

End-User Unknown:

The Legal Gun Trade and Its Role
in Guatemala's Violence

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C4ADS (www.c4ads.org) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to data-driven analysis and evidence-based reporting of conflict and security issues worldwide. Our approach leverages nontraditional investigative techniques and emerging analytical technologies. We recognize the value of working on the ground in the field, capturing local knowledge, and collecting original data to inform our analysis. At the same time, we employ cutting edge technology to manage and analyze that data. The result is an innovative analytical approach to conflict prevention and mitigation.

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Executive Summary

Gun violence in Guatemala is fueled by the licit import of handguns. Once weapons have entered Guatemala, illicit actors have greater opportunity to divert these firearms from their intended use and users, instead wielding them to pursue crime and perpetrate violence.

This report uses seizure data and supply chain analysis to assess how the international flow of weapons into Guatemala is vulnerable to diversion, or the rerouting of licitly transferred conventional arms from their intended recipient or use.¹

This analysis reveals:

- Handguns are the predominant weapon type used in violent crime in Guatemala. Many of the seized handguns are produced by major international weapons manufacturers such as Glock, Israeli Weapons Industries (IWI), Taurus, and Beretta.
 - Diversion pathways in-country appear among private citizens, commercial, and government actors, presenting opportunities for illicit actors to acquire licit firearms.
- Handguns, predominantly those made by top manufacturers, continue to flow into Guatemala.
 - These weapons are most often manufactured in the U.S., Brazil, and Turkey.
 - Manufacturers or entities within the manufacturer’s corporate network account for most handgun exports to Guatemala.
- Handguns entering Guatemala primarily do so via air. They often transit through third countries and/or third parties, complicating due diligence and creating greater opportunity for diversion.
 - The U.S., Canada, and Germany are the most common transit countries for Guatemalan handgun imports.
 - U.S. gun stores are the most common non-manufacturer exporters of handguns to Guatemala.
- The majority of Guatemalan importers are not end-users, but retailers that sell to both government and civilian consumers.

This report uses cases of weapons seizure and diversion to explore each of these findings. Using new data, we re-examine a case of Israeli arms that were sold in Guatemala in exchange for weapons later diverted to paramilitary forces in Colombia.

These findings illuminate areas where Guatemalan and international stakeholders can do more to counter the diversion of firearms in Guatemala. To this end, the report makes targeted recommendations for closing gaps in current legislation and enforcement.

Glossary

ATT: Arms Trade Treaty. An international treaty regulating the trade of conventional arms.² Among other conditions, the treaty requires signatories to set export control measures to prevent diversion.

ATF: The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives of the United States, which addresses “the illegal use and trafficking of firearms, the illegal use and storage of explosives, acts of arson and bombings, acts of terrorism, and the illegal diversion of alcohol and tobacco products.”³ The ATF provides firearm tracing services to other national governments on request.⁴

Diversion: The rerouting or appropriation of licitly shipped conventional arms.⁵ Diversion can take multiple forms, including arms entering the illicit market or being redirected to unauthorized or unlawful end users or end uses.⁶

DIGECAM: Dirección General de Control de Armas y Municiones, The General Directorate for the Control of Arms and Munitions.⁷ The authority responsible for the authorization, registration, control, import, manufacture, export, storage, sale, transportation, possession, and carrying of firearms and ammunition that enter, circulate and/or leave Guatemala, including through the authorization of respective licenses, physical registration and inspections, and inventory management.⁸

Handgun: In this report, the term handgun is used to refer to a pistol or revolver. Some trade data does not specify whether the shipment contains pistols or revolvers, necessitating the use of the umbrella term.

IEPADES: Instituto de Enseñanza para el Desarrollo Sostenible, Institute for Teaching for Sustainable Development, a Guatemalan civil society organization that specializes in⁹ and publishes research on small arms.¹⁰

INACIF: Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Forenses de Guatemala, The National Institute of Forensic Sciences of Guatemala.¹¹ The organization publishes violent crime data and associated forensic findings, including firearm statistics.

MP: The Ministerio Público, the Public Prosecutor’s Office of Guatemala, is responsible for investigating crimes and pursuing criminal prosecution in Guatemala.¹² MP collects weapons seizure data.

PNC: Policía Nacional Civil de Guatemala, the National Civil Police of Guatemala.¹³ The PNC collects seizure data and intermittently publishes weapons seizure information and photographs on its social media.

Trafficking: the import, export, acquisition, sale, delivery, movement or transfer of firearms, their parts and components and ammunition from or across one state to another without proper authorization.¹⁴

Introduction

Every year, thousands of Guatemalans die by homicide, while many more are injured through violent crime.^{15 16} Each death or injury affects yet more lives: families are displaced,¹⁷ economic opportunities evaporate,¹⁸ students drop out of school,¹⁹ and community mental health suffers.²⁰ This violence is one factor driving thousands of Guatemalans – including many unaccompanied minors^{21 22} – to leave the country^{23 24} as they search for safer and more stable lives elsewhere in Central or North America.

