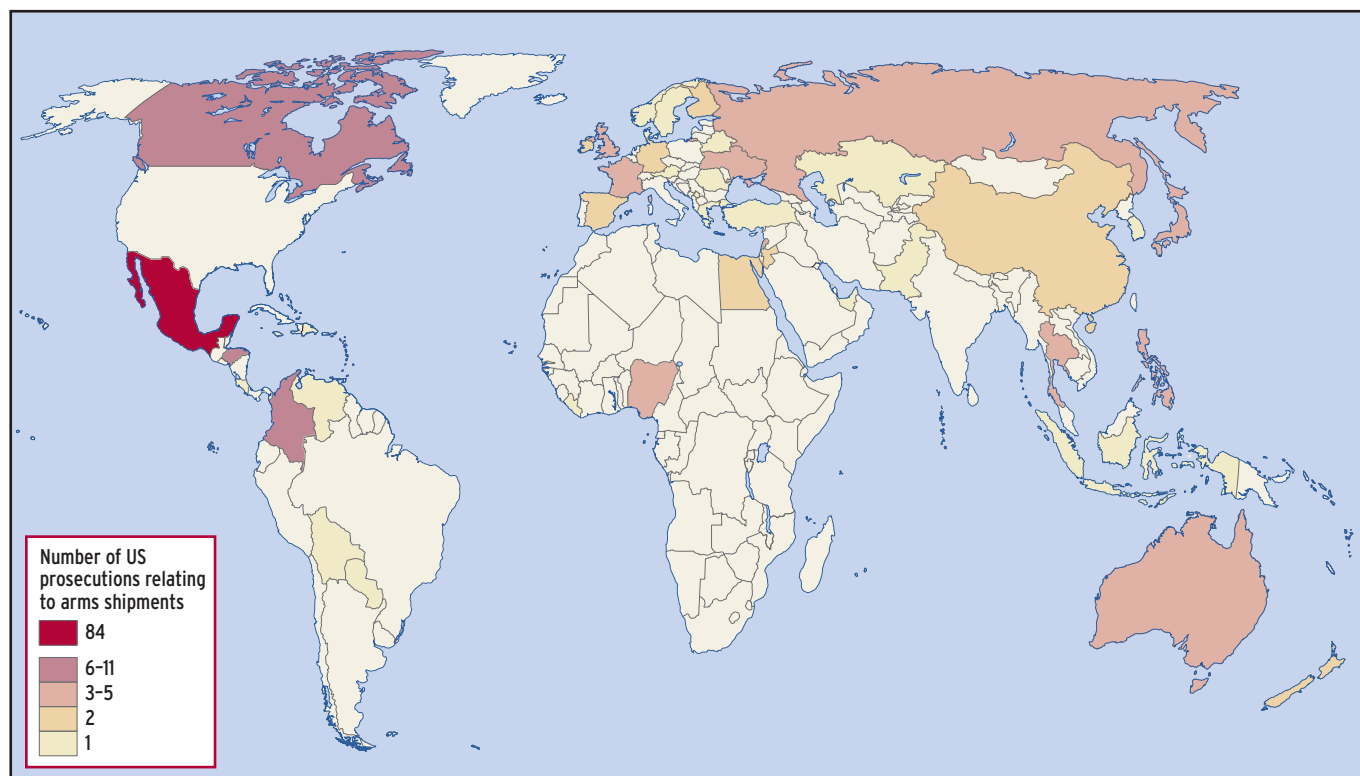
The study focuses on trafficking from the United States because of the ready availability of detailed documentation on criminal cases tried in US courts, including cases of arms trafficking. In addition, the US government's robust arms export regime, sophisticated investigative and law enforcement mechanisms, and strong court system serve as striking contrasts to the underdeveloped governmental institutions in many of the countries profiled in reports on the 'merchants of death'.

The cases studied describe the activities of more than 400 individuals⁶ accused of illegally shipping small arms and light weapons, their parts, accessories, or ammunition to at least 46 countries or foreign territories on 6 continents.⁷ More than half of the cases (84) involved trafficking to Mexico. This is not surprising given Mexico's

proximity to the United States, the long and porous land border shared by the two countries, the high levels of drug-related violence in Mexico, and the two countries' disparate laws on civilian ownership of small arms.⁸ Yet, the drug cartels in Mexico are not the only clients of arms traffickers in the United States. Nearly half of the cases studied involved smuggling to countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Central and South America (see Map 1).

As mentioned above, the database compiled for this study consists of information from documents generated as part of criminal prosecutions of arms traffickers in the United States. There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach. The primary disadvantage is that arms trafficking cases tried in US courts do not account for all documented incidents of illicit arms transfers from the United States. Summaries of border seizures published by US Customs and Border Protection, for example, include references to

Map 1 Destination countries of illicit small arms shipments arranged by traffickers profiled in the 159 cases studied, 2010-15

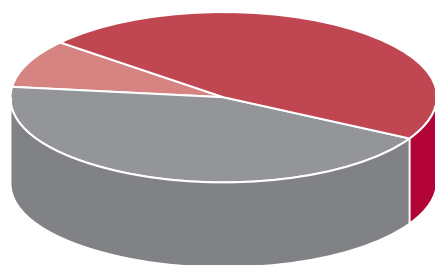


Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

These figures are consistent with other data on trafficking to Mexico. Records of border seizures obtained by the Small Arms Survey show that,

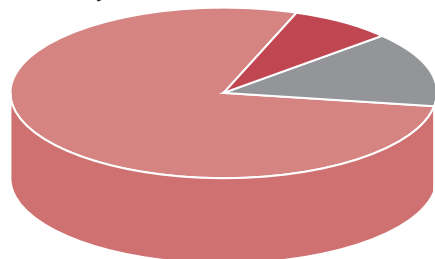
Figure 1 Trafficking of rifles as a percentage of the 159 cases under review

Trafficking to Mexico



- Rifles only (48%)
- Rifles and other firearms (45%)
- Other firearms only (7%)

Trafficking to other countries



- Rifles only (8%)
- Rifles and other firearms (20%)
- Other firearms only (72%)

from 2009 to 2011, 70 per cent of the firearms seized by US agents along the Mexican border were rifles (Schroeder, 2013, p. 290). Indeed, rifles account for a relatively large proportion of seized weapons because Mexican drug traffickers acquire and use rifles at a higher rate than illicit end users in other countries.

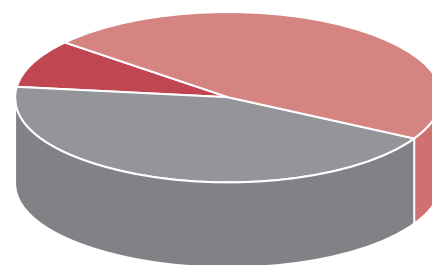
Recent data suggests that the ratio of traced rifles to handguns is decreasing, although it is still higher than in neighbouring countries. Of the weapons seized in Mexico that were submitted for tracing in 2014, 31 per cent were rifles. In contrast, rifles accounted for just 6 per cent of traced firearms submitted to the ATF by authorities in Central America and only 4 per cent in the Caribbean (USDOJ, 2015b, p. 7; 2015c, p. 7; 2015d, p. 8).

