



January 2022

# FIREARMS TRAFFICKING

More Information Is  
Needed to Inform U.S.  
Efforts in Central  
America

## Why GAO Did This Study

The four Central American countries Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have high rates of violence, including homicide. According to foreign crime data and foreign officials, most homicides in the countries are committed with firearms imported legally or illegally from other countries. Violence and insecurity in the countries have been identified as contributing factors in migration to the U.S.

GAO was asked to report on U.S. efforts to counter firearms trafficking to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. This report examines (1) U.S. agencies' knowledge about firearms trafficking to criminals in these countries, (2) U.S. agencies' efforts to disrupt firearms trafficking in these countries, and (3) U.S. planning to address firearms trafficking in these countries. GAO reviewed firearms tracing and other agency data, related analysis, and program information for fiscal years 2014 through 2020. GAO also interviewed U.S. and foreign officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State obtain information about conditions in the four countries to support the development of effective programs to reduce the availability of illicit firearms. State concurred.

View [GAO-22-104680](#). For more information, contact Chelsa Kenney at (202) 512-2964 or [kenneyc@gao.gov](mailto:kenneyc@gao.gov).

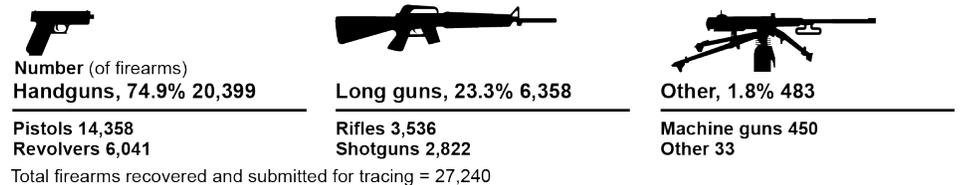
# FIREARMS TRAFFICKING

## More Information Is Needed to Inform U.S. Efforts in Central America

### What GAO Found

The Department of Justice's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) receives firearm trace requests from the governments of Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras for some, but not all, firearms recovered in those countries. ATF tracing data for approximately 27,000 firearms recovered from 2015 through 2019—the most recent data available—show that 40 percent came from the U.S. and the rest from 39 other countries. ATF data also indicate that almost half of the U.S.-sourced firearms were likely diverted from legitimate commerce in the four countries rather than smuggled from the U.S. From January 2015 through March 2021, more than 100,000 firearms were legally exported from the U.S. to the four countries, according to agency data. Firearms are not manufactured in these countries, but U.S. and foreign officials stated that criminals can obtain them through illegal markets and theft, among other means. ATF data show most firearms submitted for tracing were handguns.

**Types of Firearms Recovered in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and Submitted to ATF for Tracing, 2015–2019**



Source: GAO analysis of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) data. | GAO-22-104680

Although disrupting firearms trafficking is not a specific U.S. goal for the region, U.S. agencies have broad capacity-building, investigative, and border security efforts, which may help disrupt firearms trafficking. For example:

- The Department of State provided a total of \$38 million for capacity-building programs in fiscal years 2015 through 2019, which included some activities related to firearms trafficking—for example, training on firearms-trafficking investigations.
- ATF assisted partner governments by tracing recovered firearms, which provided investigative leads and helped law enforcement agencies in partner countries to link disparate criminal acts.
- U.S. Customs and Border Protection shared information on criminal activity, including firearms smuggling, with the four countries.

The 2021 *U.S. Strategy for Addressing Root Causes of Migration in Central America* directs U.S. agencies to address violence, crime, and security in the region. State officials said that in response to this strategy, they plan to develop new projects or modify existing projects to focus on firearms. However, according to the officials, they lack sufficient information about relevant country conditions to tailor these projects to address each country's needs. State officials have not sought such information from the four countries' governments or other U.S. agencies because State has not focused on firearms trafficking in the countries. Obtaining such information would enhance State's ability to develop effective programs to reduce criminal access to firearms and firearms-related violence in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

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### Abbreviations

ATF	Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
BIS	Bureau of Industry and Security
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
Commerce	Department of Commerce
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOJ	Department of Justice
GCIF	Grupo Conjunto de Inteligencia Fronteriza
HSI	Homeland Security Investigations
ICE	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
ICITAP	International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program
ILEA	International Law Enforcement Academy
INL	Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs
MS-13	Mara Salvatrucha
PM	Bureau of Political-Military Affairs
TCIU	transnational criminal investigative unit
TCO	transnational criminal organization
UN	United Nations
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
WHA	Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs

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January 11, 2022

The Honorable Dick Durbin  
Chairman  
Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate

The Honorable Gregory W. Meeks  
Chairman  
Committee on Foreign Affairs  
House of Representatives

Instability and high levels of violence, often perpetrated by transnational criminal organizations (TCO), continue to raise security concerns in Central America and are considered to be factors in northward migration—a significant U.S. policy interest.<sup>1</sup> According to U.S. and United Nations (UN) reports, criminal gangs and drug trafficking organizations are responsible for much of the violence, including homicides, which are most often committed with firearms.<sup>2</sup> In June 2021, the Vice President stated that fear of cartels and gang violence was among the root causes of migration to the United States.<sup>3</sup>

On July 29, 2021, the White House issued the *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America*, with objectives that include countering and preventing violence, extortion, and other crimes perpetrated by criminal gangs, trafficking networks, and other criminal organizations.<sup>4</sup> In response to the strategy, the Department of State plans to elevate U.S. efforts in the region to address firearms

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Congressional Research Service, Salvadorans and Hondurans who have been victims of multiple crimes have significantly higher migration intentions than those who have not. See Congressional Research Service, *Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy*, IF11151 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 22, 2021).

<sup>2</sup>Department of State, Overseas Security Advisory Council, “Guatemala 2020 Crime and Safety Report” (Mar. 31, 2020); United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide* (2019).

<sup>3</sup>The White House, “Remarks by Vice President Harris, Secretary of Homeland Security Mayorkas, Chairman Durbin, and Representative Escobar in Press Conference,” June 25, 2021.

<sup>4</sup>The White House, *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America* (Washington, D.C.: July 29, 2021).

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trafficking (i.e., the diversion of guns from lawful commerce to the illegal market) and reduce the availability of firearms to criminals, among other actions, according to State officials.

You asked us to report on U.S. efforts to counter firearms trafficking to criminal organizations in four Central American countries—Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.<sup>5</sup> This report examines (1) U.S. agencies' knowledge about firearms trafficking to criminals in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; (2) U.S. agencies' efforts to disrupt firearms trafficking in the four countries; and (3) U.S. planning to address firearms trafficking in these countries.

To address these objectives, we reviewed U.S. agency documents and interviewed officials of the Departments of Commerce, Justice, Homeland Security, and State as well as officials of foreign governments and the UN. To examine U.S. agencies' knowledge about firearms trafficking in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, we reviewed data collected by federal agencies on firearms recovered in other countries, firearms exported from the U.S., and firearms seized at the U.S. border. We assessed the data's reliability for the purposes of addressing our objectives and determined that these data were sufficiently reliable for those purposes. We also interviewed U.S. and foreign law enforcement officials who were familiar with criminal activity involving firearms in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, including officials from the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

To examine U.S. efforts to disrupt firearms trafficking in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, we reviewed plans and reports issued by Commerce, DOJ, DHS, and State. We reviewed agency plans in order to identify goals related to firearms trafficking and reviewed agency documentation to identify related efforts. We interviewed State

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<sup>5</sup>This report includes updates of information in two reports we issued in 2016. See GAO, *Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Combat Firearms Trafficking to Mexico Have Improved, but Some Collaboration Challenges Remain*, [GAO-16-223](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 11, 2016); and *Building Partner Capacity: U.S. Agencies Can Improve Monitoring of Counter-Firearms Trafficking Efforts in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico*, [GAO-16-235](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 13, 2016). In February 2021, we issued a report on firearms trafficking from the United States into Mexico. See GAO, *Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Disrupt Gun Smuggling into Mexico Would Benefit from Additional Data and Analysis*, [GAO-21-322](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 22, 2021).

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officials responsible for managing U.S. foreign assistance to build partner countries' capacity related to investigating and interdicting firearms. We also interviewed U.S. law enforcement officials involved in disrupting firearms trafficking. In addition, we interviewed U.S. and foreign officials familiar with U.S. efforts who were located in Belmopan, Belize; San Salvador, El Salvador; Guatemala City, Guatemala; Tegucigalpa, Honduras; Panama City, Panama; and Washington, D.C.

To examine U.S. planning to address firearms trafficking in these countries, we interviewed State officials responsible for managing U.S. foreign assistance related to building partner countries' capacity to investigate and interdict firearms. We also reviewed U.S. strategies, such as the July 2021 *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America*. Further, we interviewed UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) officials who analyze violent crime and firearms trafficking in Central America.

We conducted this performance audit from December 2020 to January 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

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### Violent Crime and Firearms in the Four Central American Countries

Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have high levels of violent crime, with homicide rates among the highest in the world. In each of the four countries, violent criminals, including those associated with TCOs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (18th Street), use firearms to commit violent crimes such as murder, extortion, and assault.<sup>6</sup>

- **Belize.** According to a 2020 State report, evidence indicates that TCOs provide logistical support to drug and other trafficking

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<sup>6</sup>The Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control includes MS-13 as a TCO in its list of specially designated nationals. The assets of specially designated nationals are blocked, and U.S. persons are generally prohibited from dealing with them.

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organizations that use Belize as a transit country.<sup>7</sup> UNODC consistently ranks Belize among the worst five countries in the world for homicides per capita. Belize Crime Observatory data for 2019 show that 89 of 134 homicides (66 percent) were committed with a firearm.<sup>8</sup>

- **El Salvador.** In El Salvador, violent, well-armed street gangs engage in street-level drug sales, extortion, arms trafficking, murder for hire, carjacking, and aggravated street crime, according to a 2020 State report.<sup>9</sup> El Salvador's Ministry of Justice and Public Security data for 2019 show that 1,754 of 2,398 homicides (73 percent) were committed with a firearm.
- **Guatemala.** Guatemala's high murder rate appears to be driven by narcotics trafficking, gang-related violence, a heavily armed population, and a police and judicial system unable to hold criminals accountable, according to a 2020 State report.<sup>10</sup> Gang members often respond to noncompliant extortion victims with violent assault or murder. Guatemala's National Security Council data for 2019 show that 2,840 of 3,578 homicides (79 percent) were committed with a firearm.
- **Honduras.** In Honduras, gangs often use violence and specialize in murder for hire, carjacking, extortion, and other violent street crime, according to a 2020 State report.<sup>11</sup> Violent TCOs are also involved in narcotics trafficking and other illicit commerce in Honduras. Honduran National Police data for 2019 show that 2,985 of 4,099 homicides (73 percent) were committed with a firearm.

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<sup>7</sup>Department of State, Overseas Security Advisory Council, "Belize 2020 Crime and Safety Report" (Mar. 27, 2020).

