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The Role of Military-Style Firearms in Mexico

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the prevalence and characteristics of military-style firearms in Mexico, with particular emphasis on firearms seizures carried out between 2019 and 2023. Drawing on official records from the Secretariat of National Defence (SEDENA), it shows that 19,879 of the 33,961 weapons seized (58.6%) correspond to military-style firearms, primarily rifles and assault-style long guns chambered in military calibres, especially 7.62 × 39 mm.

The study is guided by the hypothesis that military-style firearms are gaining prominence in Latin America relative to other categories of small arms in terms of authorised trade, illicit flows and seizures. The findings indicate that the share of military-style firearms in Mexico has increased over time and is now substantially higher than in other Latin American countries, with a growing presence in legal and illegal markets and a clear contribution to specific patterns of armed violence. The article examines the main brands, types, calibres, manufacturers and countries of origin associated with these firearms, and analyses the interaction between legal imports, domestic registration and diversion into illicit circuits.

The research also reveals significant information gaps and barriers arising from the inability of various state institutions to provide updated, disaggregated data essential for tracing illicit firearms. It therefore examines what Mexican institutions record and what they do not, showing how these omissions and inconsistencies shape the interpretation of illicit market dynamics and hinder the development of evidence-based strategies for the prevention, tracing and reduction of armed violence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Lethal violence in Mexico is a severe and persistent problem. Some Mexican cities rank among the most lethal in the world (Instituto para la Economía y la Paz, 2024), and in 2023 the national homicide rate reached 24.0 per 100,000 inhabitants (INEGI, 2024). That same year, firearms were involved in 70 per cent of all homicides and in 60 per cent of femicides (INEGI, 2024), underscoring the central role they play in lethal violence.

The sharp rise in homicides since 2007 is closely linked to the deployment of militarised security strategies against drug cartels, the fragmentation of criminal organisations, and the widespread availability of firearms (Flores Martínez and Phillips, 2021; Dube, Dube and García-Ponce, 2013). According to the Global Organized Crime Index 2023 (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023), Mexico is the third-largest criminal market in the world; the fragmentation of power among cartels, partly driven by the state's strategy of capturing their leaders, has significantly contributed to escalating violence.

In this context, firearms, and particularly military-style firearms, play a central role. In this study, military-style firearms are understood as submachine guns and machine guns of all calibres, as well as rifles and carbines chambered in 5.45 × 39 mm, .222 Rem (5.7 × 43 mm), .223 Rem (5.56 × 45 mm), .243 Win, 6.8 mm Rem, .300 AAC, .308 Win (7.62 × 51 mm), 7.62 × 39 mm, 7.62 × 54 mm and .50 BMG. Those are firearms that use calibres closely associated with military and policing standards worldwide and that are commonly employed in assault rifles, sniper rifles and other high-powered firearms designed for combat scenarios.

The identification of these firearms in official records is based primarily on their classification by type and calibre, which is linked to international technical standards established by the Permanent International Commission for the Proof of Small Arms (C.I.P.) and the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute (SAAMI).

The analysis of the presence of such weapons in Mexico will help better understand how security governance, firearms trafficking and the dynamics of organised violence intersect in the country.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study analyses documents and data from official sources, both openly available and obtained through freedom-of-information requests. The core empirical material consists of two databases—one of seized firearms and another of firearm imports—provided by the Secretariat of National Defence (SEDENA) in response to formal information requests (SEDENA, 2023, Request 330026423000378). This source is complemented and cross-checked with information supplied by the National Customs Agency of Mexico, data published in Annual Government Reports, and the yearly submissions that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs presents under Article 13 of the Arms Trade Treaty, as well as with national and international documents.

The research reviews how institutions classify, record and report firearms, paying particular attention to omissions and discrepancies between government sources.

Mexico is a federation comprising 32 states and 2,478 municipalities; consequently, public security is organised under a framework of concurrent powers between the three levels of government: federal, state and municipal. In accordance with Article 21 of the Constitution (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, 2020), national strategic decisions rest with the Federal Executive, primarily through the Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection, the National Guard (which is an institution inside SEDENA, i.e., inside the army), the armed forces themselves (SEDENA and the Secretary of Marine-SEMAR) and the prosecutor's office (*Fiscalía General de la República*). The investigation and prosecution of crimes fall within the prosecutor's office. In the 32 states, there is a state prosecutor's office with their own ministerial police and a preventive police force that reports to the state secretary of security who is appointed by the governor. Many municipalities also have their own municipal police. Coordination between these bodies is facilitated through the National Public Security System and the National Public Security Council. Yet decision-making, operational control and information systems remain fragmented amongst federal, state and municipal authorities.