Violence in Guatemala is a product of historical, political, and social factors. State capacity has remained low since the 1960–1996 civil war, with the police and judicial system underfunded and weakened by corruption.^{25 26} As such, criminal organizations have built a thriving illicit narcotics industry, which spurs gang violence.²⁷

The majority of homicides and violent assaults in Guatemala are perpetrated with the use of a firearm.²⁸ Stopping guns from being misappropriated is a key means through which Guatemalan and international stakeholders can help curb crime and its many negative effects on the people of Guatemala. To develop a better strategy for preventing illicit arms acquisition and use, stakeholders must understand how guns get into Guatemala, and at what point along a supply chain a weapon moves from the licit to the illicit domain.

Guatemala lacks a domestic gun manufacturing industry, meaning firearms enter the country from elsewhere.^{29 30} Illicit weapons trafficking into Central America, and Guatemala in particular, is a globally recognized problem.^{31 32} The country’s decades-long civil war contributed to the high number of firearms currently in circulation, a problem compounded by criminal networks running an active firearms black market.³³ Other weapons—held by security forces, companies, and individuals in Guatemala—are simply stolen; this complicates traceability and increases the number of illicitly acquired firearms. Meanwhile, new guns enter the country illicitly through the international trafficking of weapons, many of which originate in the United States.^{34 35} Firearms trafficking and theft are therefore active priorities for the Guatemalan government, which receives support from other governments and international organizations on this issue.^{36 37}

However, the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) has found that almost half of U.S.-sourced weapons seized in Guatemala were diverted from licit commerce.³⁸ Despite this, there is little public information on the full scope and pathways of diversion of international firearms imported into Guatemala. This report responds to that gap by using firearms seizure and supply chain data to identify trends and vulnerabilities in the movement of firearms to Guatemala, providing stakeholders with the information they need to more effectively respond to crimes perpetrated with firearms.

Methodology

This report seeks to expose the points at which licitly produced and exported firearms become illicit. To do so, it joins analysis of firearms after they become illicit (weapons seizure analysis) with analysis of firearms before they become illicit (supply chain analysis) using each to inform analysis of the other.

Weapons seizure data is derived from four main sources:

- Weapons seizure data from the Public Prosecutor’s Office of Guatemala (MP)
- Statistical data from the National Institute of Forensic Sciences of Guatemala (INACIF) indicating brands of weapons used in violent crimes
- Seizure and tracing data obtained from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) by Stop US Arms to Mexico³⁹
- Social media posts on weapons seizures from the National Civil Police of Guatemala (PNC)

Data from the MP, ATF, and INACIF provide statistical information regarding seizures, whereas social media posts from the PNC provide incident-level information about seizures.

Supply chain analysis relies on two main types of publicly available trade data:

- Detailed import records from January 2013 through September 2019, which contain specific information about shipments and related parties
- Non-detailed import records available for January 2020 through June 2024, which contain information about the countries of destination, origin, and departure of shipments, but do not contain specifics about shipment contents or related parties

Where available and relevant, analysts supplemented analysis with alternative sources, including procurement records.

Limitations

The supply chain analysis of this report only assesses firearms entering Guatemala licitly; it does not comprehensively investigate the flow of weapons entering Guatemala illicitly or the state of weapons already present in Guatemala before the period of study. Neither seizure data nor supply chain data can paint a complete picture of weapons flows to Guatemala.

Seizure data is a rough proxy for the use of illicit firearms, and each data source has its own limitations:

- While the MP and INACIF datasets are complete to the best of our knowledge, reporting processes between the two authorities can vary.
- PNC seizure data only includes seizures posted online by PNC and does not include any unpublicized seizures. Human error can also impact reporting. To counter this, C4ADS used markings and weapon characteristics present in photos to conduct analysis and present a best assessment of weapon type, brand, and potential ownership; no in-person analysis was conducted.
- ATF data is a complete dataset of ATF seizure and tracing activities. However, the ATF only conducts tracing activities upon request of partner governments, meaning ATF data may not be representative of all seized firearms.⁴⁰