<sup>8</sup>In our report, all years cited are calendar years (January–December) unless denoted as fiscal years (October–September).

<sup>9</sup>Department of State, Overseas Security Advisory Council, "El Salvador 2020 Crime and Safety Report" (Mar. 31, 2020).

<sup>10</sup>Department of State, Overseas Security Advisory Council, "Guatemala 2020 Crime and Safety Report" (Mar. 31, 2020).

<sup>11</sup>Department of State, Overseas Security Advisory Council, "Honduras 2020 Crime and Safety Report" (Mar. 31, 2020).

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UNODC reported in 2020 that violent crime appears to be a key driver of demand for firearms in Central America.<sup>12</sup> UNODC also concluded that gangs and organized crime drive the homicide rates in parts of Central America.

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**U.S. Agencies’  
Responsibilities Related to  
Firearms Trafficking in  
Belize, El Salvador,  
Guatemala, and Honduras**

Several U.S. departments and agencies have responsibilities related to addressing firearms trafficking in the four countries.

**State’s Responsibilities**

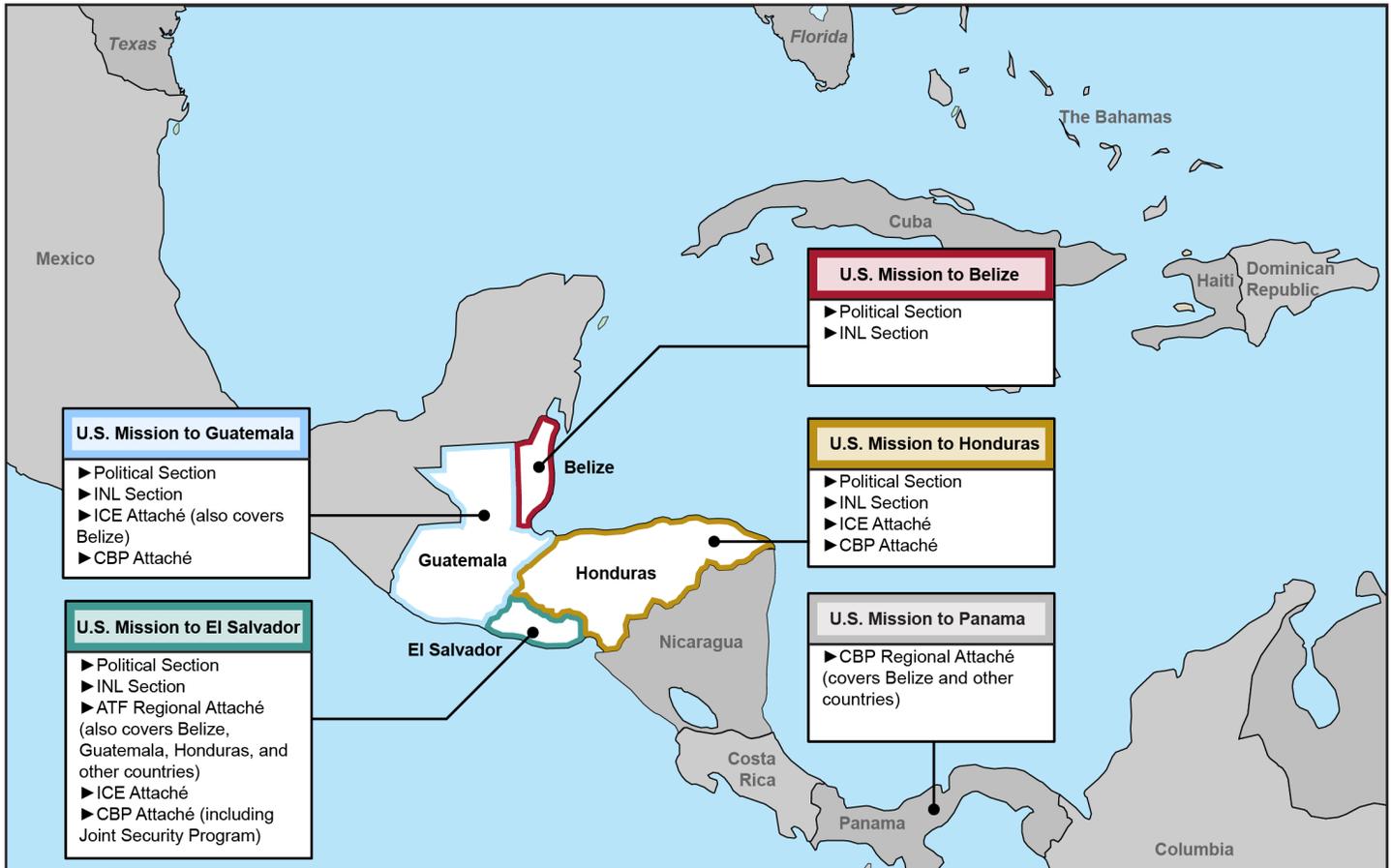
State is responsible for maintaining U.S. bilateral relations with each of the four countries and providing capacity-building assistance in each country, including assistance intended to address firearms trafficking. Several State bureaus carry out these responsibilities.

- The **Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs** (WHA) manages the bilateral relationships with Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. WHA also provides general oversight of U.S. foreign assistance programs, including guidance to missions on program management and evaluation. The missions include representatives from many of the U.S. agencies involved in disrupting firearms trafficking in Central America, including ATF, CBP, and ICE (see fig. 1). In addition, WHA manages related multilateral relationships, such as with the Organization of American States.

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<sup>12</sup>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (New York: March 2020).

**Figure 1: U.S. Missions to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras**



Legend: ATF = U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, CBP = U.S. Customs and Border Protection, ICE = U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, INL = International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. agency information. | GAO-22-104680

- The **Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL)** manages law enforcement–related capacity-building assistance funded through the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement account. INL personnel in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras administer this assistance. Other U.S. agencies often implement these State-funded activities.
- The **Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM)** manages military-related capacity-building assistance funded through the Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Programs account. U.S. foreign service officers at the U.S. embassies monitor this assistance. PM also oversees export licenses for firearms on the

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U.S. Munitions List, including fully automatic firearms.<sup>13</sup>

ATF's Responsibilities

DOJ's ATF is responsible for investigating violations of federal firearms laws and regulations, including the diversion of firearms from legitimate commerce, and for enforcing these laws and regulations.<sup>14</sup> Specific ATF responsibilities include investigating domestic firearms trafficking, including firearms thefts and "straw purchases" (i.e., unlawful firearms purchases on behalf of third parties), and inspecting federal firearms licensees.<sup>15</sup>

ATF maintains a regional attaché in San Salvador who works with foreign law enforcement on firearms issues. ATF's Central and South America Regional Office works with Central American law enforcement and other U.S. agencies to investigate criminal and regulatory violations of U.S. federal firearms law. The office also assists foreign law enforcement with tracing firearms recovered in Central America.<sup>16</sup> For example, the office helps foreign agencies submit requests to ATF's National Tracing Center

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<sup>13</sup>The U.S. Munitions List, which State maintains, shows defense articles subject to export restrictions. Before March 2020, the list included all firearms, except certain shotguns with a barrel length of 18 inches or greater. In March 2020, oversight of certain firearms, including nonautomatic and nonsemiautomatic firearms, was transferred to Commerce. The Commerce Control List shows items for which Commerce regulates export under the Export Administration Regulations, 15 C.F.R. Parts 730-774. Fully automatic firearms remain on the U.S. Munitions List.

<sup>14</sup>Other DOJ components reported that they had no efforts focused on firearms trafficking. Officials at the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Drug Enforcement Administration told us that they do not investigate firearms trafficking specifically but inform ATF about any firearms encountered during their investigations. Officials of the Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys told us that U.S. Attorneys' Offices prosecute firearms violations but have no initiative specifically aimed at prosecuting illegal firearms trafficking to Central America. DOJ's Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training trains and mentors investigators, prosecutors, and judges in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Operation Regional Shield is focused on disrupting TCOs and does not specifically address firearms trafficking. DOJ officials have mentored foreign officials on some organized crime cases involving firearms.

<sup>15</sup>According to ATF, a straw purchase occurs when a person who is a convicted felon (or otherwise prohibited by federal law from purchasing a firearm) or who wishes to remain anonymous uses a third party, the straw purchaser, to execute the paperwork necessary to purchase a firearm from a federally licensed firearms dealer. Straw purchases violate 18 U.S.C. § 922(a)(6), which prohibits purchasers from knowingly making false oral or written statements or furnishing false identification intended to deceive licensed importers, manufacturers, or dealers as to the lawfulness of the sale.

<sup>16</sup>ATF's regional office works with 17 countries in Central and South America.

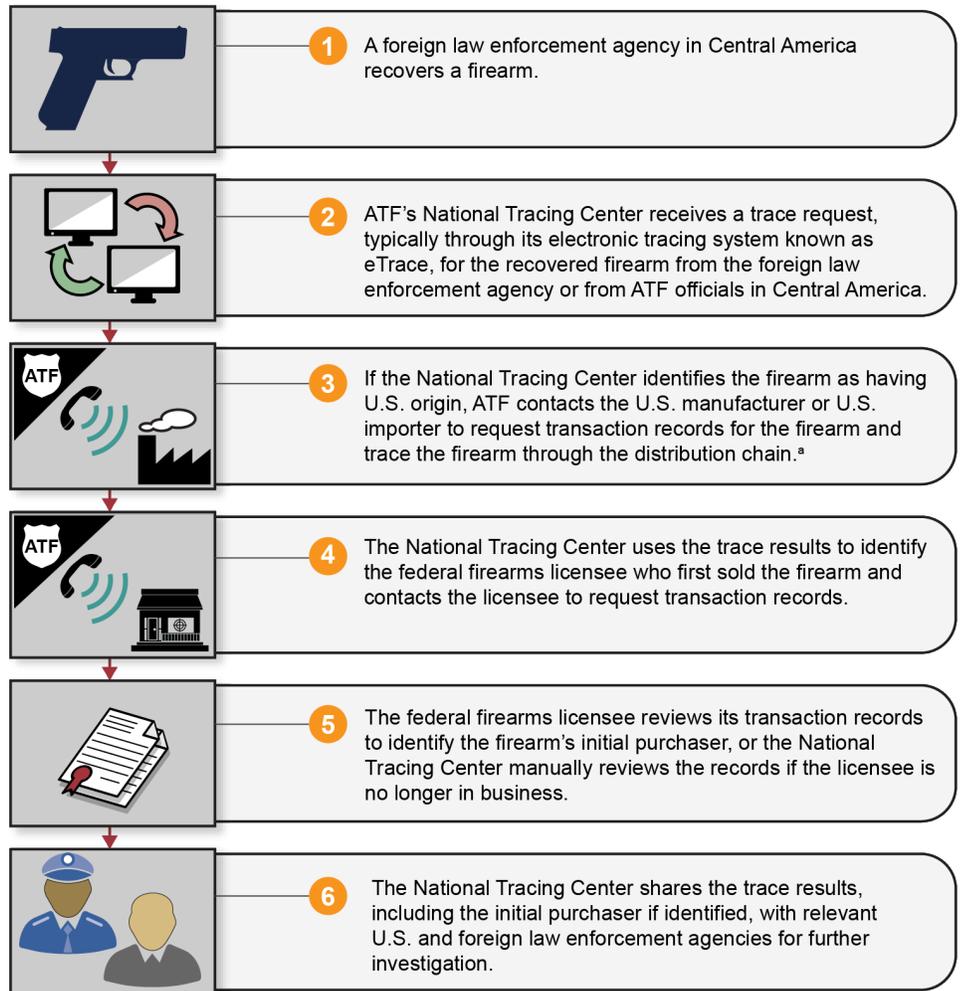
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to trace recovered firearms to initial purchasers.<sup>17</sup> Figure 2 shows ATF's tracing process.

