

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-235](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Trafficking of illicit materials, including firearms, is widespread across Mexico's more than 700-mile southern border with Guatemala and Belize. Such trafficking presents a challenge for law enforcement in all three countries and for U.S. security interests. State and other U.S. agencies, such as ATF, have provided support to build the capacity of their counterparts in these three countries to address problems related to firearms trafficking. GAO was asked to review U.S. support to the governments of Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico to stem firearms trafficking across their shared border. This report examines, for these three countries, (1) the activities undertaken by U.S. agencies to build partner capacity to combat firearms trafficking and the extent to which they considered key factors in selecting the activities and (2) progress the United States has made in building such capacity. GAO analyzed program documentation and conducted interviews with U.S., Belizean, Guatemalan, and Mexican officials. To examine progress, GAO selected a nongeneralizable sample of eight key activities based on a number of factors, including whether the activity addressed firearms trafficking.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that (1) ATF establish and document performance targets for its key counter-firearms trafficking activities in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico, as appropriate, and (2) State work with other U.S. agencies and implementers to help ensure that progress reports identify key challenges and plans to address them. ATF and State agreed with these recommendations.

View [GAO-16-235](#). For more information, contact Jessica Farb at (202) 512-6991 or [farbj@gao.gov](mailto:farbj@gao.gov).

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## BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY

### U.S. Agencies Can Improve Monitoring of Counter-Firearms Trafficking Efforts in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico

#### What GAO Found

U.S. agencies and their implementing partners have undertaken a number of capacity-building activities that support counter-firearms trafficking efforts in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico. The figure below outlines examples of the areas of effort under which these activities fall. Selected, in part, based on partner country needs, these activities include efforts to provide support in using the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' (ATF) web-based firearms tracing system (eTrace) and providing forensics training, including on ballistics. Some of these activities, such as firearms identification training, relate directly to firearms trafficking, while others broadly support antitrafficking or border security efforts for which stemming the trafficking of firearms is one of many goals. Presidential Policy Directive 23 highlights key factors, including partner country needs, absorptive capacity, sustainability, and other U.S. and other donor efforts, as important in planning security sector assistance. Agencies considered these factors in determining what activities to fund.

**Examples of Areas of Effort for U.S. Counter-Firearms Trafficking Activities in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico, Based, in Part, on Each Partner Country's Identified Needs**



Sources: GAO analysis of agency documents (data); Map Resources (map). | GAO-16-235

U.S. agencies and implementing partners have achieved many of their goals for eight key counter-firearms trafficking activities GAO reviewed, but could enhance their efforts to measure and report on progress. Agencies and implementers established performance measures and targets for five of these eight activities. *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that managers should compare actual performance against expected results, highlighting the importance of such measures and targets. ATF tracks its activities but has not established performance targets for them, without which it is difficult to measure the success of its efforts. Two of the five activities GAO reviewed that established metrics and targets are ongoing and are meeting their goals, while three other activities were completed and met or partially met their goals, according to Department of State (State) and implementer reports. For activities it funds, State requires implementers to include a discussion of key challenges and strategies to address those challenges in quarterly reports. However, implementers' reports for activities GAO reviewed were inconsistent and did not always identify challenges or strategies for addressing them. Without this information, agencies risk not fully meeting their goals and may be unable to maximize the use of U.S. resources.