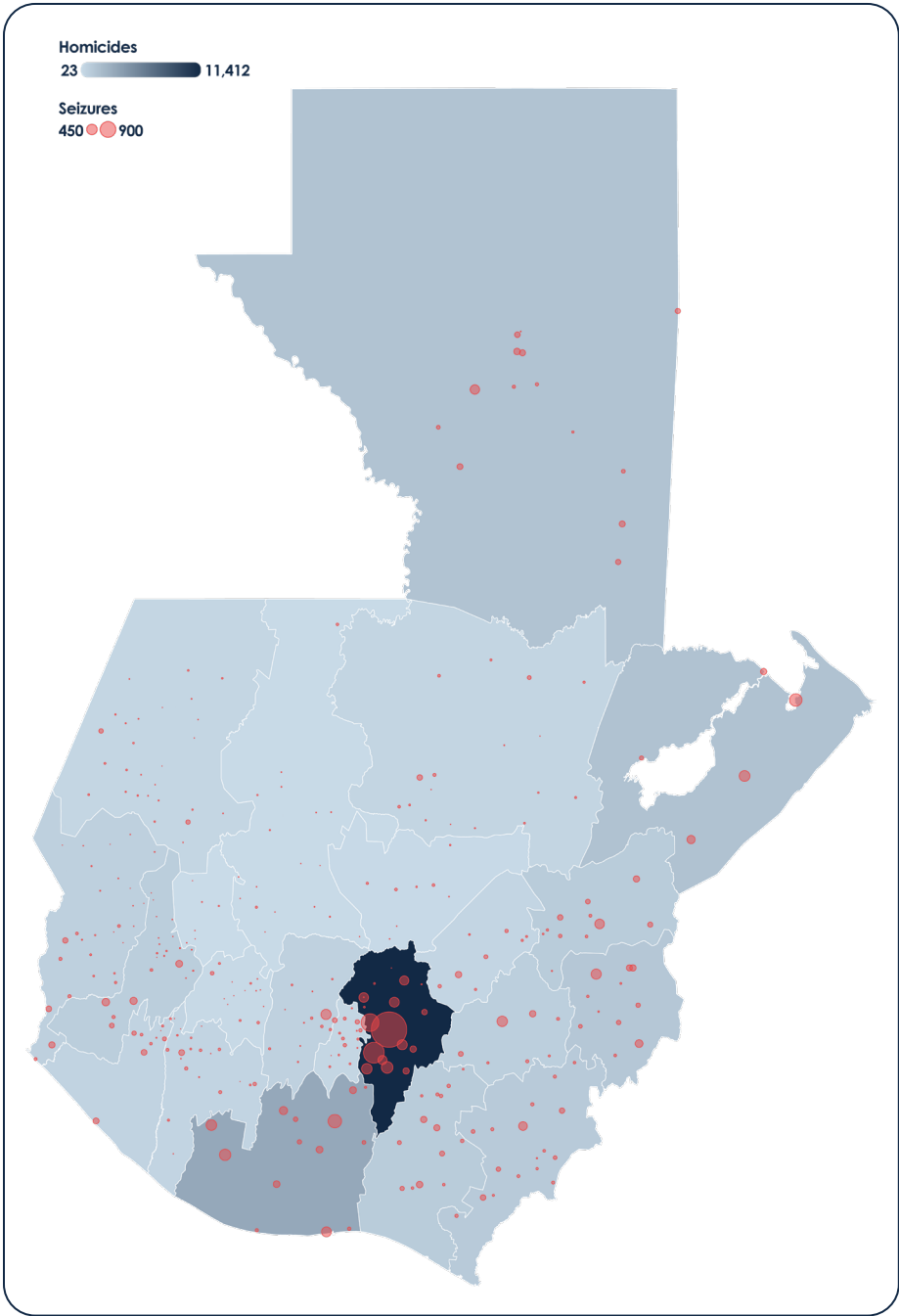
Trade data was obtained from third-party vendors and may contain inconsistencies due to human error, possible obfuscation, or gaps. In the case of Guatemala in particular, trade data availability and completeness vary over the study period (2013–2024). As such, aspects of Guatemalan trade may be over- or under-represented in this analysis. Finally, while this report makes use of country of origin and country of departure data represented in trade records, this data may not reflect the complete transit path of shipments in all cases.

From Diversion to Violence

Firearms Fuel Homicide in Guatemala

Firearms are a key driver of violence in Guatemala. Over 34,800 homicides took place in Guatemala between January 2015 and October 2024, at least 80% of which involved firearms.⁴¹

Homicides by department (January 2015-October 2024) and seizures by municipality in Guatemala (January 2015 - April 2024)



Data on homicides sourced from PNC, provided by Diálogos;⁴² data on seizures sourced from MP, provided by Diálogos.⁴³

Firearm violence is concentrated in Guatemala’s urban population centers, particularly the Guatemala Department, which encompasses Guatemala’s eponymous capital city and is home to over a third of the country’s urban population.⁴⁴ The Guatemala Department accounted for over 40% of homicides involving firearms from January 2015 to October 2024,⁴⁵ as well as nearly one-third of seizures from January 2015 to April 2024.⁴⁶