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<sup>17</sup>ATF's National Tracing Center assists domestic and foreign law enforcement agencies by tracing, at an agency's request, the origins of any firearm recovered during a criminal investigation to the firearm's first sale by a manufacturer or importer and, if information is available, to the firearm's initial retail purchaser. The center may be unable to identify the initial purchaser in some cases and may identify a more recent purchaser or an unlicensed purchaser in other cases. After receiving trace results, the submitting agency and ATF field offices may conduct further investigations to determine the chain of events from initial purchase to recovery by law enforcement. See [GAO-21-322](#) for more information.

**Figure 2: ATF's Process for Tracing a Firearm Recovered in Central America to an Initial Purchaser**



Source: GAO analysis of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) information. | GAO-22-104680

Note: ATF's National Tracing Center is not always able to identify the initial purchaser and sometimes identifies a more recent purchaser or an unlicensed purchaser.

<sup>a</sup>The distribution chain may include a wholesaler and multiple retailers.

## BIS's Responsibilities

Since March 2020, the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) has been responsible for approving export licenses of

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nonautomatic firearms to Central America.<sup>18</sup> According to BIS officials, for firearms exported to Central American countries, BIS requires an import certificate from the receiving Central American country before approving an export license. BIS export licenses are generally valid for 4 years.

In addition, BIS's Export Enforcement conducts end-use checks worldwide,<sup>19</sup> which include prelicense checks<sup>20</sup> and postshipment verifications.<sup>21</sup> To determine which end-use checks to apply, BIS conducts case-specific risk analysis before and after the export of selected items, which may include firearms. BIS coordinates its postshipment verifications with the U.S. Embassy and sometimes conducts these checks with the embassy, according to BIS officials. Although BIS maintains personnel in other countries to assist with end-use monitoring, BIS has no personnel assigned to embassies in Central America. BIS also sends U.S.-based agents to various countries to conduct end-use checks.

## CBP's Responsibilities

CBP is responsible for enforcing U.S. customs and trade laws.<sup>22</sup> In this capacity, CBP's Office of Field Operations conducts targeted inspections of articles, including firearms, being transported into and from the United States. This office conducts temporary outbound inspections and targeted

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<sup>18</sup>BIS reviews license applications involving certain nonautomatic and nonsemiautomatic firearms, as well as certain non-fully automatic shotguns, that appear on the Commerce Control List. Previously, State PM was responsible for reviewing export licenses for all firearms (except certain shotguns with barrels 18 inches or longer, which were already subject to the Export Administration Regulations prior to March 2020). PM remains responsible for reviewing export license applications for fully automatic firearms, shotguns, and other items on the U.S. Munitions List. According to State officials, State has not authorized any firearm export licenses to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras since March 2020.

<sup>19</sup>According to BIS, an end-use check is a physical verification on location with a party to an export transaction to determine whether the party is a reliable recipient of U.S. goods and that items are, or will be, used in accordance with the Export Administration Regulations.

<sup>20</sup>According to BIS, prelicense checks establish bona fides and validate information on export license applications prior to shipment.

<sup>21</sup>According to BIS, postshipment verification strengthens assurance that all parties comply with export requirements and also monitors illicit diversion of U.S. exports after shipment.

<sup>22</sup>CBP's mission includes enforcing U.S. customs, immigration, and agriculture laws and regulations, including laws related to the importation and exportation of merchandise, at the U.S. border. CBP's mission also includes enforcing various U.S. laws on behalf of numerous federal agencies.

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interdictions at official ports of entry, including land, air, and sea ports. In Central America, CBP provides assistance to foreign customs and police agencies in host countries. For example, CBP personnel in El Salvador provide such assistance at the airport and a regional information-sharing center. CBP has attachés in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; CBP's regional attaché in Panama City covers Belize.

CBP's Office of Intelligence and National Targeting Center analyze and provide intelligence for the Office of Field Operations at the ports of entry and for Border Patrol efforts. Such intelligence may include information about weapons suspected of being exported illegally to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras. The National Targeting Center shares some of this information with Central American partner governments in coordination and through ICE, according to CBP officials.

#### ICE's Responsibilities

ICE's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) is responsible for export control investigations, including investigations of firearms smuggling from the United States to Central America. ICE works with U.S. and foreign law enforcement to identify and prosecute smugglers and TCOs and seize illegal firearms and other dangerous weapons.

In Central America, ICE works with foreign law enforcement agencies through transnational criminal investigative units (TCIU) in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras that it has vetted. According to ICE, TCIUs include foreign law enforcement officials, customs officers, immigration officers, and prosecutors who receive ICE training and undergo rigorous background investigations to ensure joint investigative efforts are not compromised. ICE has attachés in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; the ICE attaché in Guatemala also covers Belize.

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#### Foreign Government Agencies' Responsibilities Related to Firearms Trafficking

Various government agencies in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have responsibilities related to firearms (see table 1). In all four countries, laws govern the possession and importation of firearms, which are not manufactured in any of the countries but, according to U.S. and foreign officials, are commercially available to private citizens.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>We did not analyze foreign law for this report. Any information about foreign law in this report is the product of interviews or secondary sources.

**Table 1: Government Agencies in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with Responsibilities Related to Firearms**

<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Belize</b>	<b>El Salvador</b>	<b>Guatemala</b>	<b>Honduras</b>
Administering firearms regulations, including licensing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Belize Police Department</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National civilian police, with support from the military</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ministry of Defense, Division of Control for Arms and Munitions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National police</li> <li>Ministry of Defense's Armory (La Armería)</li> </ul>
Investigating crimes involving firearms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Belize Police Department</li> <li>Belize Prosecution Branch</li> <li>National Forensic Science Service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National civilian police, including the Criminal Investigations Division's Firearms Trafficking Unit and the Firearms and Explosives Division</li> <li>Armed Forces of El Salvador (La Fuerza Armada de El Salvador), which supports police in suppressing TCOs, including gangs and drug traffickers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National civil police, including its Division for the Investigation and Deactivation of Arms and Explosives</li> <li>Attorney General's office, including a firearms trafficking unit established in 2020</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National police, including the Directorate for Police Investigations (Dirección Policial de Investigaciones)</li> </ul>
Administering customs, including collection of duties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Belize Customs Agency</li> <li>Belize Coast Guard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>El Salvador Customs Agency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customs and Tax Authority (Superintendencia de Administración Tributaria)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customs Administration (Administración Aduanera de Honduras)</li> </ul>
Enforcing border security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Belize Police Department, including the Mobile Interdiction Team and the Police Special Branch</li> <li>Belize Defence Force</li> <li>Belize Coast Guard</li> <li>Belize Customs Agency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National civilian police</li> <li>Armed Forces of El Salvador, which supports police enforcing border security</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National civil police's border division, including the Special Tactical Operations Group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Honduran National Police, Frontier Police Directorate, including the Special Tactical Operations Group</li> </ul>
Managing firearms stockpiles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Belize Police Department</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National civilian police</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National civilian police</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ministry of Defense's Armory</li> </ul>

Source: GAO analysis of interviews with U.S. and foreign officials and of U.S. documentation. | GAO-22-104680

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## Available Data Show Firearms Came from 40 Other Countries, Including the U.S.

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### ATF Data Indicate Firearms Recovered in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in 2015–2019 Came from the U.S. and 39 Other Countries

Although available data on firearms recovered in the four countries are incomplete, data from ATF's traces of such firearms indicate that about 40 percent of those submitted for tracing were U.S. sourced (i.e., had been manufactured in or imported into the U.S.).<sup>24</sup> The remainder were traced to 39 other countries.

According to U.S. and foreign officials, ATF's tracing system provides the most reliable and informative data on sources of firearms recovered in the four countries.<sup>25</sup> However, the countries' governments do not submit trace requests for all recovered firearms, which limits ATF's knowledge of the precise number and the sources of recovered firearms, according to ATF officials.<sup>26</sup>

Information provided by ATF suggests that in many cases, trace requests are not submitted for firearms recovered in the four countries. For example, ATF information suggests that Guatemala submitted trace requests for about 60 to 70 percent of the firearms it recovered in 2020 and Honduras submitted trace requests for less than 10 percent. ATF officials told us that trace request rates vary on the basis of political will and processing capacity in each country.

According to foreign government officials, trace requests for firearms may not be submitted for various reasons. For example, according to a Honduran police official, not all firearms seized by Honduran government agencies are sent to forensic laboratories—the only Honduran entities

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<sup>24</sup>As of November 2021, data on firearms recovered in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in 2019 and traced by ATF were the most recent available from ATF.

<sup>25</sup>According to U.S. and foreign officials, Central American governments do not have reliable data systems to track firearms. For example, Belize firearm records are paper based and are not centralized, making them less accessible and difficult to analyze, according to U.S. and Belizean officials.

<sup>26</sup>According to ATF, its estimates of total numbers of recovered firearms for these countries are based on open-source data that the foreign governments publish and that may not include all firearms seized by each government.

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that submit firearms trace requests to ATF—because of concerns about preserving evidence and because not all crimes require forensic analysis of a seized firearm.