There were similar variations in the trafficking of handguns. Whereas pistols and revolvers were among the firearms trafficked to countries other than Mexico in 80 per cent of the cases studied, only 52 per cent of cases of trafficking to Mexico included references to handguns (see Figure 2). This difference is also reflected in data on handguns submitted for tracing to the ATF, although the gap between Mexico

and its neighbours appears to be narrowing. In 2014, handguns seized in Mexico accounted for 61 per cent of all firearms submitted for tracing to

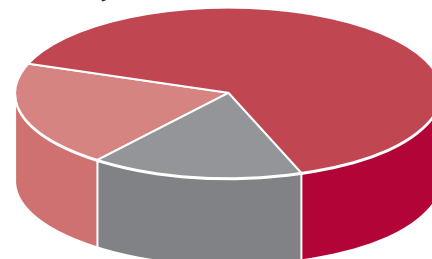
Figure 2 Trafficking of handguns as a percentage of the 159 cases under review

Trafficking to Mexico



- Handguns only (7%)
- Handguns and other firearms (45%)
- Other firearms only (48%)

Trafficking to other countries



- Handguns only (56%)
- Handguns and other firearms (24%)
- Other firearms only (20%)

US authorities, as compared to 55 per cent in 2012 and 32 per cent in 2010 (USDOJ, 2015d). According to US officials, this increase is explained, at least in part, by changing procurement patterns associated with a decrease in the number of ‘running gun battles’ (armed confrontations) between the cartels and heavily armed Mexican military and law enforcement units. As a result, the cartels do not need as many large-calibre rifles.¹⁴

Parts or accessories for firearms were illicitly exported in over one-half of the cases studied and, in 21 cases (13 per cent), they were the only items trafficked. Smugglers of firearms parts were among the largest and most prolific trafficking networks, sending hundreds of shipments to more than two dozen countries. One of the networks, which was based in Massachusetts,

purchased hundreds of firearms parts from online retailers, repackaged them in padded envelopes, and illicitly shipped them through the US Postal Service to recipients in approximately 22 countries. A similar network based in California arranged for more than 240 shipments of rifle and handgun barrels, flash suppressors, and other firearms parts to co-conspirators in Thailand before its leaders were arrested in 2013. US authorities estimate that the shipments were worth more than USD 1 million (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

Comparable trafficking networks located in New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington, DC, illicitly shipped firearms parts to East Asia, Europe, and the Pacific, among other destinations. These cases also highlight the widespread use of the Internet by traffickers. Through their online presence,

smugglers were able to locate and fill orders from customers in nearly every region of the world (see Table 1).

In other cases studied, parts for firearms were assembled into functional weapons in the United States and then illicitly shipped abroad. In 2012, authorities arrested participants in an illicit firearms manufacturing operation located in Corpus Christi, Texas. The participants reportedly purchased firearms kits online and from local gun stores, assembled the kits into AK-style rifles using commercially available frame bending tools,¹⁵ and sold the rifles to a trafficker located near the Mexico border. Some of the weapons were later recovered at crime scenes in Mexico. Court documents suggest that the operation was large; the conspirators purchased at least 900 rifles and receivers in a

Table 1 Selected US-based trafficking networks of parts for firearms

Years of illicit activity	Items trafficked	Destination(s)	No. or value of illicit shipments	Summary
2008-10	Parts for machine guns, laser aiming sights	Canada	74 firearms and 92 weapon sights	US law enforcement officers ordered firearms and accessories and had them sent to their police headquarters. The officers then disassembled the firearms and sold the parts and other items online.
2008-13	Parts for firearms, including 5.56 mm upper receivers and rifle barrels	Philippines	At least USD 200,000 in defence items, including firearms parts	Traffickers based in the Philippines and the United States ordered parts from online sellers and had the items shipped to an intermediary with a US address. The parts were then repackaged and exported to the Philippines.
2009-11	Parts and magazines for various firearms, including high-powered rifle scopes	Denmark and 33 other countries	At least 287 defence items, including firearms parts and accessories	A former US Army officer sold military-grade weapons parts and accessories online to customers in 34 countries.
2010-11	Telescopic and holographic weapons sights, trigger guards, collapsible butt stocks, and other accessories	Canada, France, Hong Kong, New Zealand, South Korea, Spain, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine	Multiple shipments	The operator of an online business in New York sold firearms parts and accessories to customers around the world.
2010-12	Disassembled AR-15 rifles, M4 rifle receivers, M16 rifle bolt carriers, pistol barrels and slides, sub-machine gun barrels	Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Indonesia, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Thailand, and 12 other countries	‘Hundreds’ of parts	An international trafficking network purchased firearms parts from online retailers and illicitly shipped them to recipients in 22 countries.
2010-13	Rifle parts, magazines, night vision scopes, handgun and shotgun parts	Thailand	‘Hundreds’ of firearms parts	Traffickers ordered hundreds of firearms parts and accessories online and had them delivered to a US address. The items were then repackaged and shipped to Thailand.
2010-13	Rifle and handgun barrels, rifle bolt carriers, flash suppressors, other parts for firearms	Thailand	More than 240 shipments exceeding a total value of USD 1 million	Traffickers based in Thailand took orders for firearms parts and magazines. US-based co-conspirators filled the orders online and had the items delivered to US addresses. The parts were then repackaged and sent to Thailand.

Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

single seven-month period (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

Two years later, another Texas-based arms trafficker was arrested for participating in a similar network, buying hundreds of rifle receivers from straw purchasers,¹⁶ and giving them to co-conspirators in the Dallas area who illegally assembled the receivers into fully functional firearms. One of the co-conspirators reportedly had 'significant gun manufacturing tools in his residence, including a large metal press' (Small Arms Survey, n.d.). Other participants in the network drove the weapons across the Mexican border. US authorities claim that at least 600 firearms were trafficked in this manner, and that 47 of the weapons were later recovered by Mexican authorities at crime scenes and during other unspecified 'incidents' (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