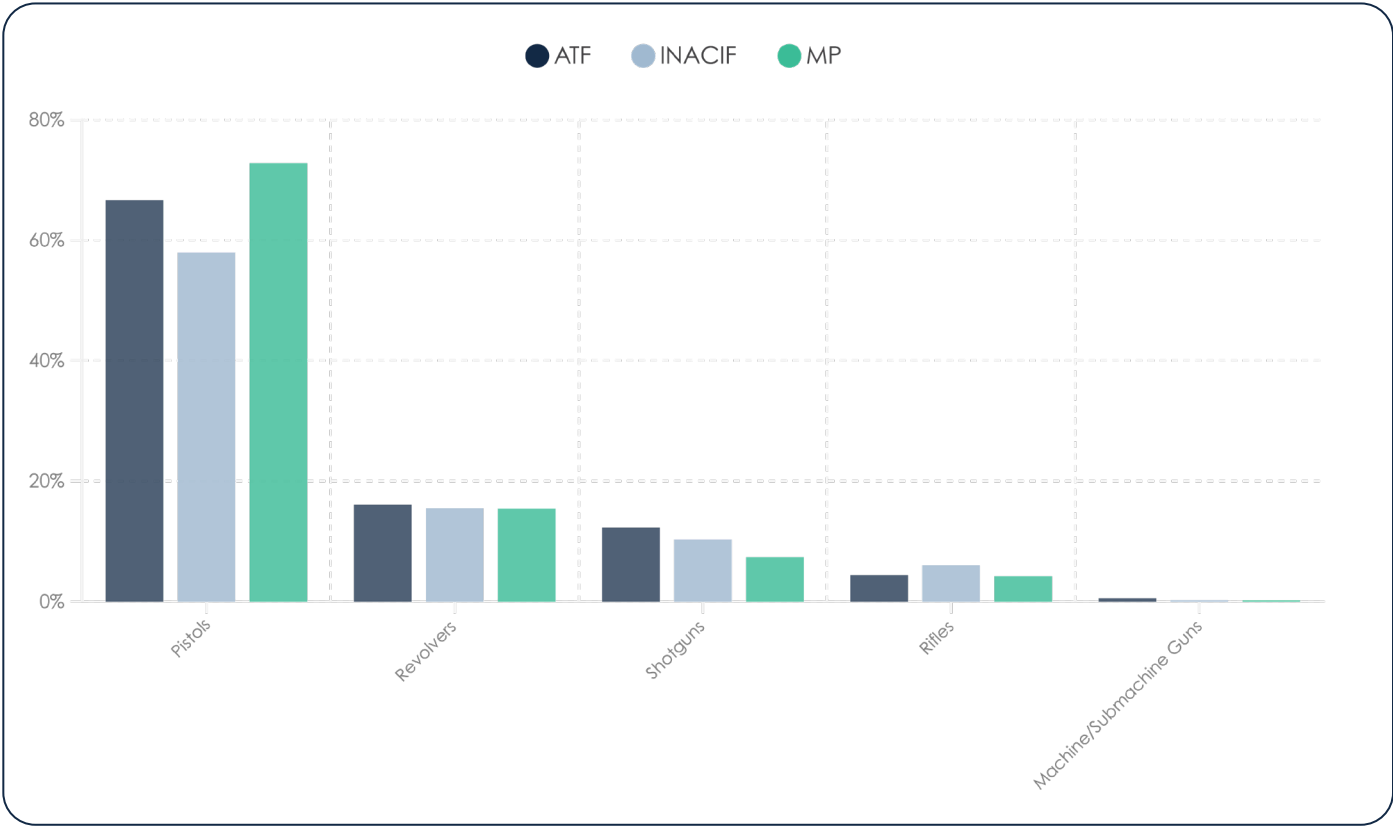
Further analysis suggests that violence involving firearms also tends to be concentrated in municipalities with major transport infrastructure, including ports, international motorways, and airports.^{47 48 49} Several of the departments of concern are also well-known hubs for criminal organizations, including those engaging in cross-border crime.^{50 51 52}

Seized Firearms are Global Brand Handguns

The firearms fueling these violent crimes in Guatemala tend to be handguns, including those diverted from civilian and government users. In particular, brands such as IWI, Glock, Taurus, Beretta, Daewoo, CZ, Smith & Wesson, and Maverick are the handgun brands most commonly associated with weapon seizures in Guatemala.

Between 2019 to 2024, handguns – pistols and revolvers – have consistently made up the majority of weapons seized or analyzed in Guatemala by the MP, INACIF, and ATF. The agencies reported that 86.4%, 71.0%, and 77.8% of their respective seizures were of handguns.^{53 54 55} Handguns, therefore, warrant increased scrutiny from stakeholders working to counter weapons trafficking to Guatemala.

Weapon Seizures in Guatemala by Gun Type.
Graph citations: ^{56 57 58}



Review of weapons seizure data reveals a limited number of manufacturers, among the worlds’ hundreds

of firearms manufacturers, that consistently appear across available datasets. In INACIF, MP, and ATF weapons seizure data, the top ten manufacturers of each agencies’ seizures make up 70%, 66% and 55% of identified firearms seized, respectively.^{59 60 61} These manufacturers include:

Top 10 Manufacturers of Firearms Seized in Guatemala (by % of seizures)^{62 63 64 65}

Brand	MP (2019–2024)	INACIF (2019–2023)	ATF (2019–2022)
Glock	14%	12%	7%
IWI	13%	10%	7%
Taurus	9%	5%	5%
Beretta	8%	10%	5%
Smith & Wesson	6%	3%	6%
Daewoo	5%	7%	4%
Maverick	4%	NA	8%
Tisas	3%	4%	2%
Ranger	2%	NA	0
Cz (Ceska Zbrojovka)	2%	10%	6%

How Diversion Occurs

There are multiple points at which the diversion of firearms can occur. Diversion can happen via government, private sector, or individual actors.⁶⁶ Diversion can occur prior to or at arrival: examples include via the re-routing or misappropriation of the means of transit, or by smuggling.⁶⁷ Diversion after arrival can involve diversion of stockpiles or of firearms in active use.⁶⁸

Stockpiles or collections of arms – regardless of their size and whether they be government, commercially, or privately owned – are inherently susceptible to diversion.⁶⁹ Stockpile diversion can be caused by thefts or looting, and may be paired with, or enabled by, issues of corruption.⁷⁰

Diversion can also occur during the active use of the firearm, or via its unauthorized sale, rental, or transfer.⁷¹