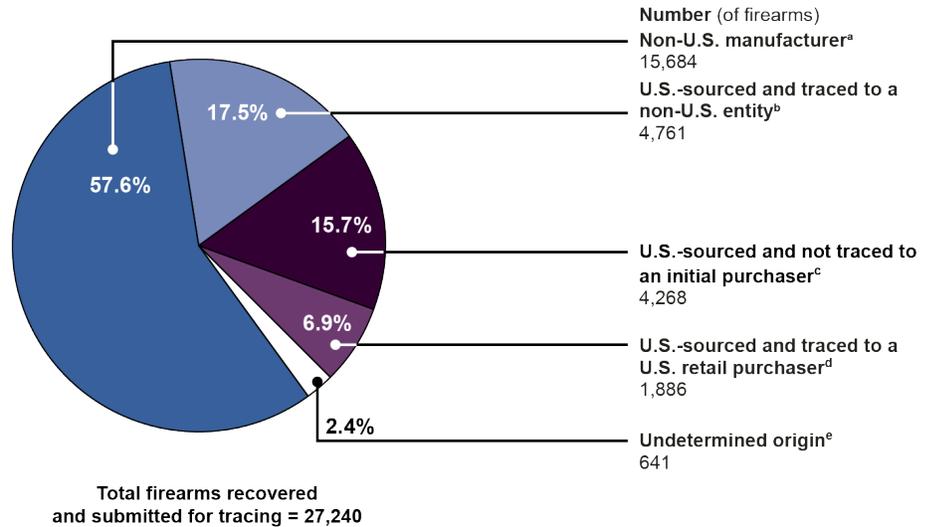
According to ATF data, about 20,000 of the firearms for which ATF received trace requests were traced either to non-U.S. manufacturers or to other non-U.S. entities, such as foreign governments, law enforcement agencies, or dealers (see fig. 3). About 6,000 firearms either were traced to U.S. retail purchasers or were determined to be U.S. sourced but could not be traced to an initial purchaser.<sup>27</sup> ATF data show that approximately 16,000 firearms recovered in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras from 2015 through 2019 and submitted for tracing were traced to non-U.S. manufacturers in 39 other countries, including Austria, Argentina, Brazil, China, and Turkey.<sup>28</sup> Some of these firearms were manufactured in countries dissolved in the 1990s, such as Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, which suggests the firearms are decades old. In addition, ATF data show that about 5,000 U.S.-sourced firearms were traced to other non-U.S. entities.

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<sup>27</sup>Firearms traced to non-U.S. entities include firearms manufactured in foreign countries as well as U.S.-sourced firearms acquired by non-U.S. entities through licit or illicit means. U.S.-sourced firearms were either manufactured in, or imported to, the United States.

<sup>28</sup>ATF provided a list of countries of manufacture for firearms recovered each year. This list does not show the number of the traced firearms manufactured in each of the 39 countries and does not provide information about firearms manufactured in other countries that were not identified as having been imported to the United States.

**Figure 3: Origins of Firearms Recovered in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and Traced by ATF, 2015–2019**



Source: GAO analysis of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) data. | GAO-22-104680

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding.

<sup>a</sup>Non-U.S. manufactured firearms are those that ATF determined were manufactured in other countries and not imported to the United States or whose importer was not shown on the trace request.

<sup>b</sup>U.S.-sourced firearms traced to a non-U.S. entity are those that ATF determined were transferred from a U.S. federal firearms licensee to a foreign government, law enforcement agency, dealer, or other foreign entity.

<sup>c</sup>U.S.-sourced firearms not traced to an initial purchaser are those that ATF determined were manufactured in, or imported into, the United States but for which ATF was unable to determine the initial purchaser.

<sup>d</sup>U.S.-sourced firearms traced to a U.S. retail purchaser are those that ATF determined were sold by a U.S. federal firearms licensee to a purchaser in the United States.

<sup>e</sup>Firearms of undetermined origin are those for which ATF was unable to identify the manufacturer.

As table 2 shows, the origins of the traced firearms varied among the four countries. For example, Belize had the highest percentage of U.S.-sourced firearms traced to U.S. retail purchasers (18 percent) and El Salvador and Guatemala each had the smallest percentage (6 percent).

**Table 2: Origins of Firearms Recovered in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and Traced by ATF, 2015–2019**

	Belize		El Salvador		Guatemala		Honduras		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Traced to non-U.S. entities										
Non-U.S. manufacturer <sup>a</sup>	118	40.4	5,589	47.4	7,093	66.6	2,884	63.9	15,684	57.6
U.S.-sourced and traced to a non-U.S. entity <sup>b</sup>	67	22.9	2,608	22.1	1,768	16.6	318	7.0	4,761	17.5
Total traced to non-U.S. entities	185	63.4	8,197	69.6	8,861	83.2	3,202	71.0	20,445	75.1
Traced to U.S. entities										
U.S.-sourced and not traced to an initial purchaser <sup>c</sup>	50	17.1	2,453	20.8	1,092	10.2	673	14.9	4,268	15.7
U.S.-sourced and traced to U.S. retail purchaser <sup>d</sup>	54	18.5	745	6.3	666	6.3	421	9.3	1,886	6.9
Total traced to U.S. entities	104	35.6	3,198	27.1	1,758	16.5	1,094	24.2	6,154	22.6
Undetermined origin <sup>e</sup>	3	1.0	386	3.3	35	0.3	217	4.8	641	2.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>11,781</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>10,654</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>4,513</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>27,240</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: GAO analysis of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) information. | GAO-22-104680

Note: Because of rounding, percentages may not sum to totals shown.

<sup>a</sup>Non-U.S. manufactured firearms are those that ATF determined were manufactured in other countries and not imported to the United States or whose importer was not shown on the trace request.

<sup>b</sup>U.S.-sourced firearms traced to a non-U.S. entity are those that ATF determined were transferred from a U.S. federal firearms licensee to a foreign government, law enforcement agency, dealer, or other foreign entity.

<sup>c</sup>U.S.-sourced firearms not traced to an initial purchaser are those that ATF determined were manufactured in, or imported into, the United States but for which ATF was unable to determine the initial purchaser.

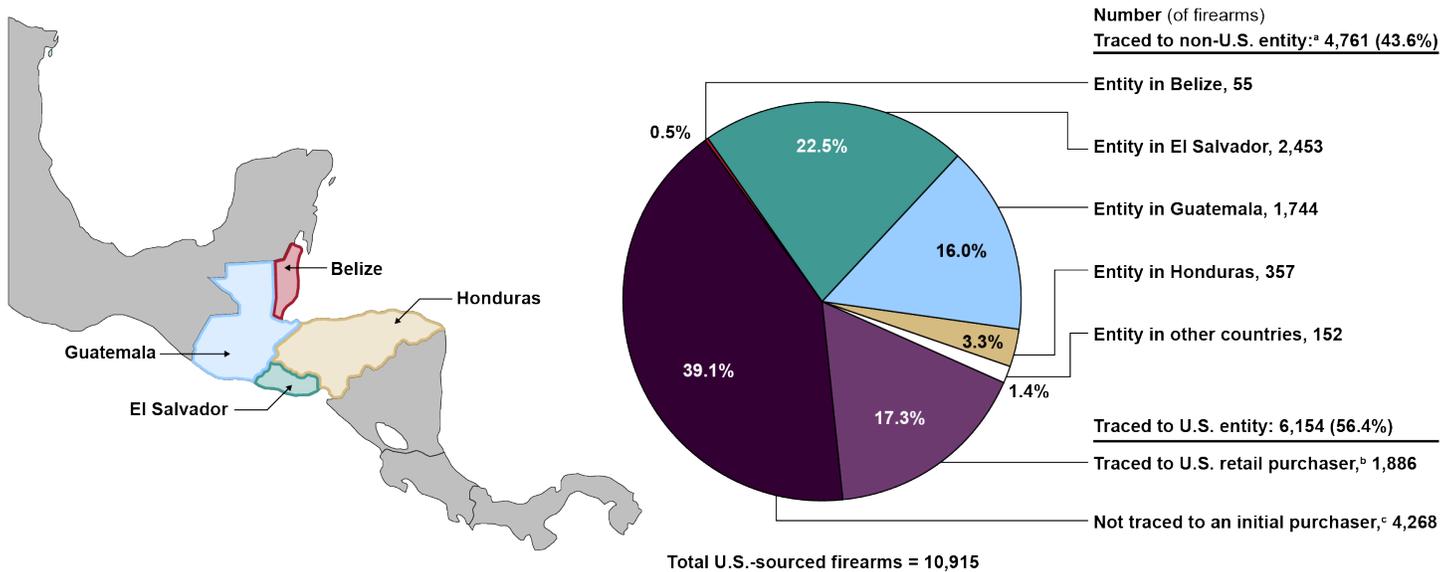
<sup>d</sup>U.S.-sourced firearms traced to a U.S. retail purchaser are those that ATF determined were sold by a U.S. federal firearms licensee to a purchaser in the United States.

<sup>e</sup>Firearms of undetermined origin are those for which ATF was unable to identify the manufacturer.

Of the approximately 27,000 firearms submitted for tracing after recovery in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, about 11,000 firearms were identified as U.S. sourced (see fig. 4). ATF subsequently either traced these U.S.-sourced firearms to U.S. retail purchasers or non-U.S.

entities, such as foreign governments or law enforcement agencies, or was unable to complete the trace.

**Figure 4: U.S.-Sourced Firearms Recovered in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and Traced by ATF to U.S. and Non-U.S. Entities, 2015–2019**



Source: GAO analysis of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) data. | GAO-22-104680

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

<sup>a</sup>U.S.-sourced firearms traced to a non-U.S. entity are those that ATF determined were transferred from a U.S. federal firearms licensee to a foreign government, law enforcement agency, or dealer or other foreign entity.

<sup>b</sup>U.S.-sourced firearms traced to a U.S. retail purchaser are those that ATF determined were sold by a U.S. federal firearms licensee to a purchaser in the United States.

<sup>c</sup>U.S.-sourced firearms not traced to an initial purchaser are those that ATF determined were manufactured in, or imported into, the United States, but for which ATF was unable to determine the initial purchaser.

As figure 4 shows, ATF traced almost 44 percent of the U.S.-sourced firearms to non-U.S. entities. According to ATF data, U.S.-sourced firearms acquired by non-U.S. entities were most often recovered in the same country as those entities. This suggests that the firearms had likely been diverted from legal commerce in that country rather than smuggled from another country. For example, of approximately 2,600 U.S.-sourced firearms recovered in El Salvador and traced to non-U.S. entities, ATF determined about 2,400 had been transferred to a non-U.S. entity in El Salvador and thus were likely diverted from legal commerce in that country.