The army (SEDENA) is in charge of arms registration and control in the country.

At the federal level, specific information requests were submitted to SEDENA and the National Customs Agency for the period 2019–2023. SEDENA provided a database of 33,961 seized firearms with detailed information on type, calibre, brand, model and serial number, alongside complementary datasets on firearm imports and on collective licences regulated under the Federal Law on Firearms and Explosives. Customs, for its part, supplied records for 1,790 seized firearms, with a more limited level of disaggregation. The imports database was cross-referenced with the annual reports submitted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Arms Trade Treaty in order to identify discrepancies and to explore possible diversion pathways between legal and illegal markets.

At the subnational level, the research also draws on 63 freedom-of-information requests submitted through the National Transparency Platform to 32 state prosecutor's offices and 31 state-level public security secretariats. Each request sought disaggregated information for the period 2019–2023 on seized firearms, including type, calibre, brand, model, serial number, country of origin, date and location of seizure and associated offence. Unfortunately, responses were often incomplete and, in some cases, non-existent due to various arguments (lack thereof, confidentiality, etc.). Annex 1 presents the information provided by each institution so they can be compared in terms of the degree of transparency.

Furthermore, the study conducted a systematic review of Mexican legislation, international norms, official reports and specialised literature on arms trafficking, security governance and armed violence. This review serves to situate the empirical findings within broader debates and to interpret the patterns observed.

The methodology pursues three objectives: first, to map the prevalence and characteristics of military-style firearms within the universe of firearms recorded in Mexican official databases; second, to assess the internal coherence and limitations of these information systems; and third, to use these patterns to infer how legal and illegal markets intersect around military-style firearms.

3. LEGAL IMPORTS OF MILITARY-STYLE FIREARMS

The Mexican legal framework on firearms is structured primarily around the Federal Law on Firearms and Explosives (LFAFE; Gobierno de México, 1972), which determines the monopoly of the State over the production, import, commercialisation, seizure and control of firearms. SEDENA is the central authority: through the Armament and Ammunition Commercialization Directorate (DCAM), it authorises the import, export, commercialisation and transfer of firearms and explosives; operates the only two legal points of sale to the public; administers the Federal Firearms Registry; and grants individual and collective licenses. All seized and stored firearms must also be recorded in this registry.

Since 2022, SEDENA has additionally held operational control over most land and airport customs in the country, in coordination with the Secretariat of the Navy (DOF, 2022). This institutional design enhances state control capacities but generates risks of diversion to illicit markets. One key risk is that both legal trade management (import procedures) and the implementation of measures against illicit trafficking fall under the command of the same institutions, customs authorities and SEDENA, which are responsible for facilitating lawful commerce while also preventing illicit flows (Villarreal Peralta, Aguirre Álvarez, & Orozco Reynoso, 2026).

SEDENA is the sole entity authorised to import and distribute firearms; private actors are not allowed to sell firearms directly to the public without going through these state-controlled channels.

All the weapons that we defined as military-style firearms in this article are restricted for military use according to article 11 of the Federal Law (LFAFE). Specifically, the article establishes that the following firearms, magazines, ammunition and materials are reserved for the exclusive use of the Armed Forces:

a) Revolvers: .357 Magnum and calibres higher than .38 Special;
b) Pistols: 5.7 × 28 mm; .357 (all variants); 9 mm Parabellum/Luger and similar; .38 Super and higher calibres;
c) Rifles, carbines, muskets and short rifles: .223 (5.56 × 45 mm); 5.45 mm; 5.56 mm; 7 mm; 7.62 mm; .30; .50 (12.7 mm) and similar or higher calibres

d) Automatic firearms (pistols, carbines, rifles, submachine guns, machine guns): all calibres
e) Shotguns: Barrel length under 635 mm; calibres higher than 12 gauge; non-industrial gas-launching shotguns.

As a result, all legal imports of military-style firearms into the country must be carried out by law enforcement institutions. Furthermore, any such weapons in the hands of civilians are the result of either illegal flows into the country or of deviation from state arsenals.

The import database provided by SEDENA in response to access-to-information requests records a total of 47,411 firearms imported between 2019 and 2023, of which 28,398 (59.89%) are classified as military-style firearms. This proportion indicates that military-style firearms occupy a very prominent place within legal firearms imports.

Figure 1 shows the annual evolution of the percentage of military-style firearm imports relative to the total legal firearm imports made by Mexico between 2019 and 2023.

