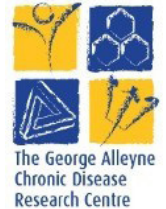


SITUATION UPDATE

November 2024



Trends in Trafficking: Comparing US-based Firearms Trafficking to the Caribbean and Latin America

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KEY FINDINGS

- This Situation Update is an initial analysis of newly acquired US government data on seizures of outbound firearms shipments at US ports. The findings are preliminary and will be checked against data from other sources in future research.
- The data reveals a notable increase in seizures of firearms shipments to both the Caribbean and Latin America from 2016 to 2023. Seizures of shipments to Mexico more than tripled in this period, and seizures of Caribbean-bound shipments increased by 48 per cent.
- Rifles (all models) accounted for a much higher percentage of firearms in shipments to Latin America than to the Caribbean.
- AK- and AR-pattern rifles comprised a higher percentage of rifles seized in Caribbean-bound shipments than in those bound for Latin America, including Mexico. Similarly, shipments to the Caribbean contained a higher percentage of high-capacity pistol and rifle magazines, including magazines capable of holding 50 or more rounds.
- The transport modes of the seized shipments varied significantly between and within the two regions.
- The overwhelming majority of seizures took place in southern US border states, with seizures in Florida comprising nearly 90 per cent of shipments to the Caribbean and almost three-quarters of shipments to Latin American countries other than Mexico.

Introduction

This Situation Update uses newly acquired data from US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to analyse the types, transport modes, and seizure locations of illicit firearms shipments from the United States to the Caribbean and Latin America, and highlights key differences in trafficking dynamics between the latter two regions. The Update is an initial analysis of the data and what it reveals about the similarities and differences between US-based trafficking to the Caribbean and Latin America. In future research the preliminary findings from this analysis will be checked against data from other sources, including data that government agencies in destination states have collected.

Quantities and composition of interdicted firearms shipments

The data indicates that seizures of firearms shipments from the United States to the Caribbean and Latin America¹ have increased significantly since 2016. The number of seizures jumped from 708 in the period 2016–19 to 1,556 in 2020–23, an increase of 120 per cent. The data also reveals significant differences within and between regions, with shipments to Mexico accounting for most of the increase in seizures. The increase in seized shipments

to the Caribbean was notably higher than to Latin American countries other than Mexico, but was modest compared to shipments to Mexico (see Table 1). It is not clear from the data whether the increases are due to improved detection and interdiction capabilities, greater international cooperation, increased trafficking, changes in data collection practices, or a combination of these variables.

Types of seized firearms

The seizure data is consistent with earlier findings that rifles comprise a much lower percentage of arms trafficked to the Caribbean than to Latin America.² Of the 626 firearms seized from Caribbean-bound shipments, just 6 per cent were rifles, as opposed to 35 per cent of firearms in shipments to Latin America (see Table 2).

Most of the rifles bound for Latin America were intended for Mexico, where they are in high demand among drug cartels. In shipments to the rest of Latin America, rifles comprised roughly 27 per cent of seized firearms, which is lower than in shipments to Mexico, but significantly higher than in those to the Caribbean. This is consistent with previous research.³

Seizures of rifles from Caribbean-bound shipments have increased in recent years, jumping from two per

Table 1 Number of seized shipments to the Caribbean and Latin America, 2016–23

Seizure dates	Number of seizures			
	Caribbean	Latin America (Mexico)	Latin America (other countries)	Latin America and the Caribbean
2016–19	93	286	329	708
2020–23	138	1,037	381	1,556
Increase	45 (+48%)	751 (+263%)	52 (+16%)	848 (+120%)

Sources: US CBP (2021; 2023; 2024a)

1 The Caribbean countries for which the Small Arms Survey requested and obtained data are Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Curacao, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago, and the British overseas territories of Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, and Turks and Caicos Islands. The Latin American countries are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.