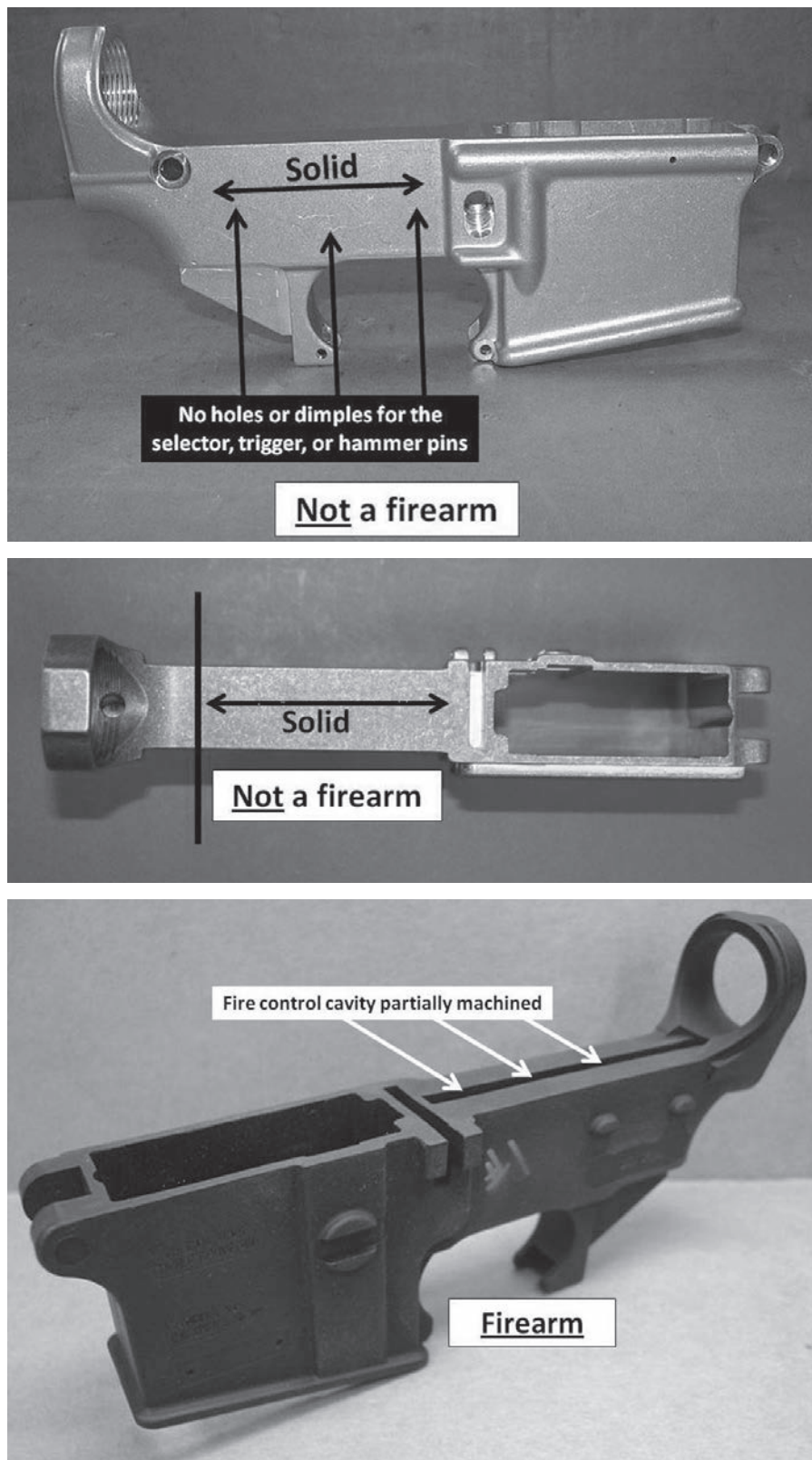
US officials also expressed concern about trafficking of so-called '80 per cent' or 'unfinished' receivers¹⁷— receiver castings or 'machined bodies' that can be converted into functional receivers with minor alterations (see Image 1).¹⁸ While firearms receivers are considered 'firearms' under US law and are subject to the same controls as fully assembled firearms,¹⁹ certain unfinished receivers are categorized as firearms parts and therefore do not require serial numbers and can be sold without background checks (USDOJ, n.d.). As authorities searched the residence of one of the traffickers studied, they discovered tools for making AR-style rifle receivers, firearms parts, and 80 per cent receivers converted into functional receivers for AR-style rifles.²⁰

The most significant example of light weapons trafficking in the cases studied involved the smuggling of parts for hand grenades to Mexico. Some grenade components, including grenade bodies and spent practice fuses, are readily available online and at military surplus stores in the United States. This availability was exploited by a trafficker operating out of Arizona who purchased thousands of grenade parts at military surplus stores and transported them to Mexico, where

they were assembled into functional grenades for drug cartels.²¹ Since US law permits the possession and sale of grenade parts as long as an 'essential component to assemble a [working grenade] is missing' (USDOJ, 2014, p. 14), none of the trafficker's purchases were

illegal. Unless authorities caught him crossing into Mexico with the parts (which is a crime), there was little they could do. By 2010, the trafficker had become a regular customer at surplus stores and was routinely buying their entire inventory of 'dummy'

Image 1 An unfinished receiver compared with one that meets the legal definition of a receiver



Source: USDOJ (n.d.)

grenades and components. The full extent of the trafficker's activities is not publicly known, but records of his purchases suggest that his operation was large (see Table 2).

Modes of transport and concealment methods

The modes of transport employed by the traffickers, and the methods used to conceal the trafficked items, vary significantly. Nonetheless, there are clearly discernible geographic patterns in transport modes and, to a lesser extent, trafficking methods. This section summarizes patterns in trafficking to Mexico and to the rest of the world.

Trafficking to Mexico

The vast majority of the weapons trafficked to Mexico in the cases studied were transported by land.²² There was significantly more variation in the types of vehicles used by smugglers and in the manner in which the trafficked items were concealed. The variety of vehicles and the diverse, often innovative, concealment methods underscore the difficulty of preventing trafficking between countries with long, contiguous land borders.

Image 2 Ammunition hidden in the seat of a minivan that was stopped by US authorities as the driver attempted to cross into Mexico. Douglas, Arizona, 2010.



Source: DHS (2010)

Table 3 lists the 29 cases of trafficking to Mexico in which the mode of transport and method of concealment are specified. Vehicles identified in the cases do not fit any particular profile; traffickers used cars, minivans, sports utility vehicles (SUVs), pick-up trucks, and commercial vehicles of various makes and models. Further complicating

efforts to detect trafficking attempts are the many ways in which weapons are hidden in the smugglers' vehicles. In the cases studied, trafficked weapons were hidden in every conceivable location, including in the fuel tank, above the exhaust system, and under the bumpers. One particularly innovative trafficker replaced his vehicle's

Table 2 Grenade parts reportedly purchased by an Arizona-based trafficker, 2009-10

Date	Store location	Item*	Quantity	Payment method
June-July 2009	Arizona	Grenade bodies	30-40	Unspecified
September 2009	New York	Hand grenade safety clips	1,000	Money order
		Hand grenade spring kits	900	
October 2009	Arizona	Baseball grenade bodies	20	Cash
		Lemon grenade bodies	14	
		Pineapple grenade bodies	56	
December 2009	New York	Hand grenade spoons	100	Money order
		Hand grenade head assemblies	100	
		Hand grenade spring kits	4,000	
		Hand grenade safety clips	4,000	
January 2010	Arizona	Grenade bodies	64	Cash
		Dummy lemon grenades	8	
June 2010	Arizona	Dummy pineapple grenade bodies	29	Unspecified

Note: * As reported in the source document.

Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

Table 3 Documented modes of transport and concealment locations of items trafficked to Mexico, 2010-15

Mode of transport	Vehicle description (year)	Items trafficked	Concealment location
Car	Chevrolet Monte Carlo (2002)	Ammunition	Rear quarter panels and in centre console
	Chrysler 200 (2012)	Firearms, ammunition, accessories	Hollowed-out car battery case containing a smaller motorcycle battery
	Chrysler 300 sedan	Firearms, accessories	Above the exhaust system
	Ford Focus (2002)	Firearms, ammunition	Rear quarter panel of vehicle
	Ford Taurus	Firearms, accessories	Modified factory compartment behind rear seats and in rear quarter panel
	Mitsubishi Eclipse (1997)	Ammunition	Concealed throughout the car
	Unspecified ²³	Firearms, ammunition, accessories	Unspecified 'compartments'
SUV	Cadillac Escalade (2015)	Ammunition, accessories	Glove box, centre console, and in 'a factory compartment behind the stereo buttons'
	Chevrolet Tahoe (2003)	Light weapons parts, ammunition	Spare tire
	Chevrolet Suburban	Ammunition	In doors and wheel wells
	Chevrolet Suburban	Firearms	Engine compartments and front quarter panels
	Chevrolet Suburban	Firearms, ammunition, accessories	Beneath the front and rear bumpers and behind the panelling of the vehicle cargo area
	Dodge Durango (2000)	Ammunition, accessories	Magazines hidden in front wheel well; ammunition hidden in smuggler's purse
	Ford Explorer (1998)	Firearms, accessories	Rear cargo area of tractor trailer
	Jeep Grand Cherokee (1993)	Firearms, accessories	Firearms hidden under the rear seat; magazines in the centre console
Truck, pick-up	Chevrolet	Ammunition	Spare tire
	Chevrolet (2003)	Firearms, accessories, ammunition	Firearms partially concealed behind seat; ammunition boxes in plain view on the passenger's seat
	Dodge Ram	Firearms	Disassembled and concealed in the I-beams
	Dodge Ram (2002)	Ammunition, accessories	Covered in vacuum-sealed wrapping and hidden in engine intake manifold
	Ford F250	Firearms, ammunition, accessories	Fuel tank
Truck, semi-tractor	Unspecified	Accessories	Cab
	Unspecified	Firearms	Gas tank
Van	Toyota Sienna	Accessories, ammunition, parts	Interior quarter panel, under front passenger seat, and in an electric wheelchair
	Unspecified	Ammunition	Engine compartment
Vehicle, unspecified	Unspecified	Firearms, ammunition, magazines	Wrapped in plastic and black electrical tape and secured to undercarriage of vehicle; ammunition hidden in spare tire
Pedestrian	-	Ammunition	In smuggler's waistband and around thighs
	-	Ammunition	Duct-taped to smuggler's body (under baggy clothes)
	-	Firearms, ammunition, accessories	In two duffel bags placed in a large cardboard box
	-	'Military-grade sub munition' ²⁴	In backpack

Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

factory-built battery with a smaller battery encased in a standard car battery shell. Hidden in the space between the smaller battery and the shell were a semi-automatic pistol and 100 rounds of ammunition. Similarly, in 2012, police officers in Texas found five disassembled firearms that had been concealed in the I-beams of a Dodge Ram pick-up truck (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

In other cases, efforts to hide smuggled weapons were minimal or non-existent. Several traffickers were arrested when US authorities spotted weapons and ammunition unconcealed in their cars during routine inspections at the border or during traffic stops. In 2010, border agents at the port of entry in Pharr, Texas, pulled over a grey 2003 Cheverolet pick-up truck that was heading into Mexico. In the cab, they found 6,300 rounds of ammunition 'in plain view in the passenger area of the vehicle'. The agents also found two AK-style rifles that were 'partially concealed behind the seat' (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

Traffickers in four of the cases attempted to smuggle weapons and ammunition into Mexico on foot. In two of those cases, the items were taped to the smugglers' bodies (see Image 3). Authorities recovered surprisingly large quantities of contraband from these traffickers: 300 rounds of 9 mm ammunition in one case and 1,100 rounds of 7.62 mm ammunition in the other. The largest of the four seizures from pedestrians occurred in

February 2015, when police officers noticed a man pulling a large cardboard box on a dolly toward the Mexico-bound walkway of the Gateway International Bridge in Brownsville, Texas. Inside the box, the officers found two duffle bags containing an AK-style rifle, three magazines, and 3,500 rounds of ammunition. The fourth case involved the discovery of a 'grenade'²⁵ in the backpack of a woman who was attempting to cross into Mexico from Del Rio, Texas. Authorities later found 35 more of the devices in a child's bedroom closet in the apartment where a co-conspirator was staying (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

Trafficking to countries other than Mexico

Whereas the vast majority of weapons trafficked to Mexico are driven over the border, smugglers of small arms to other parts of the world use a wide array of transport modes, ranging from padded envelopes unwittingly delivered by the US Postal Service to large maritime shipping containers rented from commercial transport services.

Traffickers used maritime shipping services in at least 20 of the cases studied.²⁶ These services typically transport goods in shipping containers—rectangular metal boxes that are 20 to 40 feet (6–12 m) in length and about 8 feet (2.5 m) tall. Firearms trafficked in shipping containers are rarely shipped alone; most are combined

with other goods, such as clothing, appliances, industrial equipment, and automobiles. Weapons typically comprise only a small portion of these shipments, as illustrated by a seizure of firearms and ammunition bound for Lebanon in 2014. In that case, traffickers hid 7 firearms, 2 rifle scopes, and 9,420 rounds of ammunition among 200 household items in two 40-foot (12 m) containers (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

Illicit maritime shipments of firearms are difficult to detect not only because of the large size of most shipping containers, but also because of the high number of containers that pass through US and foreign ports. The port of Los Angeles, for example, handled more than 730,000 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) of containerized cargo in September 2015 alone (Port of Los Angeles, 2015; see Image 4). A TEU is roughly equal to a standard 20-foot (6 m) shipping container, which means that the equivalent of 24,000 containers of cargo moves through the port each day. Given that illicit small arms are often shipped in small quantities and are hidden under or in household goods or other cargo, intercepting these shipments is difficult, even at well-equipped and adequately staffed ports.²⁷

In 21 of the cases studied, firearms and parts were sent overseas via post.²⁸ These cases are noteworthy for the large number of items trafficked and the geographic diversity of the recipients. In nearly one-third of the cases, authorities identified recipients in more than one country; in five of the 21 cases, recipients were spread out in multiple countries and territories on two or more continents (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).²⁹

Traffickers also used commercial airliners as modes of transport. This is noteworthy given the significant increase in the screening of airline passengers and luggage prompted by the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. In eight of the cases studied, traffickers flying to foreign destinations hid firearms and related items in their luggage. While many of the weapons were discovered and seized by authorities prior to departure, some appear

Image 3 Traffickers arrested for attempting to smuggle ammunition into Mexico, 2014



Source: DHS (2014)