Identifying In-Country Diversion in Guatemala

Markings on seized weapons can provide insight into the site of diversion, and whether diversion is taking place within Guatemala or outside of the country, with weapons subsequently trafficked into Guatemala. Firearms registered with DIGECAM, the Guatemalan arms control authority, are engraved with the letters “GUA,” and additional marking is required for weapons transferred to state security

forces.⁷² According to 2024 reporting by the Institute for Teaching for Sustainable Development (IEPADES), 55% of weapons used in criminal offenses in DIGECAM’s custody were registered in Guatemala, meaning they entered the country legally.⁷³ However, only 23.7% of the seized, registered firearms in DIGECAM’s custody had previously been reported to the Guatemalan authorities as stolen.⁷⁴ It is possible, then, the diversion or theft of firearms is significantly underreported in Guatemala, or that some of the registered owners of weapons enabled the weapons’ diversion, meaning even apparent licit sales of firearms may have some diversion risk.⁷⁵

Photos of seized weapons posted by the PNC highlight the prevalence of diverted firearms: many have the “GUA” marking indicating Guatemalan registration.⁷⁶ Many of these GUA-marked weapons meet the general profile of seized weapons in Guatemala – pistols from some of the world’s top brands, including Glock, IWI, Tisas, and CZ.

CASE STUDY: Violence, Guns, and Gangs

Many of the guns seized from gang members in Guatemala – including those with a history of per-petrating violent crime – entered the country legally before being diverted. Diversion can occur in multiple ways, including thefts from private citizens.⁷⁷

In June 2022, police arrested two alleged hitmen from the Mara Salvatrucha gang, also known as MS-13,⁷⁸ in San Miguel Petapa, Guatemala Department. The men were believed to be responsible for the death of a 4-year-old girl and injury of a 20-year-old woman during an armed attack, and one of the men reportedly had a criminal record for a previous armed robbery. During the arrest, the police seized a stolen G-Cherokee pistol with markings indicating it was made in Israel and registered in Guatemala.



In May 2022, police arrested two alleged members of the 18th Street Gang (also known as Barrio 18), a rival gang of MS-13,^{79 80} in Guatemala City. The men were carrying a Tisas pistol, the Zigana Px-9, which was produced in Turkey and registered in Guatemala. The police also seized 46 bags of marijuana, and they referred a missing teen found with the men to juvenile court.⁸¹



In March 2023, police arrested an alleged MS-13 gang member accused of an armed attack on a taxi stand that killed two and injured another two in Villa Nueva, Guatemala Department.⁸⁴ The man was carrying a Browning Arms Company pistol that was registered in Guatemala.⁸⁵



In April 2022, police seized a CZ pistol from three Salvadoran gang members in Mixco, Guatemala Department that had entered Guatemala illegally.^{82 83}



CASE STUDY: Private Security Companies

Guatemala’s large market of private security forces— estimated by the government to employ at least 45,000 guards⁸⁶ – also represents a notable diversion risk. In addition to diversion risks via stolen arms, individuals have previously used employment in private security firms to access, and potentially divert, firearms. In one such case, the diversion scheme included an individual who repeatedly joined private security companies to gain access to, and subsequently divert, firearms.⁸⁷

Seized weapons can be stolen from private security companies. In December 2024, authorities captured two individuals accused of robbing several businesses in Jalapa, Jalapa Department.⁸⁸ They seized a homemade firearm and a Brazilian-origin Taurus pistol, which had been reported stolen from a private security company earlier in the year.

Individuals that likely should not have access to firearms may be able to obtain them via private security companies. In January 2024, police captured a private security guard in San Cristóbal, Totonicapán Department who was allegedly attempting to sell a vehicle acquired during an armed theft.⁸⁹ The suspect was an active private security guard, though he had arrest warrants for illegal firearm possession and aggravated robbery. The police seized a Taurus revolver, registered in Guatemala, that the guard was carrying without a license.



CASE STUDY: Diversion of Government Weapons

Like private security companies, firearms actively used by public security forces or in their stockpiles also can be at risk of diversion. Procurement records indicate that Guatemalan government agencies have procured firearms made by many of the same manufacturers that are among the most seized, including by Glock,^{90 91} IWI,⁹² CZ,^{93 94} and Beretta.^{95 96}

Seized weapons are sometimes diverted from government control through armed theft. In May 2022, the PNC seized weapons in Tiquisate, Escuintla Department that had been stolen during the assault of a police officer the previous day.^{97 98} The weapons – an IWI Tavor rifle and a Pietro Beretta pistol – were seized alongside 28 bags of marijuana.

Ammunition is also at risk of possible diversion from government stores. In January 2022, the PNC arrested two individuals in Guatemala City who were carrying a pistol with a filed-off registration number – likely diverted in Guatemala based on markings – and ammunition designated for the exclusive use of security forces.⁹⁹



Each seized weapon with a GUA marking represents a missed opportunity to prevent licit weapons from being diverted in Guatemala and used to perpetrate violent crimes. Supply chain analysis can help fill in knowledge gaps on how weapons move into Guatemala, allowing stakeholders to close existing vulnerabilities.

The Manufacturers and Middlemen Getting Guns into Guatemala

Top Gun Manufacturers Produce the Handguns Entering Guatemala

Trade data confirms what seizure data suggests: handguns are the most common weapon imported into Guatemala. The United Nations Comtrade database, which provides aggregated statistics for global trade flows, indicates that Guatemala’s primary arms imports are pistols and revolvers.¹⁰⁰ In 2023, USD \$18.2 million of the USD \$41.4 million worth of arms imported by Guatemala that year were handguns, which represents 44% of the total value of arms imports.¹⁰¹ The predominance of handguns matches data on violent crime and weapons seizures: consistently, most of the weapons seized in Guatemala are pistols and revolvers.