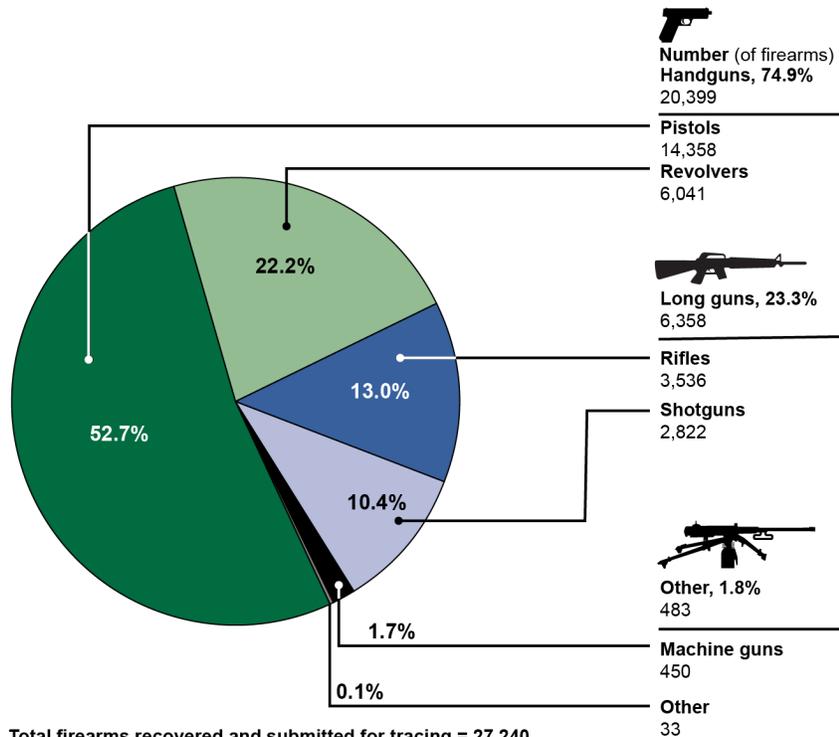
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ATF identified initial U.S. retail purchasers—most often located in Florida, Texas, or California— for almost 2,000 (17 percent) of the U.S.-sourced firearms. ATF was unable to identify initial U.S. retail purchasers for about 4,000 (39 percent) of the U.S.-sourced firearms for various reasons. For example:

- Data (e.g., the firearm model, serial number, or importer) supplied by the law enforcement agency requesting the trace were missing or invalid for about 1,400 U.S.-sourced firearms.
- Federal firearms licensee records were incomplete, missing, or illegible for about 1,000 U.S.-sourced firearms.
- About 1,000 U.S.-sourced firearms were manufactured before the Gun Control Act of 1968 established marking and record-keeping requirements.

ATF data on all firearms recovered in the four countries (i.e., not only U.S.-sourced firearms) show that about three-quarters were handguns (see fig. 5). According to U.S. and foreign law enforcement officials we interviewed, their investigations had found that street gangs operating in urban areas were more likely to use pistols, while drug traffickers operating in less populated areas were more likely to use long guns. According to foreign police officials, criminal gangs such as MS-13 and 18th Street are likely to use pistols to carry out murder for hire and extortion. Foreign police officials stated that drug traffickers typically carry rifles—such as an AR-15 or AK-47—to protect their drug shipments and the locations where shipments are transferred between vehicles, such as fields for landing small aircraft.

**Figure 5: Types of Firearms Recovered in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and Traced by ATF, 2015–2019**



Total firearms recovered and submitted for tracing = 27,240

Source: GAO analysis of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) data. | GAO-22-104680

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

### Criminals in the Four Countries Acquire Firearms through Various Means, According to U.S. and Foreign Officials

Although U.S. agencies have no reliable data on criminals' acquisition of firearms in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, U.S. and foreign law enforcement officials said their experience had shown that criminals in those countries purchase firearms illegally in local black markets, steal them from legal firearm owners, and rent or borrow them from legal owners. According to State, ATF, and UNODC documents, large quantities of firearms from prior conflicts remain in the region.

- Illegal purchase.** According to U.S. and foreign officials, firearms are available for illegal purchase in black markets. For example, Salvadoran officials told us that criminal organizations such as MS-13 and 18th Street can purchase firearms from illegal markets in El Salvador. According to a UNODC report, firearms are often sold in black markets for lower prices than in legal markets, indicating ample

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availability of illicit firearms.<sup>29</sup> UNODC noted firearms prices were relatively low in the illicit market in El Salvador.

- **Theft.** U.S. and foreign officials noted the occurrence of firearm thefts from private owners, government stockpiles, and commercial retailers. U.S. and foreign officials told us that private security personnel commonly carry firearms, such as shotguns and revolvers, and can be targets for thieves. Foreign police investigators said that they had encountered thefts from private owners more often than thefts from government stockpiles or commercial retailers. For example, Belizean officials recalled multiple thefts from private owners and one theft from a commercial retailer but did not recall any thefts from a government stockpile.
- **Rental or loan.** U.S. and foreign officials described instances in which firearms were apparently rented or loaned to criminals by legal owners, including police officers and private citizens. For example, a Guatemalan official said that in one case a firearm registered in Guatemala was loaned by the legal owner, used in a crime in El Salvador, and then returned to the owner. Belizean law enforcement officials said such cases are difficult to prosecute because the legal owners often claim the firearm was stolen.

U.S. and foreign officials stated that because firearms are not manufactured in any of the four countries, newer firearms must be either imported or smuggled. Officials said that in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala, firearms can be imported by government agencies, such as police departments, and by commercial entities, such as firearms dealers. In Honduras, only the government can import firearms, according to U.S. and Honduran officials.

U.S. agencies do not have data on the total number of firearms imported by these countries from around the world. However, available State and Commerce data show that more than 100,000 firearms, including more than 10,000 fully automatic firearms, were legally exported from the United States to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras from January 2015 through March 2021.<sup>30</sup> According to State and Commerce,

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<sup>29</sup>UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (New York: March 2020).

<sup>30</sup>From January 2015 through December 2019, State approved the export of 104,593 firearms, including 10,189 fully automatic firearms. State's data did not include firearms exported in 2020. From March 2020 through March 2021, Commerce approved the export of 4,274 firearms. As of March 2021, Commerce had licensed the export of about 113,000 firearms, which can be exported over 4 years.

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all U.S. exporters were required to have an import license from the recipient country before the firearms could be shipped.

U.S. and foreign officials indicated that illicit firearms have been smuggled into the countries via land, air, and sea. Foreign officials in all four countries said they believed that smuggling of firearms over the porous land borders was most prevalent, although they noted the lack of data on firearms smuggling. According to Guatemalan and Honduran officials, criminals enter their countries at unofficial crossings without being inspected. According to Salvadoran police officials, some firearms are discovered at the airport (see fig. 6) but more are seized while being smuggled over El Salvador's land borders. From 2014 through 2020, CBP intercepted firearms being illegally exported from the United States by air, sea, and land to the four countries, according to CBP data. These data show that firearms being smuggled by air were most often destined for El Salvador, while firearms being smuggled by sea were most often destined for Honduras.

**Figure 6: Firearm and Ammunition Allegedly Smuggled through El Salvador International Airport**



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). | GAO-22-104680

U.S. and foreign officials observed that illicit firearms have been smuggled in small quantities. Foreign officials recalled smuggling cases involving one or two firearms. CBP data for seizures at the U.S. border from 2014 through 2020 show that most seizures of firearms bound for

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the four countries involved one firearm; the largest seizure involved 10 firearms. Honduran officials told us that firearms are smuggled in packages shipped commercially, and they observed that multiple packages containing small numbers of smuggled firearms can add up to an overall significant number. DHS officials said they were aware of firearms smuggled to these countries in cargo containers.

In addition, U.S. and foreign officials investigating smuggling stated that they had interdicted firearms smuggled in pieces. For example, ICE officials recalled identifying firearm parts concealed in packages that were consolidated by freight forwarders into maritime shipping containers.

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## U.S. Agencies Conduct Efforts That May Help Disrupt Firearms Trafficking in the Four Central American Countries

State, ATF, BIS, CBP, and ICE each conduct efforts related to disrupting firearms trafficking in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, although disrupting firearms trafficking is not a U.S. goal for the region. U.S. goals and objectives for the region focus on security, governance, and prosperity but not explicitly on disrupting firearms trafficking. In fiscal years 2015 through 2019, State provided a total of about \$38 million for programs to build capacity for weapons reduction, criminal justice, and border security, which include activities that may help disrupt firearms trafficking.<sup>31</sup> ATF, BIS, CBP, and ICE also conduct activities—for example, ATF’s firearms tracing, BIS’s export licensing, CBP’s Joint Security Program, and ICE HSI’s smuggling investigations—that may help disrupt firearms trafficking as an aspect of efforts to achieve broader criminal justice or border security goals.

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## Disrupting Firearms Trafficking Is Not an Explicit U.S. Objective in Central America

The *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America* and integrated country strategies for Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras focus on broad objectives related to strengthening security, governance, and prosperity. Although several of these objectives may contribute to disrupting firearms trafficking, the strategies do not identify it as a goal or objective of U.S. efforts. Table 3 shows objectives and subobjectives of the *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America*.

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<sup>31</sup>This total includes funding for 17 State projects related to firearms trafficking. See appendix I for more detail.

**Table 3: Objectives and Subobjectives of U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America**

Enhance security	Improve governance	Promote prosperity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professionalize civilian police</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professionalize civil service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve trade and transport</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduce violence at the local level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve fiscal accountability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Diversify and connect electric grids</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professionalize militaries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Governments uphold democratic values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduce poverty</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduce influence of organized crime and gangs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implement justice reforms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve quality of education</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support natural disaster resilience</li> </ul>

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State information. | GAO-22-104680

Because the *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America* and the integrated country strategies for the four countries do not identify disrupting firearms trafficking as a U.S. goal or objective, U.S. agencies do not track performance measures related specifically to firearms trafficking. Instead, they track performance related to broader objectives, such as the *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America's* security-related objectives of professionalizing the police, reducing violence, and reducing the influence of organized crime.

### State's Efforts to Build Capacity for Weapons Reduction, Criminal Justice, and Border Security May Help Disrupt Firearms Trafficking

State's efforts to develop weapons reduction, criminal justice, and border security capacity in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras may contribute to disrupting firearms trafficking. State PM weapons destruction and stockpile management programs seek to help the countries better secure stockpiles and destroy excess conventional arms, while State INL criminal justice programs and border security activities seek to improve the countries' investigative, law enforcement, and border enforcement capacities. Figure 7 shows the types of capacity-building activities State funded in the four countries in fiscal years 2015 through 2019.

**Figure 7: Types of State Department–Funded Capacity-Building Efforts in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, Fiscal Years 2015–2019**



Source: GAO analysis of State information. | GAO-22-104680

Note: The data shown reflect 17 State projects related to disrupting firearms trafficking. State’s decisions about the implementation of State-funded capacity-building efforts in the four Central American countries are based on a number of factors, including political will and country needs, according to State officials.

<sup>a</sup>State did not provide dedicated funding for weapons destruction and stockpile management assistance for Belize, and officials told us no regional efforts were implemented in the country.

As table 4 shows, State provided \$38 million to build the Belizean, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran governments’ capacity for weapons destruction and stockpile management, criminal justice, and border security in fiscal years 2015 through 2019.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup>This total is based on the latest available funding data for State’s capacity-building efforts. As of December 2021, we were unable to verify fiscal year 2020 funding related to firearms trafficking because it had not been sub obligated.

**Table 4: State Department Funding for Capacity-Building Assistance That May Help Disrupt Firearms Trafficking in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, Fiscal Years 2015–2019**

Type of assistance	Belize	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Regional	Total
Weapons destruction and stockpile management	— <sup>a</sup>	650,000	650,000	648,000	1,000,000	<b>2,948,000</b>
Criminal justice	— <sup>b</sup>	845,000	— <sup>c</sup>	1,616,125	12,696,371	<b>15,157,496</b>
Border security	— <sup>b</sup>	271,233	463,655	355,000	18,967,016	<b>20,056,904</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1,766,233</b>	<b>1,113,655</b>	<b>2,619,125</b>	<b>32,663,387</b>	<b>38,162,400</b>

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State information. | GAO-22-104680

Note: State data did not include funding for fiscal year 2020 that we could verify as being related to firearms trafficking because funding had not been sub-obligated as of December 2021.