Image 4 The Port of Los Angeles/Long Beach is one of the largest and busiest ports in the US



Source: CPB

to have passed undetected through US airports. In March 2010, Kosovar authorities found two disassembled pistols in the luggage of a US citizen on a flight from Washington, DC. Six months later, the same individual was detained at Vienna airport after Austrian authorities found another disassembled pistol in the lining of his checked luggage (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

That same year, US authorities uncovered a much larger operation. The trafficker, who lived in North Carolina, smuggled 63 firearms to the UK on nine separate commercial airline flights from February to July 2010, according to court documents. The firearms were disassembled and hidden in multiple pieces of luggage. When a Transportation Security Administration officer found one of the shipments, the trafficker reportedly told her that he was a salesman returning from a gun show and that the weapons were not in working order. The officer apparently found his story convincing. After running a check on the serial numbers,

she allowed the trafficker to ‘continue on with his travel’, which included a connecting flight to Manchester. Firearms purchased by the trafficker were later used in shootings and other violent crimes in Manchester, Liverpool, and elsewhere in the UK (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

Methods used to conceal trafficked weapons varied depending on the sophistication of the trafficking operation and mode of transport, but there were also some notable similarities. Trafficked firearms were often disassembled, wrapped in duct tape or aluminium foil, and hidden in or under various household items (such as video game systems, tools, clothing, exercise equipment, and furniture). These techniques were used by traffickers who had clients in different regions of the world and who employed different modes of transport.

Many of the trafficked items were thoroughly concealed. Traffickers in Louisiana hid firearms bound for Lebanon in furniture configured spe-

cifically for smuggling, including a wooden table with a false compartment. In other cases, weapons were hidden in containers within containers. In 2010, customs agents in Puerto Cortez, Honduras, opened a shipping container from Miami, Florida, after detecting ‘abnormalities’ with an ion scanner. The contents of the container included several boxes and crates filled with clothes and other personal items. Inside one of the crates, authorities found two large, white PVC cylinders with caps on each end. The officials opened the cylinders and found two Coleman beverage coolers, one in each cylinder. The coolers were filled with green paint and, submerged in the paint, were two handguns—a .357 revolver and a 9 mm pistol. Honduran authorities then found three more pistols wrapped in duct tape and foam that were hidden in a CD organizer. That the operator of the scanner was able to detect a handful of thoroughly concealed handguns in one of the thousands of shipping containers that

Table 4 Use of automobiles in transcontinental small arms trafficking, 2010-15

Dates of illicit activity	Trafficked items	Mode of transport	Destination	Case description/role of automobile
2007-10	Firearms, ammunition, accessories	Maritime shipping	Honduras	A Florida-based arms trafficking ring sent hundreds of firearms to Honduras in shipping containers with car parts and other household goods.
2008-10	Firearms, ammunition	Maritime shipping	Nigeria	In September 2010, authorities discovered nine firearms and 3,700 rounds of ammunition in a Nissan Xterra that was being shipped to Nigeria. Traffickers had hidden the weapons in a box that was placed in the false bottom of a metal chest.
2009-10	Firearms	Common carrier	Bolivia	Traffickers shipped firearms to Bolivia in boxes misidentified in shipping documents as 'auto parts'.
2009-12	Firearms	Maritime shipping	Nigeria	The owner of an export business helped a trafficker to hide eight handguns in a vehicle that was placed in a shipping container and exported to Nigeria.
2009-12	Firearms, ammunition	Maritime shipping	Liberia	The trafficker purchased handguns at US gun shows, shipped them to Liberia, and then sold them himself. At least one of the transfers was exported in a shipping container with other items, including vehicles.
2010-13	Accessories	Unclear	Russian Federation	A trafficker based in the Russian Federation enlisted straw purchasers to procure firearms accessories online and send them to the Russian Federation by various means, including by concealing the accessories inside 'chopped-up car parts'.
2011	Firearms	Maritime shipping	Egypt	A trafficker hid six shotguns inside the rear seat of a partially dismantled SUV, which was placed in a shipping container with other disassembled vehicles. On customs forms, the container's contents were identified as 'used auto parts'.
2011	Firearms	Maritime shipping	Nigeria	The owner of an international shipping service arranged 12 firearms to be concealed within vehicles and shipped to Nigeria.
2011	Firearms, parts, accessories	Maritime shipping	Puerto Rico	In May 2011, customs officers in Florida found firearms in the 'void spaces' of the door panels of a used van in a shipping container. Officers at that port had seized firearms from the same van model on two other occasions since 2007.
2012	Firearms, ammunition, accessories	Maritime shipping	Greece	Authorities found weapons in the locked trunks of two cars that were being shipped from New York to Italy. Upon arrival, the cars were to be driven to Greece.
2014	Firearms, accessories	Maritime shipping	Jordan	A trafficking network operating out of Florida and Texas purchased used cars at auto auctions, hid weapons in them, and exported them first to Jordan and then on to Africa and other countries in the Middle East.
2014	Firearms	Unclear	Kazakhstan	One of the traffickers reportedly told authorities that he planned to ship the firearms with 'auto parts and hidden in the seats of vehicles that were being shipped by container'.
2014-15	Firearms, accessories	Maritime shipping	Lebanon	In July 2015, customs agents found disassembled handguns inside an engine and transmission in a shipping container filled with cars and car parts. The shipper, who owned an auto parts business, had caught the attention of authorities after purchasing 93 handguns over a single five-month period.

Note: * A co-conspirator told authorities that he 'planned to ship the firearms by FedEx because the container ship would take approximately three months and he needed to sell the guns quickly'. It is not clear whether the defendants were contradicting each other or referring to different shipments.

Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

passes through the port each day is notable and underscores the importance of technology and training in detecting illicit small arms shipments at large shipping hubs.

Smugglers also used automobiles and automobile parts to conceal firearms. This was remarkably common, even in transcontinental trafficking schemes. Cars and other automobiles were used in 13 of the 52 cases of trafficking to other continents in which the mode of concealment was listed. Table 4 provides a brief summary of these cases.

Several trafficking networks hid firearms in used cars that were then loaded into shipping containers and transported by sea to foreign ports. In some of these cases, the cars were purchased specifically for trafficking firearms and other contraband. The most notable case involved a Florida-based smuggling ring run by foreign nationals who bought used cars at auto auctions, hid firearms under the seats, in hidden compartments and in the vehicles' subsystems, and then shipped the cars to Jordan. From there, the shipments were forwarded to Africa and to other countries in the Middle East, where the firearms were sold for a large profit (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).³⁰

Officials interviewed by the Survey indicated that smuggling firearms in this manner is a common practice. In a single year, US authorities identified 12 shipments of illicit firearms hidden in automobiles bound for Ghana, Liberia, and Nigeria.³¹ This practice is partly explained by the pricing structure for maritime cargo shipments.³² Since a smuggler who rents a 20-foot (6 m) intermodal shipping container often pays the same rate for the container whether it contains 20 kg or 2,000 kg of cargo, automobiles can be cost-effective concealment vessels for firearms trafficked overseas.