Handguns imported into Guatemala predominantly come from brands such as Beretta, Taurus, and IWI.¹⁰² Between 2013 and 2019 (the dates for which detailed information about trade parties is available), the top manufacturers exporting pistols to Guatemala included Beretta, Taurus, IWI, Glock, TISAS, NORINCO, and Girsan.¹⁰³

Top 10 Manufacturing Exporters of Pistols to Guatemala, 2013-2019^{104 105}

Brand	Product Origin (as reported in trade data)	Units Shipped
Beretta	Italy, United States	10,748
Taurus	Brazil, Belize, United States	6,565
Israel Weapon Industries (IWI)	Israel	6,563
Glock	United States	3,609
Tisas	Turkey	3,219
China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO)	China	3,000
Girsan	Turkey	2,891
Ceska Zbrojovka (CZ)	Czechia	2,220
STI International (now Staccato)	United States	1,898
Lasserre	Argentina	1,750

While data on exporters is not available after 2019, country of origin data indicates that the top ten countries in which these exporting companies are based continue to dominate the export of handguns to Guatemala.¹⁰⁶ The United States, Brazil, and Turkey, which are the countries of origin for the 2013–2019 top exporters (Beretta, Taurus, Glock, Tisas, Girsan, and STI), dominated exports of pistols and revolvers to Guatemala between 2020 and 2024.¹⁰⁷

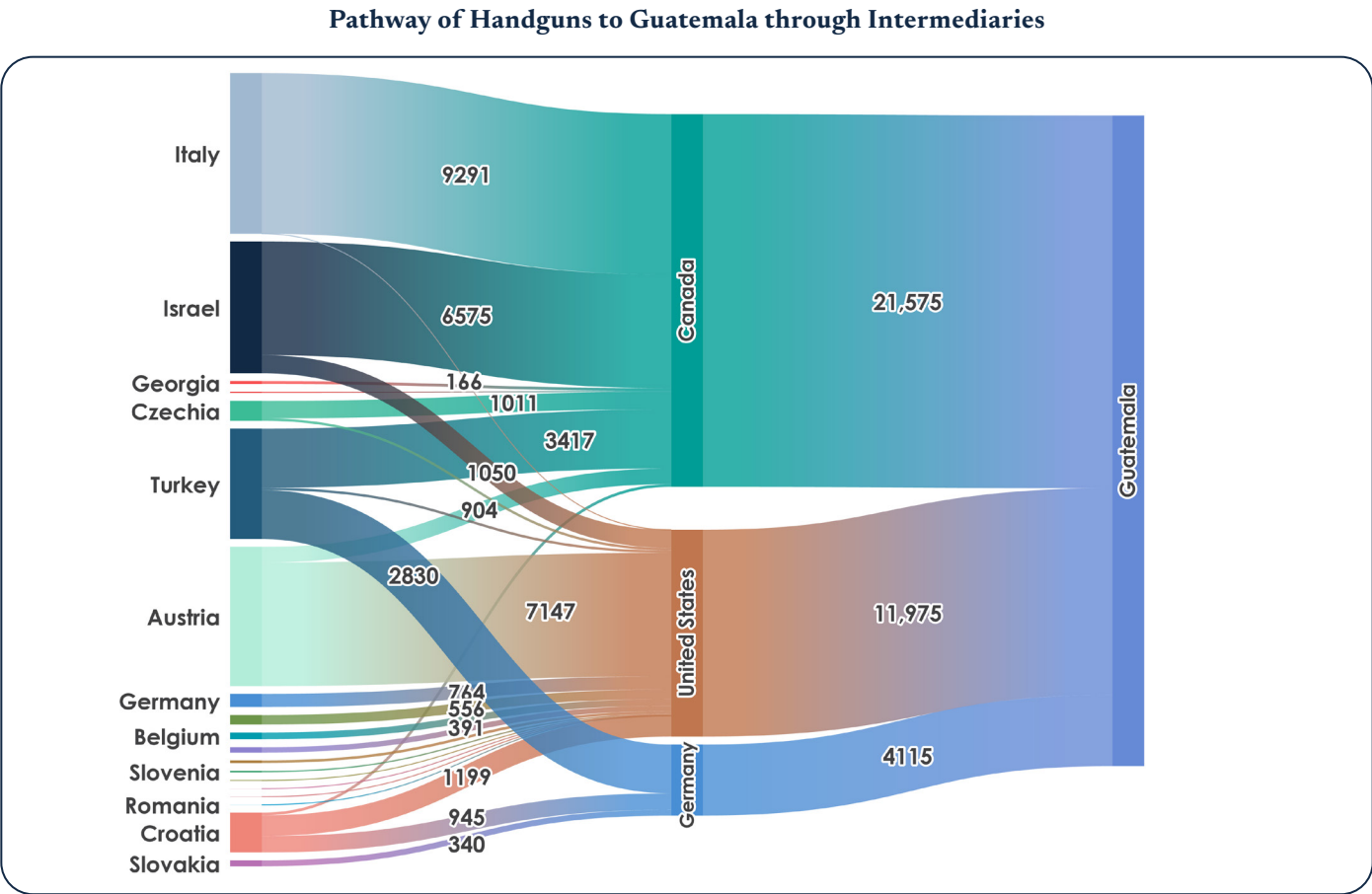
Top 10 Countries of Origin for Handguns Imported to Guatemala, 2020–2024¹⁰⁸