<sup>a</sup>State did not provide dedicated funding for weapons destruction and stockpile management assistance for Belize, and officials told us State had implemented no regional efforts in the country.

<sup>b</sup>State did not provide dedicated funding for criminal justice or border security assistance for Belize, but officials told us that State had implemented some regional efforts in the country.

<sup>c</sup>State did not provide dedicated funding for criminal justice assistance for Guatemala, but officials told us that State had implemented some regional efforts in the country.

**PM Weapons Destruction and Stockpile Management Program**

State PM’s Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement provided about \$3 million in fiscal years 2016 through 2019 for weapons destruction and stockpile management assistance in the four Central American countries.<sup>33</sup> According to State PM, physical security assistance helps governments identify security vulnerabilities in their weapons storage depots and upgrade the depots to reduce the possibility of diversion of firearms into the illicit market. Stockpile management assistance also helps build these governments’ capacity to destroy excess firearms, light weapons, and ammunition.

State documents show the number of storage depots upgraded and the total number of firearms and ammunition destroyed in fiscal years 2018 through 2020. For example, according to progress reports for the program, State’s implementing partner assisted in destroying 2,469 firearms in Guatemala and 2,036 firearms in El Salvador.<sup>34</sup> Guatemalan

<sup>33</sup>State PM data did not include information on weapons destruction and stockpile management activities before fiscal year 2016 in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras.

<sup>34</sup>State’s implementing partner also destroyed ammunition and ordnance in both countries. According to PM officials, State’s implementing partner in Honduras was unable to destroy any firearms because of a 2018 Honduran law that required ballistics testing of confiscated weapons before those arms could be destroyed. PM does not fund a program in Belize.

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officials stated that PM's support has helped with the destruction of firearms left over from prior internal conflicts.

## INL Criminal Justice Program

State INL provided about \$15.2 million in fiscal years 2015 through 2019 for activities in its criminal justice program in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras that may contribute to disrupting firearms trafficking. For example:

- INL provided \$8 million to DOJ's International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP) for a regional effort to upgrade the capabilities of forensic laboratories in Central America. ICITAP assistance included training lab personnel and providing equipment to improve Central American agencies' investigative and analytical capabilities and help them achieve international accreditation. As of September 2021, ICITAP assistance was helping forensic labs in Honduras achieve international accreditation in ballistics analysis.
- INL provided about \$4.7 million for foreign officials to attend training related to disrupting firearms trafficking—for example, courses on small-arms trafficking and leadership development—provided by State's International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA).<sup>35</sup> According to a State document, the small-arms trafficking course focuses on identifying and tracing firearms, identifying homemade and counterfeit firearms, and using the internet to investigate firearms, among other topics. Guatemalan and Salvadoran officials stated that ILEA's small-arms trafficking courses helped improve their investigative capacity and their ability to identify and analyze firearms seized from crime scenes.
- INL provided about \$400,000 for El Salvador to upgrade its Integrated Ballistics Identification System, which is used to catalogue arms and link crimes committed with known firearms.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>State data show that in 2014 through 2020, 263 officials from the four countries participated in ILEA training related to disrupting firearms trafficking—36 officials from Belize, 130 from El Salvador, 60 from Guatemala, and 37 from Honduras. In 2021, ILEA San Salvador offered 42 courses on a variety of topics, including two courses related to disrupting firearms trafficking: the small arms trafficking course and the weapons trafficking and gangs model law course. ATF provides instructors for some of these ILEA courses held in San Salvador, El Salvador, and in Roswell, New Mexico.

<sup>36</sup>ATF officials told us in September 2021 that they were working with INL to identify equipment needs (e.g., microscopes and computers) for El Salvador and Guatemala.

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INL Border Security Program

State INL provided about \$20 million in fiscal years 2015 through 2019 for programs to build border security capacity in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. According to State officials, this assistance aims to disrupt smuggling of various types of contraband and may contribute to disrupting firearms trafficking. For example:

- INL provided about \$12.4 million, implemented by CBP, to provide training to Central American police and border officials, support border operations, identify human smuggling victims and traffickers, combat crime, and decrease illegal migration. According to CBP officials, the assistance trains law enforcement officials in the four countries to search for and interdict all types of contraband, including firearms. Guatemalan and El Salvadoran police officials told us they have used the training to intercept some contraband, including firearms, but lack the resources to conduct inspections at all ports of entry.
- INL provided \$2 million, implemented by ICE HSI, to build the capacity of specialized vetted units to disrupt and dismantle transnational criminal networks. ICE provides, among other things, training and mentoring in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to vetted TCIUs focused on transnational crime with a link to the United States.<sup>37</sup>
- INL provided about \$105,000 to obtain 10 canines for the Salvadoran Antinarcotics Unit and \$74,000 to obtain 13 canines for the Guatemalan National Police. A Guatemalan official said the canines deployed to ports of entry have helped customs officers identify contraband entering the country, such as drugs and ammunition.

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<sup>37</sup>ICE HSI does not implement its TCIU training and mentoring program in Belize.

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## ATF, BIS, CBP, and ICE Conduct Investigative and Enforcement Efforts That May Help Disrupt Firearms Trafficking in Central America

### ATF Assists Foreign Agencies and Investigates Domestic Cases Connected to Central America

ATF's regional office in San Salvador assists foreign law enforcement agencies in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with firearms tracing and facilitates information sharing between Central American countries. In addition, ATF conducts domestic firearms investigations connected to Central America.

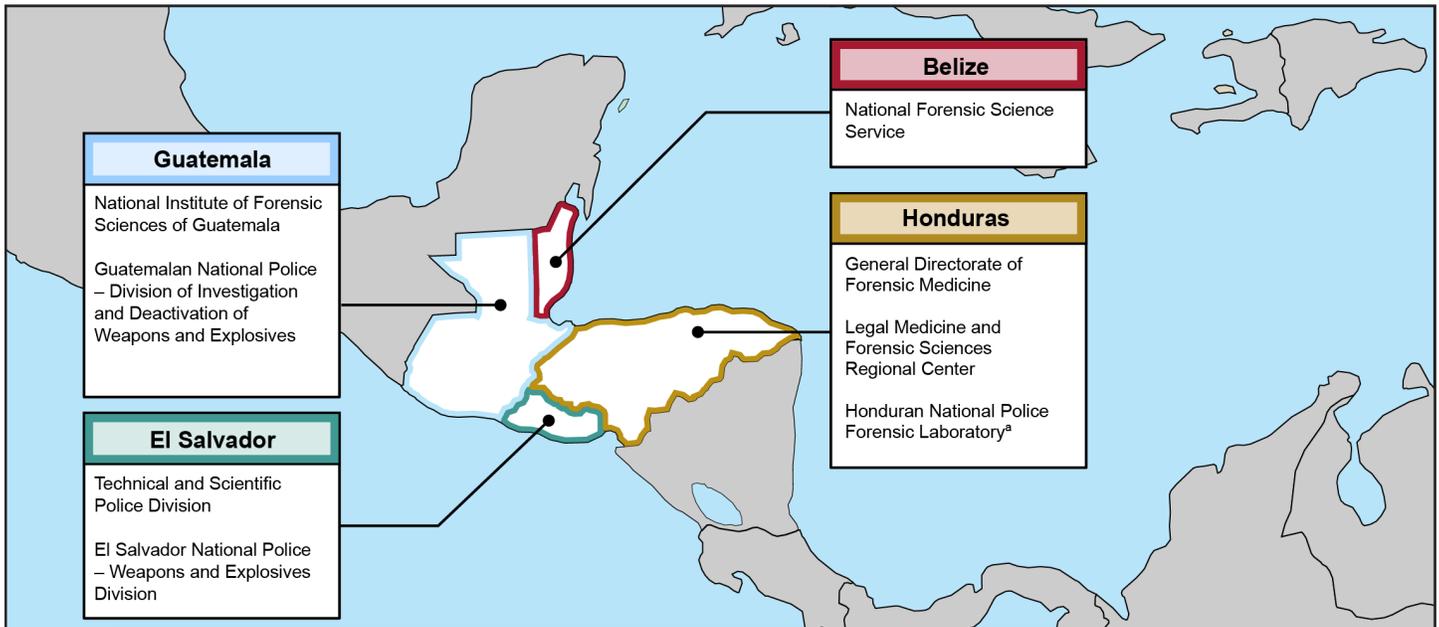
**Firearms tracing and information sharing.** ATF assists law enforcement entities in Central America by tracing firearms and sharing the results. In addition, ATF provides law enforcement entities in Central America with access to, and training for, its firearms tracing platform known as eTrace.<sup>38</sup> Law enforcement officials from Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras told us that the training was beneficial and stated that ATF's tracing system is the best available. As figure 8 shows, law enforcement entities in each of the four countries have received this training and gained access to eTrace.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>According to ATF officials, State INL funds the transportation costs for foreign law enforcement officials to participate in eTrace training.

<sup>39</sup>ATF officials said that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, ATF has been unable to provide eTrace training to Central American law enforcement entities since 2020. ATF officials stated that they are working with State INL to secure funding for future eTrace training.

**Figure 8: Foreign Government Agencies in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with Access to ATF's eTrace**



Source: Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) information. | GAO-22-104680

Note: eTrace is ATF's electronic system for tracing firearms.

<sup>a</sup>As of July 2021, the Honduran National Police's Forensic Laboratory was awaiting eTrace training from ATF.

Foreign officials told us that firearms trace results have provided investigative leads and helped law enforcement agencies in partner countries to prosecute violent criminals, in some cases by linking disparate criminal acts committed with the same firearm. For example, in April 2021, trace results for a firearm submitted by Belize's national forensic laboratory connected the firearm to multiple murders in Guatemala, according to Belizean officials. ATF plans to measure trace requests by foreign countries and is establishing a baseline for this measure, according to ATF officials.

ATF also shares with BIS trace results for firearms recovered and traced to U.S. exporters and to importers in the four countries. For example, ATF officials stated that they provide BIS with the names of firearm importers that frequently show up in trace results. Such information may be useful for BIS's export licensing review process and its end-use monitoring efforts, according to ATF officials.

BIS Processes and Approves Export License Applications and Conducts Risk-Based End-Use Checks on Firearms Exported to Central America

**Domestic investigations.** ATF conducts firearms trafficking investigations in the U.S. but does not systematically track cases connected to foreign countries. According to ATF officials, ATF’s case management system does not include data fields specific to foreign countries. However, ATF reported identifying 113 domestic U.S. investigations with a link to at least one of the four countries in fiscal years 2011 through 2021. In addition, in fiscal years 2015 through 2021, ATF’s Central and South American Office made 43 referrals from those four countries to the agency’s domestic offices. ATF began tracking its regional office referrals as a performance measure in 2019 in response to a recommendation we made in 2016.<sup>40</sup>

Although BIS does not focus on firearms trafficking in Central America when reviewing and approving firearms export licenses, its risk-based end-use checks of exported firearms could mitigate illicit diversion of the firearms, according to BIS officials. Table 5 shows the numbers of firearms BIS has approved for export to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras since it became responsible for processing nonautomatic firearm licenses in March 2020.