Interviews with law enforcement officials and court documents shed additional light on the modus operandi of traffickers who smuggle weapons in used cars. According to one agent, '[s]muggling organizations purchase inexpensive vehicles so as to minimize their expenses because the vehicle isn't

the true commodity being shipped' (Small Arms Survey, n.d.). Another agent remarked that the traffickers 'don't even care if the cars run'.³³

The traffickers employed a wide array of additional smuggling tactics and techniques. The most common tactic was the provision of false or misleading information on shipping documents. Traffickers misidentified weapons as 'metal hunting tools', 'steel blocks', and 'toy parts'; provided aliases and false shipping addresses; and purposely undervalued shipments. At least one of the trafficking networks mislabelled firearms parts as 'airsoft' components, apparently assuming that most customs agents cannot tell the difference between firearms and air-gun replicas.³⁴ A law enforcement official interviewed for this study noted that authorities have seen similar mislabelling of firearms parts in other cases.³⁵ Smugglers also attempted to deceive customs agents by removing identifying labels from trafficked items and by shipping instruction manuals and other product-related documents separately (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).³⁶

Surprisingly few traffickers obliterated the serial numbers on smuggled firearms. In only 24 of the 106 cases involving firearms was there any apparent attempt to remove serial numbers; in several of those cases, only some of the markings were defaced. This is not unusual, according to one US official: 'We see more seized weapons with serial numbers than without.'³⁷ Given the importance of serial numbers to law enforcement efforts, it is noteworthy that so few traffickers attempt to remove them. US officials cited several possible explanations. Some traffickers assume that even if weapons with serial numbers are seized, authorities will not attempt to trace them. In other cases, the traffickers and their recipients 'are so brazen that they don't care'.³⁸ Whether serial numbers are removed also depends on the competence of individual traffickers, which helps to explain why firearms in one shipment are defaced while the serial numbers on firearms shipped by another member of the same network are intact. US

officials indicated that online traffickers who operate on the darknet more frequently attempt to remove serial numbers, in part because of their general preoccupation with anonymity.³⁹

Another smuggling technique used in several of the cases is the recruitment of intermediaries with US addresses. US-based intermediaries received arms shipments, repackaged their contents, and illicitly retransferred the weapons to co-conspirators overseas.⁴⁰ This practice serves two purposes. First, it shields the identity of the overseas traffickers by keeping their names, addresses, and other identifying information out of sales and shipping documentation. Second, it enables traffickers to acquire controlled items from law-abiding retailers who refuse to sell weapons to international customers who do not have an export licence.

Among the largest of the networks utilizing US-based intermediaries was a group of traffickers in California, Nevada, and Washington State who illegally shipped firearms parts to Thailand. The network started as a duo—a Thai citizen in Thailand and his younger brother, a lawful permanent resident of the United States. After US authorities intercepted one of their packages, the brothers began recruiting additional conspirators, including a Thai citizen living in California and three US citizens of Thai origin in California and Nevada. Trafficking by this network took three forms:

1. the US-based brother shipped the items to the home or business addresses of the intermediaries, who then forwarded the items to Thailand;
2. the Thai-based brother purchased the items online and had them shipped to the intermediaries, who repackaged the items and shipped them to Thailand; and
3. the intermediaries purchased the firearms parts online themselves and had them shipped to their addresses. They then forwarded the items to Thailand.

The intermediaries were taught several common smuggling tactics, including:

- mailing shipments under false names;
- including false descriptions of firearms parts on customs forms;
- generating invoices with false descriptions of shipped items;
- undervaluing the contents of shipments;
- packing items to avoid detection by X-ray machines and other screening devices employed by customs agents;
- shipping manuals and weapons separately;
- minimizing personal interactions with the staff of shipping services; and
- shipping items from several different locations.

Ultimately, investigators were able to dismantle the network and arrest several of its members, but not before they arranged at least 240 illegal shipments (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

Policy implications

For policy-makers, these cases offer several important insights. The first is that strong arms export licensing and end-use monitoring systems are necessary but not sufficient. There is no indication that any of the traffickers profiled in the 159 cases applied for arms export licences or attempted to manipulate the licensing system. In interviews, US officials confirmed that few, if any, US-based small arms traffickers apply for export licences.⁴¹ Some exporters do attempt to modify arms export documentation illicitly, usually to increase the quantity of items authorized for export. But most of these exports are to legitimate end users.⁴²

Nevertheless, recent examples of attempted and successful diversions of authorized (licensed) exports underscore the continued need for robust arms export controls. A US State Department document obtained by the Small Arms

Survey describes several recent diversion schemes that were detected and, in some cases, thwarted by export licensing officials and end-use monitoring programmes. In one case, licensing officials denied a request to export firearms to a private reseller in South Asia after a check by embassy staff revealed substandard stockpile security, inadequate sales records, and the 'apparent manufacture of unlicensed replicas'.⁴³ In another case, a post-shipment check of 'military-grade' rifles that had been exported from the United States to the armed forces of a former Soviet Republic revealed that the rifles had been illegally re-exported to private end users in Central America.⁴⁴

Data on traces of US-sourced firearms recovered in Canada and several Latin American countries provides additional evidence of the continued need for robust controls on authorized exports. In 2014 alone, the US Bureau

Table 5 US-sourced firearms* recovered in the Western Hemisphere and submitted to the ATF for tracing, 2014

Country name	Traced to a foreign country ^a		Traced to a retail purchaser ^b		Undetermined purchaser	
	No. of traces ^c	% of US-sourced traces	No. of traces	% of US-sourced traces	No. of traces	% of US-sourced traces
Bahamas	16	6	223	80	39	14
Belize	17	49	12	34	6	17
Canada	381	29	601	45	344	26
Costa Rica	13	38	11	32	10	29
Dominican Republic	38	23	49	30	78	47
El Salvador	728	45	194	12	709	44
Guatemala	359	44	190	23	276	34
Honduras	101	23	146	34	187	43
Jamaica	58	20	115	40	116	40
Mexico	273	3	5,173	47	5,615	51
Panama	164	50	41	13	121	37
St. Kitts and Nevis	0	0	11	58	8	42
Trinidad and Tobago	14	19	27	36	34	45
Total	2,162		6,793		7,543	

Notes: * This table lists 'those firearms that were determined by ATF to be manufactured in the U.S. or legally imported into the U.S. by a Federal firearms licensee' (USDOJ, 2015a, p. 7).

a This category refers to 'firearms that were determined by ATF to be transferred from a U.S. Federal firearms licensee to a foreign government, law enforcement, dealer or entity' (USDOJ, 2015a, p. 7).

b This category refers to 'traces in which ATF could determine the first retailer purchaser, that is, a sale executed on an ATF Firearms Transaction Record [...] from a U.S. Federal firearms licensee to a purchaser in the U.S.' (USDOJ, 2015a, p. 7).

c These figures do not necessarily include all seized firearms that were originally exported through the US Foreign Military Sales Program.