2 See Fabre et al. (2023, p. 67).

3 See Fabre et al. (2023, pp. 67–69).

Table 2 Types of firearms seized from shipments bound for the Caribbean and Latin America, 2016–23

Firearm type	Caribbean		Latin America (Mexico)		Latin America (other countries)		Latin America (total)	
	Quantity	%	Quantity	%	Quantity	%	Quantity	%
Handguns	572	91%	1,348	52%	487	65%	1,835	55%
Pistols	555	89%	1,265	49%	465	62%	1,730	52%
Revolvers	17	3%	83	3%	22	3%	105	3%
Rifles	35	6%	976	38%	199	27%	1,175	35%
Shotguns	19	3%	254	10%	58	8%	312	9%
Other	0	0%	14	<1%	2	<1%	16	<1%
Total	626		2,592		746		3,338	

Note: Totals may not add up due to rounding.

Sources: US CBP (2021; 2023; 2024a)

cent of all seized firearms in 2016–19 to eight per cent in 2020–23. At least in part, the data reflects the intensification of conflict in Haiti,⁴ where gang members are seeking the same models of firearms favoured by Mexican drug cartel members, including AK- and AR-pattern rifles⁵ and, to a lesser extent, .50 calibre rifles.⁶

AK- and AR-pattern rifles were the most frequently seized models of rifles in shipments to both the Caribbean and Latin America, which is not surprising, given the well-documented demand for these rifles in

parts of Latin America. What is surprising, however, is that AK- and AR-pattern rifles were seized at a higher rate in shipments to the Caribbean than in shipments to Latin America, including Mexico (although the small sample size of rifles seized in Caribbean-bound shipments may skew this finding). Seventy-seven per cent of seized rifles⁷ bound for the Caribbean were AK- and AR-pattern models, whereas these models comprised just 48 per cent of rifles bound for Mexico and 61 per cent of rifles bound for other Latin American countries (see Table 3). Note that the *total quantity* of AK- and AR-pattern

Table 3 AK- and AR-pattern rifles seized from shipments to the Caribbean and Latin America, 2016–23

Seized rifles by pattern	Caribbean		Latin America (Mexico)		Latin America (other countries)	
	Quantity	%	Quantity	%	Quantity	%
AK- and AR-pattern rifles	27	77%	419	48%	103	61%
AK-pattern	13	37%	254	29%	57	34%
AR-pattern	14	40%	165	19%	46	27%
Other models	8	23%	445	52%	65	39%
Total^a	35		864		168	

Note: ^a Rifles for which the model is unspecified or unclear are excluded from these totals.

Sources: US CBP (2021; 2023; 2024a)

4 The majority of the seized rifles were bound for Haiti (eight rifles) and the Dominican Republic (13 rifles), which is a transit point for firearms trafficked to Haiti. See UNSC (2024, p. 16).

5 While AK-pattern (and AR-pattern) rifles sold in the United States are semi-automatic, increasing reports of the trafficking and use of so called 'conversion devices' in the Caribbean raise concerns that more of the region's criminals may seek to transform these rifles into fully automatic weapons.

6 See UNSC (2023, p. 24) and US DOJ (2024).

7 Only rifles that were identifiable by pattern or model are included in this figure.

rifles seized in shipments to Latin America is still significantly higher than the quantity found in shipments to the Caribbean.

Seized much less frequently were .50 calibre rifles. Just one per cent of interdicted rifles bound for Mexico were identified as .50 calibre,⁸ and none of the rifles identified by model or calibre in shipments to other Latin American countries was of this calibre. The highly publicized discovery of two .50 calibre rifles in an interdicted Haiti-bound shipment in 2022 is the only such seizure from shipments to the Caribbean (US ICE, 2022).

The data also reveals that high-capacity magazines (that is, magazines holding more than ten rounds) comprise the majority of magazines found in the interdicted shipments. Notably, 93 per cent of magazines found in Caribbean-bound shipments that were identifiable by capacity were high capacity—11 per cent higher than in shipments to Mexico. Shipments to the Caribbean also contained the largest percentage of magazines capable of holding 50 or more cartridges (see Table 4), all of which were found in shipments to the Dominican Republic and Trinidad and Tobago.