**Table 5: Numbers of Firearms Approved for Export to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, Mar. 2020–Mar. 2021**

	Approved licenses	Firearms approved for export	Exported firearms
Belize	11	818	145
El Salvador	23	9,143	307
Guatemala	46	99,270	3,822
Honduras	4	3,612	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>112,843</b>	<b>4,274</b>

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Commerce information. | GAO-22-104680

Note: Numbers of firearms are based on Commerce Control List categories 0A501 and 0A502.

BIS conducted few end-use checks in fiscal years 2020 and 2021 on firearms exported to any of the four countries. According to BIS officials, BIS’s export license reviews and its in-person end-use checks seek to ensure that approved firearms exports are being used for their intended purpose.<sup>41</sup> However, the officials said that when BIS began processing

<sup>40</sup>GAO-16-235.

<sup>41</sup>BIS officials said that the license review process validates information on each export license application and ensures the qualifications of the receiving entity. Similarly, end-use checks ensure that the receiving entity complies with export requirements.

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CBP Seeks to Disrupt the  
Illegal Export of Firearms  
through Interdictions and  
Information Sharing

export licenses for nonautomatic firearms in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented BIS officials from traveling from the U.S. to partner countries to conduct in-person end-use checks for these firearms.<sup>42</sup> In fiscal year 2021, embassy officials conducted two end-use checks in one of the four countries.

CBP interdicts illicit contraband en route to Central America, including firearms, at the U.S. border and shares with partner-country law enforcement entities information that may contribute to disrupting firearms trafficking in their countries. CBP does not collect interdiction data specific to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.<sup>43</sup> However, it collects some related information, such as the number of firearms seized at the U.S. border and the number of suspects apprehended through the Joint Security Program. CBP shares intelligence on transnational crime through a transnational intelligence operation in El Salvador.

**CBP interdictions.** CBP data show that in fiscal years 2014 through 2020, the Office of Field Operations seized 130 firearms; about 3,500 firearm components; and about 217,000 rounds of ammunition at the U.S. border destined for Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras. CBP agents at ports of entry receive information from CBP's National Targeting Center, such as intelligence on air passengers traveling with firearms who may not be in compliance with U.S. firearm export regulations.

**CBP information sharing.** CBP shares information that may contribute to disrupting firearms trafficking with partner-country law enforcement entities in the four countries through the Joint Security Program and a transnational intelligence operation known as a fusion center. In July 2016, CBP established the Joint Security Program at the El Salvador International Airport to advise Salvadoran authorities about, among other things, illicit importation of firearms. According to CBP, CBP officers assigned to the program work alongside a vetted unit from the Salvadoran National Police and other Salvadoran federal agencies to identify individuals suspected of trafficking illicit goods, including firearms,

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<sup>42</sup>BIS has no personnel in Central America, according to BIS officials.

<sup>43</sup>According to CBP officials, CBP measures and reports outbound firearm seizures on the basis of cumulative seizures, but this performance measure is not specific to seizures of firearms bound for Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. For fiscal year 2020, CBP's total seizure target for firearms leaving the United States was 500 firearms, regardless of their destination.

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and to search their luggage for the illicit material.<sup>44</sup> CBP officials said that officers assigned to the Joint Security Program in El Salvador do not have law enforcement responsibilities and rely on the Salvadoran National Police to inspect and seize contraband.

CBP shares intelligence about transnational criminals with its counterparts in Central America, which could include information about firearms, through a fusion center in San Salvador. CBP and partners from Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico established the center—known by its Spanish abbreviation GCIF (Grupo Conjunto de Inteligencia Fronteriza)—to collect, analyze, and distribute intelligence on transnational criminal activity in the region. Although foreign officials told us that GCIF has most frequently shared information about human smuggling, U.S. and foreign officials identified one case in which GCIF shared the results of a joint analysis of suspected firearms traffickers linked to criminal gangs. CBP officials said that CBP plans to exchange cargo data with each of the four countries through memorandums of cooperation that as of September 2021 had not been finalized.

### ICE Seeks to Disrupt Firearms Smuggling through Joint Investigations

ICE HSI investigates transnational crime linked to the United States jointly with TCIUs in Central America, although ICE HSI officials said few of these investigations have focused on firearms smuggling.<sup>45</sup> HSI priorities include investigations of gangs, including investigations that have addressed firearms trafficking.<sup>46</sup> ICE tracks the results of its investigative assistance, such as the number of arrests made, but does not have firearms-specific objectives for its efforts. Thus, while ICE’s joint smuggling investigations may help to disrupt firearms trafficking in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, ICE does not measure these effects.

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<sup>44</sup>According to CBP, the Joint Security Program receives information about suspected traffickers from CBP’s Office of Field Operations, including the National Targeting Center. For fiscal years 2016 through 2019, CBP reporting show the Joint Security Program responded to 18,381 referrals from the National Targeting Center, which resulted in seizures of narcotics, currency, and other items. However, CBP did not report any firearm seizures as a result of these referrals.

<sup>45</sup>According to DHS officials, as an “all threats” agency, ICE provides foreign law enforcement with investigative support for any illicit contraband leaving the U.S. and does not have efforts focused specifically on firearms. ICE provides State-funded capacity building for TCIUs.

<sup>46</sup>HSI’s priorities also include investigations of human smuggling.

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ICE HSI officials cited the following examples of the agency's activities in Central America:

- In February 2021, HSI officials in Guatemala City coordinated with the Guatemalan TCIU to target a suspected TCO leader, resulting in the seizure of 34 handguns and rifles.
- In 2019, the Salvadoran TCIU conducted an undercover operation that resulted in the seizure of two AR-15 rifles. In 2020, the suspect was sentenced to 10 years in prison for his involvement in a transnational weapons network.

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## State Plans to Develop Additional Efforts Focused on Firearms in Central America but Lacks Sufficient Information about Countries' Needs

According to State officials, the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs (WHA) plans to elevate firearms as a focus in forthcoming strategies and initiate new firearms-focused projects; however, WHA currently has insufficient information about each country's needs to develop such projects. Officials said that State regional and country strategies will be updated in response to the *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America* (Root Causes Strategy) issued on July 29, 2021. This strategy emphasizes that addressing violence, crime, and security in Central America is necessary to achieve the desired end state of a democratic, prosperous, and safe Central America.<sup>47</sup>

The Root Causes Strategy identifies threats such as gang violence, criminal activity, and illicit drug flows as challenges affecting the security environment in Central America, and it lists countering organized crime as a strategic objective. The strategy also identifies other areas of concern, such as governance challenges, including corruption, that undercut progress on civilian security. WHA officials said that the department is developing a plan to track progress toward the strategy's intended outcomes. The officials also said that State plans to modify existing projects or develop new ones to focus more directly on firearms in Central America.<sup>48</sup> However, according to the officials, State lacks information needed to tailor these projects to address firearms trafficking and other

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<sup>47</sup>The Root Causes Strategy was developed in accordance with Executive Order 14010, which called for a U.S. strategy for addressing the root causes of migration, to include proposals to counter and prevent violence, extortion, and other crimes perpetrated by criminal gangs and trafficking networks. Exec. Order No. 14010, 86 Fed. Reg. 8,267 (2021).

<sup>48</sup>State provided the Root Causes Strategy to Congress in response to a legislative mandate for a strategy to improve civilian security in the region, including combating the illicit activities of TCOs. Section 352 of the United States–Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act, Pub. L. No. 116-260, div. FF, Title III, Subtitle F, 134 Stat. 3127 (2020).

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means by which criminals obtain firearms in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

In the course of our review, we found that information that could assist State with planning and implementing firearms-focused projects in the four countries is available from other U.S. agencies and from partner governments. State officials told us they had not yet obtained this information because they had not focused on firearms trafficking in these countries.

- **Other U.S. agencies.** According to officials of U.S. agencies, including ATF and ICE, the agencies have not analyzed information about firearms that could help identify trafficking patterns, locations of criminal activity, and possible illicit sources, because the agencies have not focused explicitly on firearms trafficking. However, officials at both agencies said their agencies would be able to provide such analysis, based on their data and expertise, if asked to do so.
- **Partner governments.** The governments of the four countries are developing country-specific plans to address firearms trafficking. Since 2019, the Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran governments have worked with UNODC to develop country-specific plans, or “roadmaps,” to address firearms trafficking.<sup>49</sup> For example, according to Honduran and UNODC officials, the roadmap for Honduras highlighted the need for legal reforms to help regulate firearms in the country.<sup>50</sup> According to these officials, Honduras has begun taking steps laid out in the roadmap, including reforming firearms laws. UNODC officials told us that the European Union was considering supporting Honduras in implementing its roadmap. According to Belizean officials, Belize is developing its own roadmap to address firearms trafficking, complementing a regional Caribbean Firearms Roadmap. In September 2021, WHA officials told us they had not requested or seen these country-specific plans to address firearms trafficking in the four countries.

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<sup>49</sup>UNODC and Honduras formally signed the roadmap in December 2019. According to UNODC officials, El Salvador and Guatemala are reviewing drafts of their roadmaps and are expected to approve them in the near future.

<sup>50</sup>In November 2019, Honduras and UNODC’s Global Firearms Program signed a letter of understanding that included agreements to implement technical measures for the control of firearms and strengthen the criminal justice response to illicit arms trafficking.

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In addition, international organizations have developed other information about firearms trafficking that State has not reviewed. For example, the UN Institute for Disarmament Research has published reports about firearms diversion, including a methodology for analyzing diversion at the strategy and operation levels.<sup>51</sup> The methodology also provides guidance that may help identify vulnerabilities in the weapons management process, from the initial manufacture of a firearm through its end-of-life destruction.

State's policy contained in its Foreign Affairs Manual directs WHA's Office of Planning and Policy Coordination to provide broad oversight, guidance, and coordination on U.S. foreign assistance programs and develop policy on issues such as organized crime and political-military affairs.<sup>52</sup> In addition, State policy requires the incorporation of federal standards for internal control into all management control systems.<sup>53</sup> These standards require that management obtain information from relevant and reliable sources to achieve its objectives.<sup>54</sup>

Obtaining information about conditions in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras that affect the availability of illicit firearms in those countries and about the countries' specific needs for assistance to reduce criminals' access to such firearms would assist State with planning and overseeing efforts to disrupt firearms trafficking. Further, information about other donor efforts, such as the European Union's potential support for implementing the UNODC roadmaps, would enhance State's ability to coordinate with other donors to allocate resources efficiently.