Sources: USDOJ (2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2015d); author phone interview with a US government official, 23 October 2015

of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) traced 2,162 firearms to ‘foreign countries’, meaning that the last known authorized recipients were foreign military, law enforcement, or private entities (see Table 5). The data does not indicate when, where, or how the firearms entered the black market. In contrast to the cases of trafficking highlighted above, however, the majority of these 2,162 weapons were probably authorized exports, meaning that they were licensed or otherwise approved for export by the US government.

These and other recent examples of diversion of legally exported small arms⁴⁵ confirm the continued need for robust export licensing systems and post-shipment end-use monitoring programmes.

Further complicating this already daunting policy challenge is the need to prevent trafficking not only in small arms and their ammunition, but also in their parts and accessories. As demonstrated above, there is a massive global black market in these items that extends to nearly every region of the world. Illicit firearms parts and accessories that circulate in this market are often assembled into fully functional weapons, many of which are acquired by drug traffickers and other criminals.

These cases underscore the importance of controlling international transfers of parts and accessories for small arms, and controlling transfers of some of these items (such as receivers) as rigorously as the weapons themselves. Yet controls on parts and accessories are often significantly less extensive or robust than controls on weapons and ammunition. At the international level, this disparity is evident in the Arms Trade Treaty and, to a lesser extent, in the UN Firearms Protocol.

The Arms Trade Treaty requires states parties to control exports of parts for small arms only when the exported items are ‘in a form that provides the capability to assemble’ the weapon (UNGA, 2013, art. 4).⁴⁶ The phrase ‘capability to assemble’ is ambiguous and, according to Small Arms Survey senior researcher Sarah

Parker, it ‘is open to diverse interpretation’ (Parker, forthcoming). States could interpret this wording to mean that the treaty applies only to ‘knock-down kits’—complete sets of parts that can be assembled into fully functional weapons without additional items. Few, if any, of the shipments arranged by the trafficking networks identified in Table 1 were in a form that would require regulation under this interpretation of Article 4 of the Arms Trade Treaty. As explained by Parker:

States parties to the Arms Trade Treaty may choose a more expansive interpretation of this provision that holds that any export of parts (or at least any export of parts specifically or exclusively designed) for small arms and light weapons must be regulated, regardless of the ‘form’ the export takes (Parker, forthcoming).

Even if the treaty is interpreted in this way, however, states are not required to apply several key provisions to shipments of parts, regardless of whether the shipments contain all of the items required to make a fully functional weapon. These provisions include controls on imports, transit, trans-shipment, and brokering, along with requirements for record-keeping, reporting,⁴⁷ and international cooperation (UNGA, 2013, arts. 8–10, 12–15).

Coverage of weapons parts in the UN Firearms Protocol is less ambiguous and more extensive than in the Arms Trade Treaty. The definition of parts and components is comparatively clear and covers:

any element or replacement element specifically designed for a firearm and essential to its operation, including a barrel, frame or receiver, slide or cylinder, bolt or breech block, and any device designed or adapted to diminish the sound caused by firing a firearm (UNGA, 2001, art. 3).

This definition captures most of the firearms parts trafficked in the cases described above.

Furthermore, nearly all of the Firearms Protocol’s key provisions apply to parts. These include provisions on criminalization (UNGA, 2001, art. 5); confiscation, seizure, and disposal (art. 6); record-keeping (art. 7); export, import, and transit licensing and authorization (art. 10); security and preventive measures (art. 11); information sharing (art. 12); international cooperation (art. 13); training and technical assistance (art. 14); and brokering (art. 15).

Notably, neither the Arms Trade Treaty nor the Firearms Protocol requires member states to control international transfers of most accessories for small arms.⁴⁸ Fourteen of the 159 cases studied (9 per cent) involve trafficking solely in accessories, including telescopic, reflex, and holographic weapon sights, night vision and thermal sights, and aiming lasers. These items enhance the utility and lethality of weapons—including trafficked weapons—by increasing their accuracy and range, improving target acquisition speed, and allowing users to operate effectively at night (Grzybowski, Marsh, and Schroeder, 2012, pp. 266–67). Under US law, most of these items are subject to export restrictions, which enables US law enforcement to seize trafficked accessories and prosecute smugglers (USDOC, 1996; USDOS, n.d., part 121.1).

The cases of trafficking identified above also highlight the importance of close collaboration between law enforcement and the private sector. Given the sheer volume of goods that pass through air- and seaports every day, it is impossible for customs and border officers to detect all illicit small arms shipments on their own. They need help from private-sector employees at every stage of the transfer chain—from clerks at gun shops, customer service agents at FedEx outlets, and cargo handlers at commercial shipping services.

In at least 14 of the trafficking cases studied, private-sector employees provided critical assistance to law enforcement agencies. The case of the Arizona-based trafficker accused of

smuggling grenade parts to Mexico is a poignant example of the benefits of an educated and engaged private sector. Throughout the investigation, owners and employees of military surplus stores provided the ATF with information on the trafficker and his purchases, including order histories, his licence plate number, and a description of his vehicle, as well as timely—sometimes very timely—information on purchases. In June 2010, an employee of a surplus store in Phoenix informed the ATF of a purchase of grenade bodies by the trafficker within ten minutes of the sale. One of the stores also redirected a shipment of parts that was ordered by the trafficker to the ATF so that agents could mark the parts before delivering the package to him. These efforts helped to build the case against the trafficker, who was recently extradited to the United States. Similar assistance from private-sector employees facilitated the detection and dismantling of trafficking networks that shipped weapons to Honduras, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Mexico, and Paraguay (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).

Small arms trafficking from the United States defies common stereotypes and assumptions about the illicit arms trade. US weapons are acquired by armed groups and criminals overseas but are not delivered in the overflowing cargo holds of ageing Soviet transport planes. They arrive in dribs and drabs, hidden under clothing and toys in 20-foot shipping containers owned by legitimate companies. This side of the illicit arms trade is more mundane and, in some ways, more challenging to stop than the multi-ton shipments arranged by the merchants of death. Even governments with mature and well-funded export control systems struggle to intercept the thousands of small arms, parts, accessories, and rounds of ammunition that are illegally exported abroad every year. Curtailing this trade requires sustained action by all sectors of society—government and civilian. The first step towards doing so is to recognize this trade for what it really is. ■