The data indicates that the seizure rate of high-capacity magazines is increasing in Caribbean-bound shipments and decreasing in shipments to Latin America. High-capacity magazines destined for the Caribbean increased from 84 per cent of all seized magazines in 2016–19 to 95 per cent in 2020–23. In contrast, high-capacity magazines as a proportion of seized magazines found in shipments to Latin America fell from 94 per cent in 2016–19 to 74 per cent in 2020–23. Nearly all of the largest-capacity magazines (30 or more rounds) in the most recent Caribbean-bound shipments were intended for recipients in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Modes of transport

The seizure data allows for the first quantitative comparison of the modes of transport used in US-based firearms trafficking to the Caribbean and Latin America (see Table 5). As in the previous sections, the data supports some common assumptions about trafficking to these regions and challenges others. The data shows that the most frequently cited mode of transport for shipments to the Caribbean and Latin

Table 4 Seized firearms magazines identified by capacity, 2016–23

Magazine capacity		Caribbean		Latin America (Mexico)		Latin America (other countries)	
Type	No. of rounds	No. of magazines	%	No. of magazines	%	No. of magazines	%
Standard	10 or fewer	36	7%	842	18%	113	14%
High capacity	11–29	239	45%	794	17%	266	32%
	30–49	189	36%	2,782 ^b	61%	383	46%
	50+	55	10%	87	2%	22	3%
	'High capacity' (unspecified)	9	2%	55	1%	42	5%
	Total high capacity	492	93%	3,718	82%	713	86%
Total^a		528		4,560		826	

Notes: ^a These totals do not include seized magazines of unspecified capacity that were bound for the Caribbean (995 magazines), Mexico (4,281 magazines), and other Latin American countries (1,553 magazines). ^b This figure includes a single interdiction of 1,060 magazines. If this interdiction is excluded, the proportion of magazines with the capacity to hold 30–49 rounds drops to 38 per cent.

Sources: US CBP (2021; 2023; 2024a)

⁸ This data is consistent with other data on .50 calibre rifles trafficked to Mexico. According to the US Government Accountability Office, .50 calibre rifles comprised 0.5 per cent of 'weapons recovered in Mexico and traced to the United States that were recovered within 3 years of initial purchase' (US GAO, 2021, p. 4).

Table 5 Modes of transport of seized arms shipments intended for the Caribbean and Latin America, 2016–23

Transport mode ^a	Caribbean		Latin America (Mexico)		Latin America (other countries)	
	No. of shipments	%	No. of shipments	%	No. of shipments	%
Auto	8	3%	1,002	76%	3	<1%
Bicycle	–	–	2	<1%	–	–
Bus	–	–	62	5%	–	–
Commercial aircraft	91	39%	15	1%	380	54%
Commercial truck	–	–	12	<1%	2	<1%
Commercial vessel	79	34%	3	<1%	94	13%
Express consignment ^b	20	9%	11	<1%	19	3%
Mail	4	2%	19	1%	119	17%
No transportation involved	4	2%	–	–	3	<1%
Other	21	9%	3	<1%	88	12%
Pedestrian	–	–	56	4%	–	–
Private aircraft	3	1%	2	<1%	–	–
Private vessel	1	<1%	1	<1%	2	<1%
Truck	–	–	81	6%	–	–
Van	–	–	54	4%	–	–
Total	231		1,323		710	

Notes: ^a Transport mode description taken verbatim from the source.⁹ ^b The US Government Accountability Office describes these shipments as ‘package[s] handled by express consignment carriers such as FedEx and the United Parcel Service’ (US GAO, 2022, p. 28).

Sources: US CBP (2024a; 2024b)

America other than Mexico was commercial air cargo, not maritime shipping, which is frequently cited as the primary mode of trafficking to the Caribbean. Maritime shipments to the Caribbean only accounted for a little over a third of all seizures and were second to commercial air seizures. Even fewer seizures to Latin America were found on maritime vessels, comprising just 13 per cent of all seizures.

This data appears to be at odds with claims that most US-sourced firearms are trafficked to the Caribbean by sea, but may be a bit misleading in this regard. A US law enforcement official interviewed by the

Survey reiterated the conventional belief that most trafficking to the Caribbean is via maritime shipping. The high percentage of seized air shipments, he explained, ‘is likely a data collection issue. Air shipments are more heavily scrutinized and therefore trafficking attempts are more likely to be detected’ (US ICE, 2024). Corroborating this claim—and fully reconciling it with the data—requires access to data that is not currently in the public domain.