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## Conclusions

Violence in Central America, largely committed by criminals with firearms, is considered to be a factor in northward migration. The Vice President and the July 2021 Root Causes Strategy have emphasized that addressing this migration is a U.S. foreign policy priority. To reduce violence and counter organized crime, State expects to elevate the

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<sup>51</sup>Hardy Giezendanner and Himayu Shiotani, *A Reference Methodology for National Weapons and Ammunition Management Baseline Assessments* (Geneva: UN Institute for Disarmament Research, July 26, 2021); Alfredo Baldo et al., *The Arms Trade Treaty: Diversion Analysis Framework*, Issue Brief 3 (Geneva: UN Institute for Disarmament Research, Aug. 31, 2021).

<sup>52</sup>1 FAM 155.1 (c-d).

<sup>53</sup>2 FAM 021.2.

<sup>54</sup>GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

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importance of disrupting criminals' ability to obtain firearms in these countries.

State has indicated it plans to review its existing efforts and may design new efforts to address firearms trafficking in Central America. However, State has not obtained relevant available information that could support its ability to develop new firearms-focused projects in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Obtaining information from other U.S. agencies, partner governments, and international organizations about conditions in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras that affect the availability of illicit firearms and about the countries' specific needs for assistance to reduce criminals' access to firearms would enable State to develop more effective projects and coordinate its efforts with other donors.

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## Recommendation for Executive Action

The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, in coordination with relevant State bureaus and offices, obtains information—for example, from U.S. agencies and partner countries—about conditions in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to support State's planning and oversight of efforts to reduce the availability of firearms to criminals in those countries. (Recommendation 1)

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to State, DOJ, Commerce, and DHS for review and comment. State provided comments that we have reproduced in appendix II. State, DHS, and DOJ also provided technical comments that we incorporated as appropriate.

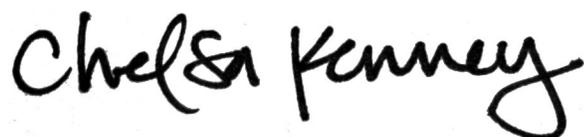
During the review period, and in consultation with State, we modified our recommendation to indicate that WHA should coordinate with other State bureaus and offices in obtaining the necessary information. In its comments, State concurred with our recommendation and stated that it would work to assess conditions that have allowed the availability of illicit firearms in the four countries. State said that it plans to obtain information through U.S. embassies and interagency working groups.

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We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Attorney General of the United States, the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Secretary of State. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

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If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2964 or [KenneyC@gao.gov](mailto:KenneyC@gao.gov). Contact points for our Office of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who contributed to this report are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chelsa Kenney". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chelsa Kenney  
Director, International Affairs and Trade

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# Appendix I: Objectives Scope and Methodology

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This report examines (1) U.S. agencies' knowledge about firearms trafficking to criminals in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; (2) U.S. agencies' efforts to disrupt firearms trafficking in the four countries; and (3) U.S. planning to address firearms trafficking in these countries.

To address these objectives, we requested and obtained agency documents and data from officials we interviewed at the Departments of Commerce, Homeland Security (DHS), Justice (DOJ), and State and the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

- We interviewed officials from Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) to obtain information about efforts to counter firearms trafficking in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras as well as data on the number of licenses approved for firearms exports to these countries and the number of firearms exported.
- We interviewed officials from DHS's U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to obtain information about efforts to counter firearms trafficking to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; data on DHS seizures of firearms destined for these countries; and supporting documentation of DHS efforts.
- We interviewed officials from DOJ's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) to obtain information about ATF's data analysis, firearms-trafficking investigations, and provision of assistance and training for Central American law enforcement agencies to build their capacity to identify and trace firearms.
- We interviewed officials from State's Bureaus of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), Political-Military Affairs (PM), and Western Hemisphere Affairs to obtain information about U.S. diplomatic efforts to counter firearms trafficking and about U.S. capacity-building assistance provided to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.
- We interviewed UNODC officials who analyze violent crime and demand drivers in Central America to obtain information about firearms-trafficking trends and assistance being provided in Central America.

To examine U.S. agencies' knowledge about firearms trafficking to criminals in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, we analyzed ATF data on firearms recovered in those countries. To assess the reliability of these data, we interviewed ATF officials who maintained

them. Specifically, we discussed how ATF received information, who provided the information, and how ATF reviewed the information for errors, among other topics. We also checked the data for missing information, outliers, and obvious errors, among other actions. On the basis of these steps, we determined that ATF's data were reliable for describing the sources and types of firearms recovered in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras from 2014 through 2019 for which law enforcement agencies submitted trace requests to ATF. These data are not representative of all firearms used by criminals in the four countries.

We reviewed CBP and ICE investigative reports on firearms smuggling. In addition, we analyzed data on firearms seized by CBP and determined that the data were reliable for reporting the types of conveyance (i.e., air, sea, or land) from which CBP seized firearms. To assess the reliability of CBP's data, we interviewed CBP officials in the U.S. and in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras who are responsible for maintaining the data, and we checked the data for missing information, outliers, and obvious errors, among other actions. Specifically, we asked CBP officials how the data was collected, what automatic error checks exist, and how often errors were found, among other questions. These data are not representative of all firearms smuggled to these countries from the United States or other countries. We reviewed UNODC reports on homicide and firearms trafficking for information specific to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

We also interviewed U.S. and foreign law enforcement officials who were familiar with criminal activity involving firearms in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Using videoconferencing, we spoke with ATF, CBP, and ICE officials covering the four countries who were knowledgeable about organized crime, violent crime, smuggling, and criminals' use of firearms. Also using videoconferencing, we interviewed foreign officials who were responsible for regulating firearms, investigating crime, analyzing firearms, prosecuting firearms criminal cases, and enforcing border security. In addition, we interviewed DOJ and DHS intelligence officials and learned that their offices did not produce any analytical reports on firearms trafficking or smuggling to Central America from 2015 through 2019. The information about foreign law in this report is not the product of our analysis but is derived from interviews and secondary sources.

To examine efforts undertaken by U.S. agencies to counter firearms trafficking to Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, we reviewed

U.S. agency documentation and interviewed officials at Commerce, DHS, DOJ, and State. We reviewed DHS, DOJ, and State plans and reports to identify activities and programs relevant to disrupting firearms trafficking to the four countries. We interviewed State officials responsible for managing U.S. foreign assistance related to building partner countries' capacity to investigate and interdict firearms. We also interviewed U.S. law enforcement officials, including ATF officials supporting firearms trafficking in the region, ICE officials investigating firearms smuggling in the region, and CBP officials interdicting weapons at the U.S. border and supporting interdiction by foreign governments. Further, we met with officials from Belize's National Police Department and National Forensic Science Service; El Salvador's National Civil Police (*Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador*); Guatemala's National Civil Police (*Policía Nacional Civil de Guatemala*) and Attorney General (*Fiscal General de la República de Guatemala*); and Honduras' Ambassador to the United States, National Police Department (*Dirección Policial de Investigaciones*). Additionally, we met with officials from the institute for sustainable development (*Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible*).

We reviewed and analyzed Commerce data on export license approvals of nonautomatic firearms destined for Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, to identify the number of firearms approved for export and the number of firearms exported. To assess the reliability of Commerce's data, we interviewed Commerce officials responsible for reviewing and approving export licenses to understand how Commerce collects information and maintains databases. Specifically, we asked how information was collected, who could update or change the information, and what automatic checks existed to minimize errors in the data, among other questions. On the basis of these steps, we determined Commerce's data on firearms exports were sufficiently reliable for reporting on the number of approved firearms export licenses and the number of firearms exported.

In addition, we reviewed and analyzed data on CBP seizures and ICE investigative assistance efforts related to firearms trafficking, to identify the number of CBP-seized firearms that were destined for these countries and the number of ICE investigations with a U.S. nexus. To assess the reliability of the data, we interviewed CBP and ICE officials that maintain the data and checked the data for missing information, outliers, and obvious errors, among other actions. On the basis of these steps, we determined that CBP's and ICE's data were sufficiently reliable.

Further, we reviewed ATF reporting on firearms-related training provided to Central American law enforcement entities to identify the kinds of training provided; the total number of Central American officials who participated; and the results, if any, of ATF's training. To assess the reliability of ATF's data, we interviewed ATF officials responsible for maintaining them and checked the data for missing information, outliers, and obvious errors, among other actions.

Last, we reviewed and analyzed State funding data for INL and PM firearms-related efforts in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, to identify the types of capacity-building assistance State provided to these countries that may affect firearms trafficking. To assess the reliability of the data, we interviewed State officials responsible for overseeing the capacity-building efforts and reviewed progress reports. Further, we verified the assistance and its outcomes, if any, with U.S. and Central American law enforcement officials.

To examine U.S. planning to address firearms trafficking in these countries, we interviewed State officials responsible for managing U.S. foreign assistance related to building partner countries' capacity to investigate and interdict firearms. We also reviewed related U.S. strategies, such as the July 2021 *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America*. Further, we interviewed UNODC officials who analyze violent crime and demand drivers in Central America.

We conducted this performance audit from December 2020 to January 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

# Appendix II: Comments from the Department of State



United States Department of State  
*Comptroller*  
Washington, DC 20520

GCC 17 2021

Thomas Melito  
Managing Director  
International Affairs and Trade  
Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001

Dear Mr. Melito:

We appreciate the opportunity to review your draft report, "FIREARMS TRAFFICKING: More Information Is Needed to Inform U.S. Efforts in Central America" GAO Job Code 104680.

The enclosed Department of State comments are provided for incorporation with this letter as an appendix to the final report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeffrey C. Mounts".

Jeffrey C. Mounts

Enclosure:

As stated

cc: GAO – Chelsa Kenney  
WHA – Emily Mendrala  
OIG - Norman Brown

**Department of State Response to the GAO Draft Report**

**FIREARMS TRAFFICKING: More Information Is Needed to Inform U.S.  
Efforts in Central America**  
**(GAO-22-104680, GAO Code 104680)**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your draft report “*Firearms Trafficking: More Information Is Needed to Inform U.S. Efforts in Central America*”.

**Recommendation:** The Secretary of State should ensure that the Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, in coordination with relevant State bureaus and offices, obtains information—for example, from U.S. agencies and partner countries—about conditions in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to support State’s planning and oversight of efforts to reduce the availability of firearms to criminals in those countries.

**Department Response:** The Department concurs and intends to work with relevant U.S. agencies and partner countries to assess conditions in the countries of northern Central America which have allowed for the availability of illicit firearms. The Department will request U.S. embassies in the region report on conditions in each country related to the availability of illicit firearms. The Department will also include discussion about the availability of illicit firearms in relevant interagency working groups.

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# Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Chelsa Kenney, (202) 512-2964 or [KenneyC@gao.gov](mailto:KenneyC@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Celia Thomas (Assistant Director), Kara Marshall (Assistant Director), Brandon L. Hunt (Analyst-in-Charge), Juan Pablo Avila-Tournut, Koffi Dogbevi, Mark Dowling, Suzanne Kaasa, Christopher Keblitis, and Reid Lowe made key contributions to this report.

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