Notes

- 1 For a recent example, see UNSC (2015).
- 2 The database includes only cases in which some or all of the trafficking occurred in 2010 or later.
- 3 This category includes all military and civilian rifles.
- 4 The terms ‘small arms’ and ‘light weapons’ are used in accordance with established Small Arms Survey practice. See Schroeder and King (2012, p. 314) and Schroeder (2014, p. 246).
- 5 Cases that involve undercover operations were excluded if: (1) the only weapons trafficked (or intended for trafficking) by the defendants were provided by law enforcement; (2) the only known attempts to traffic weapons were made in response to solicitations from law enforcement; or (3) the only smuggling techniques, methods of concealment, or modes of transport discussed in the court documents concern shipments arranged as part of the undercover operation.
- 6 This estimate includes defendants and unindicted co-conspirators.
- 7 These countries and territories are Australia, Austria, Belarus, Bolivia, Canada, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Finland, France, Gambia, Germany, Greece, Honduras, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo,* Lebanon, Liberia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Paraguay, the Philippines, Romania, the Russian Federation, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and Venezuela. The database also includes information from eight cases of trafficking to US territories, namely Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. (Note: * The designation of Kosovo is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.)
- 8 See Gutiérrez (2013) and Krouse (2014).
- 9 See, for example, DHS (2015a; 2015b).
- 10 Data on border seizures often includes legitimate exports that are temporarily detained because of paperwork issues. Since it is seldom possible to identify and exclude legitimate shipments, many data sets on border seizures are not useful for analysing the illicit arms trade.
- 11 Technical details, such as whether seized items were indeed ‘munitions’ as defined under US law, are often reviewed by munitions experts and export control officers.
- 12 International trace data provides insight into the types, sources, and movement of illicit weapons. Public access to detailed US trace data is limited, however. US government agencies are prohibited from releasing information about individual traces; see GPO (2011). The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is allowed to publish annual statistical reports, but the aggregated data in these reports provides little information on trafficking routes, modes of transport, smuggling techniques, and illicit recipients. The reports are thus useful primarily as a supplement to other data sources. See USDOJ (2015a; 2015b).
- 13 Determining the quantity of weapons and ammunition trafficked by the defendants in these cases is often extremely difficult. Court documents do not always indicate how many weapons were trafficked, nor do they consistently disaggregate weapons smuggled abroad from those trafficked domestically.
- 14 Author phone interview with a US government official, 23 October 2015.
- 15 Author correspondence with firearms expert Rick Vasquez, 25 October 2015. Vasquez also noted that all of the AK receivers used in the production of the rifles were assembled by the traffickers.
- 16 A straw purchaser is someone who buys a weapon on behalf of—or to sell to—a third party.
- 17 Author interview with a US official, 23 October 2015; author correspondence with firearms expert Rick Vasquez, 25 October 2015.
- 18 As described by the ATF, these are ‘receiver blanks, “castings” or “machined bodies” in which the fire-control cavity area is completely solid and un-machined’. These items are not categorized as firearms under US law because they have not ‘reached the “stage of manufacture” which would result in the classification of a firearm per the [Gun Control Act of 1968]’ (USDOJ, n.d.).
- 19 See US House (1968).
- 20 Author correspondence with firearms expert Rick Vasquez, 25 October 2015.
- 21 Author correspondence with firearms expert Rick Vasquez, 25 October 2015.
- 22 The mode of transport is identified in 46 of the 84 cases of trafficking to Mexico. Weapons were smuggled by land in all of those 46 cases.
- 23 Source documents indicate that the traffickers in this case also used unspecified ‘trucks’.

- 24 Court documents also describe these items as ‘grenades’.
- 25 In some of the court documents, the item is referred to as an ‘explosive device’ (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).
- 26 A US official interviewed for this study confirmed that seaborne shipping is the primary mode of transport for small arms trafficking from the United States to the Caribbean, Asia, and the Pacific. Author phone interview with a US official, 23 October 2015.
- 27 US border agents reportedly told the US Government Accountability Office that ‘only a small percentage of vehicles or cargo containers are subjected to secondary inspections’ (Caldwell, 2012, p. 11). For more information on the challenges associated with screening maritime cargo shipments, see Caldwell (2012) and Grover (2015).
- 28 Author phone interview with a US government official, 23 October 2015. US officials note that express mail is a common mode of transport for online traffickers.
- 29 These countries and territories are Australia, Belarus, Canada, China, Colombia, France, Finland, Germany, Honduras, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, New Zealand, Norway, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Romania, the Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Venezuela, and the US Virgin Islands, along with 12 countries that are not identified in court documents.
- 30 The vehicles themselves were also sold overseas. In some cases, the proceeds from illicit sales of weapons smuggled in automobiles were laundered through the purchase of additional used cars (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).
- 31 Author interview with a US government official, 23 October 2015.
- 32 Author interview with a US government official, 23 October 2015.
- 33 Author interview with a US government official, 23 October 2015.
- 34 In an email to a co-conspirator, a trafficker based in Massachusetts points out that he was ‘amazed at how close airsoft parts look to the real thing with [sic] is the biggest reason why I will wright [sic] airsoft on most things when I think I can get away with it’ (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).
- 35 Author phone interview with a US official, 23 October 2015. The official added that the shipment of air gun components for

- conversion into functional weapons is also a significant problem: ‘Some air guns are so good that you can easily modify them into [working] firearms.’
- 36 Examples include traffickers who shipped night vision and thermal imaging riflescopes to Belarus and the Russian Federation, and a network of straw purchasers on the West Coast who shipped firearms parts to Thailand (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).
- 37 Author phone interview with a US official, 23 October 2015.
- 38 Author phone interview with a US official, 23 October 2015.
- 39 Author phone interview with a US official, 23 October 2015.
- 40 In some cases, the traffickers purchased the weapons and had them shipped to the intermediary; in other cases, the intermediary acted as a straw purchaser (Small Arms Survey, n.d.).
- 41 Author phone interview with a US government official, 23 October 2015.
- 42 Author phone interview with a US government official, 23 October 2015.
- 43 Author correspondence with a US State Department official, 22 September 2015.
- 44 Author correspondence with a US State Department official, 22 September 2015. See also Schroeder, Close, and Stevenson (2008, p. 130).
- 45 See USDOS (2013; 2014; 2015).
- 46 The exact wording of the relevant article is: ‘Each State Party shall establish and maintain a national control system to regulate the export of parts and components where the export is in a form that provides the capability to assemble the conventional arms covered under Article 2 (1)’ (UNGA, 2013, art. 4).
- 47 Similarly, the UN Register of Conventional Arms and other mechanisms aimed at improving transparency in the arms trade tend to focus only on complete weapons. Governments are not expected to submit data on transfers of accessories or parts in their annual submissions to the UN Register, even when the transfers are of ‘knock-down kits’ (UNODA, 2007, p. 8). Other sources of data on arms exports provide little, if any, additional information on transfers of parts.
- 48 Silencers are included in the UN Firearms Protocol’s definition of ‘parts and components’ (UNGA, 2001, art. 3). Since the ATT does not define the term ‘parts and components’, some states parties may choose to interpret it to include some accessories. Author correspondence with Small Arms Survey senior researcher Sarah Parker, 14 December 2015.

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About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a global centre of excellence whose mandate is to generate impartial, evidence-based, and policy-relevant knowledge on all aspects of small arms and armed violence. It is the principal international source of expertise, information, and analysis on small arms and armed violence issues, and acts as a resource for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and civil society. It is located in Geneva, Switzerland, at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

The Survey has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, and criminology, and collaborates with a network of researchers, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

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This Issue Brief has been made possible through the support of the Federal Foreign Office of Germany.