The data is consistent with previous research indicating that the vast majority of firearms

9 The US Department of Homeland Security provides the following descriptions of these transport modes: Auto: Non-commercial personal vehicle; Bus: Non-commercial bus; Commercial Air: Commercial cargo shipping aircraft; Commercial Truck: Commercial cargo shipping truck; Commercial Vessel: Commercial cargo shipping vessel; Express Consignment: Express consignment carrier facility; Mail: Mail; No Transportation Involved: Conveyance was not used in the commission of the crime; Other: Conveyances not otherwise categorized, such as ultralight aircraft, canoes, etc.; Pedestrian: Person(s); Private Aircraft: General aviation aircraft; Train: Commercial and Non-commercial trains; Truck: Non-commercial truck; Van: Non-commercial van; Vessel: Non-commercial vessel (US OHSS, n.d.).

Table 6 Seizure location of arms shipments bound for the Caribbean and Latin America aggregated by CBP field office, 2016–23

Region (CBP field office ^a)	Caribbean		Latin America (Mexico)		Latin America (other countries)	
	No. of shipments	%	No. of shipments	%	No. of shipments	%
Atlanta, Georgia	3	1%	–	–	3	<1%
Baltimore, Maryland	–	–	–	–	7	<1%
Chicago, Illinois	11	5%	17	1%	31	4%
El Paso, Texas	–	–	115	9%	2	<1%
Houston, Texas	–	–	7	<1%	90	13%
Laredo, Texas	–	–	875	66%	2	<1%
Los Angeles, California	1	<1%	7	<1%	36	5%
Miami, Florida	206	89%	10	<1%	515	73%
New Orleans, Louisiana	–	–	–	–	3	<1%
New York, New York	3	1%	2	<1%	6	<1%
Portland, Oregon	–	–	1	<1%	4	<1%
San Diego, California	–	–	45	3%	–	–
San Juan, Puerto Rico	6	3%	–	–	–	–
San Francisco, California	–	–	6	<1%	5	<1%
Tampa, Florida	1	<1%	–	–	6	<1%
Tucson, Arizona	–	–	238	18%	–	–
Total	231		1,323		710	

Notes: ^a The data on seizure location is aggregated by CBP field office. A list of the offices and related ports of exit is available at US CBP (n.d.).
Sources: US CBP (2024a; 2024b)

trafficking to Mexico occurs over land borders, mostly in non-commercial vehicles.¹⁰ Seizures from buses, private cars, non-commercial trucks, and vans comprised 91 per cent of all Mexico-bound seizures. When seizures from bicyclists, pedestrians, and commercial trucks are included, this figure increases to 96 per cent. Fast parcel ('express consignment') and postal shipments ('mail') combined accounted for the second-largest proportion of shipments to Latin America outside of Mexico and the third-largest to the Caribbean, which is consistent with the increasing attention that the authorities are paying to these trafficking modes.

Seizure locations

The data also confirms that US interdictions of illicit arms shipments are highly concentrated in a small number of states and regions (see Table 6).¹¹ Nearly 90 per cent of Caribbean-bound shipments were seized in southern Florida—an area known as a hotbed of trafficking to Haiti, the Bahamas, and other Caribbean islands. Similarly, the vast majority of shipments bound for Mexico were seized in Texas and Arizona. Both findings are consistent with previous research on US-based arms trafficking to the Caribbean and Latin America.¹²

¹⁰ See Schroeder (2016, p. 6) and US GAO (2021, p. 21).

¹¹ Note that the state where the shipment was interdicted is not necessarily the state from where the items were initially shipped.

¹² See US ATF (2024, pp. 15–21).

The data suggests that Florida is also a hub for trafficking to Latin America other than Mexico. Seventy-three per cent of shipments to this group of countries were seized from ports linked to the CBP Miami field office, which include Miami Seaport and Miami International Airport. The Houston area was next with 13 per cent, followed by southern California.

Seizures in the interior of the United States were rare. Only four per cent of the 2,278 interdicted shipments to Latin America and the Caribbean were seized in states other than those on the southern border. Seizures in ports linked to the Chicago CBP office were the most numerous, but this office covers 41 ports in 12 states.¹³ Dividing the 62 seizures linked to this office by the number of states and years studied yields an average of less than one seizure per state per year.