Country of Origin (as reported in trade data)	% of Units Shipped
United States	32.8%
Brazil	22.4%
Turkey	13.9%
Italy	6.2%
Israel	5.7%
Czechia	5.1%
Austria	4.1%
Argentina	3.9%
Croatia	3.6%
Slovakia	1.1%

Import of Guns into Guatemala via Intermediaries

Intermediaries Concentrated in U.S., Canada, and Germany

Handguns entering Guatemala sometimes are not imported directly from their country of origin, but transit through additional countries and/or additional parties, referred to as intermediary or “third countries.” Trade data indicates that since 2013, more than 48,000 pistols and revolvers, or about 28% of identified handguns in available trade data during this period, have entered Guatemala through third countries.¹⁰⁹ The top three intermediary countries by percentage of handgun imports are Canada, U.S., and Germany: 44% moved through Canada, 25% through the U.S., and 9% through Germany.¹¹⁰ Examples of common brands transiting through third countries include Israeli-origin IWI and Italian-origin Beretta firearms (Pietro Beretta) transiting to Guatemala through Canada, Turkish-origin Girsan firearms transiting through Germany, and Brazilian-origin Taurus firearms transiting through the United States.¹¹¹



Depiction of the flow of firearms sent to Guatemala through intermediaries in Canada, the United States, and Germany.¹¹²

Non-Manufacturers Exporting to Guatemala

Third-party companies that export pistols to Guatemala pose another risk of diversion. Between January 2013 and September 2019, 23 entities that are not arms manufacturers¹¹³ exported over 12,000 pistols and revolvers to Guatemala, which represents 19% of the identified handguns that were exported to Guatemala during this time.¹¹⁴ Most of these entities are based in the United States (30% of them in Florida) with 75% of handguns exported by non-manufacturers during this period coming from the United States.¹¹⁵

While overall the volume of firearms coming into Guatemala via non-manufacturing companies is low compared to that originating from manufacturers, these shipments pose a particularly high risk for diversion. This may be because due diligence or know your customer practices place a high burden on small sellers, as opposed to arms manufacturers. The most prolific of these sellers are three U.S.-based gun stores – the Hurricane Butterfly corporate network,¹¹⁶ M.G. Suber & Associates (MGS), LLC, and Miami Police Depot Inc.¹¹⁷

Top 5 Non-Manufacturers Exporting Handguns to Guatemala, 2013–2019¹¹⁸

Exporter Name	Number of Units	Country (as reported in trade data)
Hurricane Butterfly Corporate Network	3,069	United States
M.G. Suber & Associates, LLC	2,712	United States
Miami Police Depot Inc	1,805	United States
Poongsan Corporation	1,200	South Korea
Lou's Police Corporate Network	948	United States

Vulnerabilities Upon Entry into Guatemala

Intermediaries: Buyers and Sellers in Guatemala

Available trade data indicates that there were at least 40 entities importing pistols and revolvers to Guatemala between January 2013 and September 2019.¹¹⁹ Thirty-five of these entities were private commercial companies (such as gun shops) or individual entrepreneurs, which imported over 65,000 pistols and revolvers in this period.¹²⁰

However, some of the weapons sent to private retailers may still have been destined for government buyers. Among the 35 private importers, 15 previously won public procurement contracts for the supply of firearms.^{121 122} Even more telling, over 90% of the identified pistol and revolver imports made by private entities between January 2013 and September 2019 were imported by companies that have won firearm supply contracts from the Guatemalan government.^{123 124}

International transfers of weapons always carry a risk of arms control evasion. Importers may falsify end-user certificates to obscure the actual recipients of firearms shipped from abroad, potentially exposing transactions to illicit activity.^{125 126 127} In other cases of diversion, importers may simply not do sufficient due diligence when selling to Guatemalan buyers, or diversion may occur later in the supply chain.

Transit: Majority of Handguns Enter Guatemala by Air

Beyond responding to the players and routes of Guatemala’s firearms supply chains, the actual means of transit to move firearms into Guatemala presents another opportunity to tackle illicit diversion. Most pistols exported to Guatemala are shipped by air.¹²⁸ Trade data from between 2020 to 2024, which

contain shipments’ customs entry location, indicate that 95% of pistols imported to Guatemala entered via airport customs sites at La Aurora International Airport in Guatemala City, while the remainder entered at sites at the maritime ports of Puerto Barrios, Puerto Quetzal, and Santo Tomas de Castilla.¹²⁹ The dominance of air transport means that most pistols enter Guatemala through channels that are more readily accessible to enforcement officials, particularly during the customs processes of departure and arrival.

