

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-322](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. *Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy: 2020* identified the trafficking of firearms from the U.S. into Mexico as a threat to the safety and security of both countries. The Mexican government has estimated that 200,000 firearms are smuggled from the United States each year.

GAO was asked to report on U.S. efforts to counter firearms trafficking to Mexico. This report examines (1) the extent of U.S. agencies' knowledge about firearms trafficking to Mexico and (2) U.S. agencies' efforts to disrupt this trafficking and the extent to which they have assessed those efforts. GAO reviewed firearms tracing data, related analysis, and program information for fiscal years 2014 through 2020. GAO also interviewed U.S. and Mexican officials.

This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in December 2020.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations, including recommending that ATF and ICE analyze additional information about the trafficking of U.S.-sourced firearms to Mexico and that ATF, ICE, CBP, and State develop performance measures to assess the results of their efforts to disrupt this trafficking. The agencies concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-21-322](#). For more information, contact Chelsa Kenney at (202) 512-2964 or kenneyc@gao.gov.

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FIREARMS TRAFFICKING

U.S. Efforts to Disrupt Gun Smuggling into Mexico Would Benefit from Additional Data and Analysis

What GAO Found

Trafficking of U.S.-sourced firearms into Mexico is a national security threat, as it facilitates the illegal drug trade and has been linked to organized crime. The Department of Justice's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) found that 70 percent of firearms reported to have been recovered in Mexico from 2014 through 2018 and submitted for tracing were U.S. sourced. However, ATF does not receive complete data about thousands of firearms, such as those recovered by Mexican states, because only Mexico's federal Attorney General's office submits trace requests to ATF. In addition, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has identified smuggling trends by analyzing DHS data on 1,012 firearms seized in the U.S. by DHS agencies. However, ICE has not analyzed ATF data on 56,000 U.S. firearms recovered in Mexico. Additional data and analysis could enhance U.S. efforts to understand firearms sources and smuggling routes.

Examples of Firearms Recovered in Mexico



Source: GAO. | GAO-21-322

U.S. agencies have undertaken a number of efforts to disrupt firearms trafficking to Mexico—including several recently established efforts as well as prior and ongoing ones—but are unable to assess progress toward this goal.

- In April 2020, ATF established Operation Southbound to coordinate with other agencies to disrupt firearms trafficking to Mexico. ATF also conducts investigations related to Mexico.
- In fiscal year 2020, ICE and DHS's U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) established a joint operation to intercept firearms being smuggled to Mexico. ICE and CBP also conduct other efforts related to this issue. For example, in fiscal years 2015 through 2017, ICE-led taskforces seized 1,104 firearms along the southwest border. In fiscal years 2014 through 2019, CBP seized an annual average of 115 firearms at the border, and in the first 10 months of fiscal year 2020, CBP increased outbound inspection at some ports of entry and seized 321 firearms.
- The Department of State (State) helps lead a working group to coordinate these and other U.S. efforts with the government of Mexico. State also provided \$54 million in fiscal years 2015 through 2019 to help build Mexico's capacity to disrupt trafficking through, for example, forensics training, inspection equipment, and canines trained for weapons detection.

However, none of the agencies have fully developed performance measures for their efforts to disrupt firearms trafficking to Mexico, and thus they have limited ability to assess progress. Identifying performance measures—including goals, indicators, targets, and time frames—would enhance their ability to optimize the use of U.S. government resources to address this threat to U.S. national security.