It is clear from the data that comparatively few illicit shipments of firearms to the Caribbean and Latin America are interdicted in states other than those along the US southern border. Less clear is why. Given the ease with which traffickers could ship packages abroad from any post office or fast parcel service office in the country, why is most of this activity concentrated along the southern border? Definitely answering this question is beyond the scope of this short Situation Update, but demographics and regional differences in gun laws are likely major factors. ‘People with ties to the Caribbean and Latin America [are] mostly tied to those places such as Houston, New York and Miami’, explained a Home Security and Investigations official, ‘and cartels and [other] criminal organizations tend to recruit traffickers from people that they know’ (US ICE, 2024). This fact, along with the comparative ease with which traffickers can obtain firearms in some southern US states, helps to explain—but not fully—the apparent concentration of trafficking along the southern border. A definitive explanation requires additional data and analysis.

Conclusion

The newly acquired data on firearms seizures at US ports of exit shows that trafficking dynamics vary significantly between the Caribbean and Latin America, and even within these regions. These differences include the number of seizures, the types of seized weapons, the illegal shipments’ modes of transport, and the seizure locations. Some of these differences are consistent with previous studies, while others are more surprising, such as the comparatively high rates of seizures of AK- and AR-pattern rifles and high-capacity magazines in shipments to the Caribbean compared to Latin America. The data also reveals that the dynamics of trafficking to most of Latin America are more similar to trafficking to the Caribbean than to Mexico, for example. These differences underscore the methodological peril of the over-aggregation of regional data on arms trafficking and the need for detailed, disaggregated data on each country in a given region.

The data also highlights several potentially noteworthy trends in firearms trafficking and counter-trafficking efforts that merit additional examination. The data appears to show a dramatic increase in US seizures of illicit outbound firearms shipments to the Caribbean and Latin America, with the largest number of seizures occurring in 2022–23. Whether this increase reflects additional or improved screening of shipments, an increase in trafficking, changes in data collection, or some combination of these possible explanations is unclear.

Also notable is the steep rise in seizure rates of semi-automatic rifles and high-capacity magazines in illegal firearms shipments from the United States to the Caribbean. This increase is consistent with reports of growing demand for these items in the Caribbean, including in Haiti, where some armed groups are better equipped than the security forces.¹⁴ The apparent demand for these weapons, combined with the spread of conversion devices and ghost

¹³ In contrast, only five ports are linked to the Miami field office, ten to the Laredo office, and ten to the Tucson office.

¹⁴ See, for example, Forero and de Córdoba (2024).

guns,¹⁵ represents a worrisome trend in the Caribbean. Corroborating and fully explaining these findings require additional data, including local seizure data from Caribbean governments and trace data from other national and international law enforcement agencies.

Finally, newly released data on seizure locations supports previous research regarding the concentration of trafficking in southern US border states; however, the data itself does not indicate whether the lower seizure rates in other US states is due to an absence of trafficking activity or less enforcement capacity. Additional data, including detailed information on the allocation of resources at ports outside of southern border states, would help to answer this question. ●

¹⁵ See Yarina and Florquin (2024).

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About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a centre for applied knowledge dedicated to preventing and reducing illicit small arms proliferation and armed violence. The Survey informs policy and practice through a combination of data, evidence-based knowledge, authoritative resources and tools, and tailored expert advice and training, and by bringing together practitioners and policymakers.

The Survey is an associated programme of the Geneva Graduate Institute, located in Switzerland, and has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, criminology, and database and programme management. It collaborates with a network of researchers, practitioners, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

The Survey's activities and outputs are made possible through core support as well as project funding. A full list of current donors and projects can be accessed via the Small Arms Survey website. For more information, please visit: www.smallarmssurvey.org.

About the Pathway to Policy project

The project 'Pathway to Policy: Integrating Security and Public Health Responses to Firearms Trafficking and Violence in the Caribbean' aims to improve the quality and availability of relevant data and analysis on matters related to firearms proliferation and misuse in the Caribbean. Building on partnerships with leading regional institutions, the project engages with regional security, public health, and research stakeholders through knowledge sharing and policy prioritization. The Small Arms Survey is partnering with the Caribbean Community Implementation Agency for Crime and Security, the Caribbean Public Health Agency, and the George Alleyne Chronic Disease Centre at the University of the West Indies on this project.

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