Case Study: Guatemalan Importers, Israeli Firearms, and Diversion to Paramilitary Forces

IWI is a major Israeli small arms manufacturer whose customers range from the Israeli Defense Forces to US law enforcement agencies.^{130 131} IWI reportedly formed after the Israeli government privatized the small arms division of state-owned Israel Military Industries (IMI) Ltd. in 2005.^{132 133}

IWI’s users are not limited to government forces. Jericho pistols and/or IWI-produced firearms are among the top-most-seized firearms in Guatemala.^{134 135 136} Some of these IWI weapons are stolen directly from their owners,¹³⁷ but, in other cases, organized crime diverts weapons or profits from weapons earlier in the supply chain.

As with many brands of weapons that end up in Guatemala, IWI often does not export weapons directly to end users in Guatemala.¹³⁸ Instead, IWI appears to typically sell weapons in Guatemala through an exclusive dealer, which then sells weapons to end users.^{139 140} This extra step in the supply chain opens more opportunity for the diversion of imported weapons, while protecting companies from being held responsible for this diversion, as demonstrated by a notable case from the early 2000s.

In 2003, the Organization for American States (OAS) stated that the exclusive dealer of IMI (historically affiliated with IWI) had sold IMI-produced weapons to Nicaraguan police in exchange for old Nicaraguan police and military weapons.^{141 142} IMI’s Guatemalan dealer then sold the Nicaraguan weapons to an Israeli buyer claiming to be buying on behalf of the Panamanian police forces. However, the Nicaraguan firearms were instead delivered to the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), a Colombian far-right paramilitary and drug trafficking organization, effectively diverting government weapons to a destabilizing criminal enterprise by using IMI weapons as barter.¹⁴³ While the OAS did not find that IMI’s Guatemalan representative was a direct co-conspirator in the plot to sell weapons to the AUC, it castigated the company for its facilitating role and its lack of due diligence regarding the supposed Panamanian buyer.¹⁴⁴ IMI denied any role in the diversion.¹⁴⁵ However, it is the very nature of this kind of supply chain – exporting to a Guatemalan dealer instead of selling weapons directly to end users – that muddles corporate responsibility for the weapons’ use.

This case is over 20 years old, but it casts its shadows over the present. In 2005, the small arms division of IMI was privatized and became IWI.¹⁴⁶ The Guatemalan company that IMI worked with in 2003 is not currently IWI’s exclusive dealer,¹⁴⁷ or at least, not exactly. Instead, IWI now works in the same way with another Guatemalan company.^{148 149} However, while IWI’s new exclusive dealer has a different name, trade data from 2007–2008 indicates that it has used the same shipping address and same contact person in its transactions.¹⁵⁰ The continued use of intermediaries to deliver weapons undermines enforcement regimes, which predominantly focus on importers, exporters, and weapons’ end use.

Conclusion

Violence in Guatemala is an international problem. International supply chains sustain violent crime, which in turn destabilizes and changes communities across Central America. Refugees and migrants flee this violence and seek shelter in Mexico, the United States, and other countries around the world, which are not always prepared for the volume and needs of the new arrivals.

Despite this, international efforts to counter the diversion of arms into Guatemala are insufficient. Most countries discussed in this report are signatories and/or state parties of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT),¹⁵¹ which mandates that exporting countries maintain an export control process and take measures to prevent diversion.^{152 153} While these countries have the requisite arms control processes in place, there is limited evidence that governments are making an effort to investigate and counter the diversion of weapons exported to Guatemala or other countries facing high rates of violence. There are some exceptions: Spain denied at least one export license for pistols to Guatemala based on the risk of diversion in 2011;¹⁵⁴ Austria denied at least one export of firearms to Guatemalan public security forces on account of the risk of diversion to illicit actors in 2014;^{155 156 157} and in April 2024 the United States set increased restrictions on firearms exports to non-government entities in high-risk countries, including Guatemala.¹⁵⁸ Though the impact of this new restriction has yet to be realized, there is significant opportunity for all governments to follow suit by enacting and enforcing stricter arms trade policies for Guatemala and other high-risk countries. Manufacturers and sellers have an obligation to better identify and assess the final destination and end users of their products, and ensure that recipients have clean histories and the proper mechanisms in place to avoid diversion.

Recommendations

We recommend stakeholders take the following steps to reduce violence caused by the diversion of firearms entering Guatemala:

National Governments should:

- Require end-user documentation for all weapons exported internationally, transited, or transshipped through their country.
- Conduct regular end-user verification checks for exports and transshipments to countries exhibiting high risk for diversion, including but not limited to Guatemala.
- Regularly publish comprehensive data about weapons exports and seizures, including data on weapon origin and import pathway.
- Tackle the means of diversion in-country. This can take multiple forms, including improvement of stockpile management for both civilian and government stockpiles.
- Enhance customs screening processes for air shipment of weapons to include best practices that increase access for, and effectiveness of, screening. This could include providing customs with unfettered access to on-site checks; limiting the ability of companies to ship weapons piece-meal via air; or increasing training for customs officials.

Manufacturers should:

- Where possible, prioritize sales of arms directly to government end users rather than through intermediary resellers.
- Re-evaluate relationships with buyers that have a history of facilitating the diversion of weapons, whether wittingly or unwittingly, and regardless of whether the buyer is a government entity.

Retailers should:

- Require stricter end-user verification and qualifications for the international export of firearms.
- Re-evaluate relationships with buyers that have a history of facilitating the diversion of weapons, whether wittingly or unwittingly, and regardless of whether the buyer is a government entity.

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