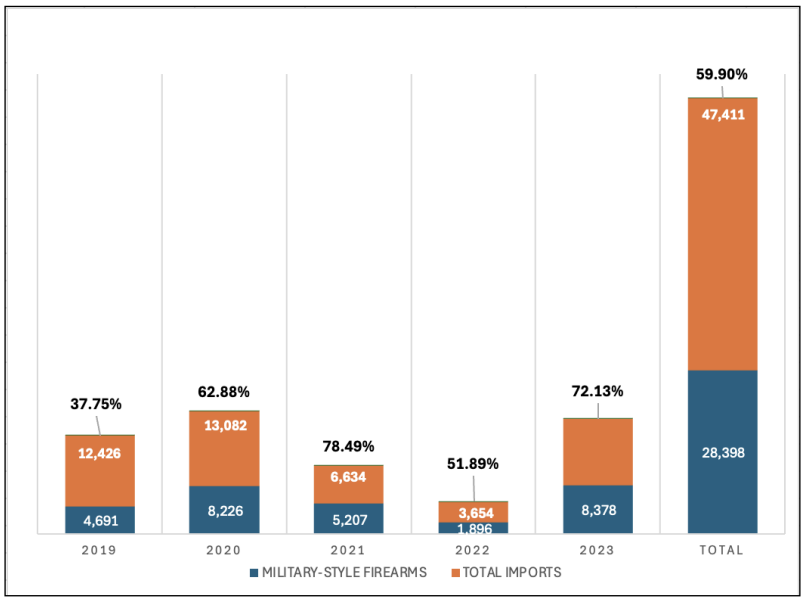


Figure 1 Proportion of military-style firearms within total legal imports in Mexico, 2019–2023.

Source: Elaborated by authors based on SEDENA's firearm import database, 2019–2023.

The main countries of origin for these military-style firearms are the United States (45%) and Israel (43%). Between 2019 and 2023, the US accounts for 12,614 imported military-style firearms, while Israel accounts for 12,165. The remaining imports originate primarily from Italy and the Czech Republic, with smaller volumes from France.

Figure 2 summarises this distribution, showing the relative share of each country.

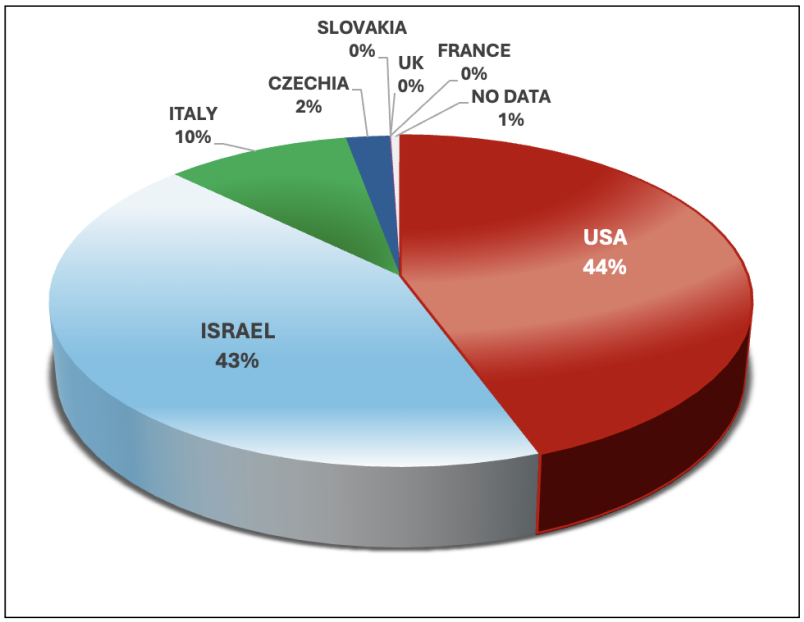


Figure 2 Average distribution of military-style firearm imports by country of origin, Mexico, 2019–2023.

Source: Elaborated by authors based on SEDENA's firearm import database, 2019–2023.

In 2022, the United States was the leading supplier of military-style firearms, accounting for 59.65% of imports in this category, whereas in 2023, Israel accounted for the largest share, with 61.57%.

Manufacturers' information also reveals differences in market structure by country. In the US, imported firearms are distributed across several manufacturers (Colt, Sig Sauer and other firms with links to military and law-enforcement sectors). By contrast, in Israel, there is a clear dominance of Israel Weapon Industries (IWI), which accounts for 42.65% of all military-style firearms imported during the period.

The composition of these imports is consistent with the growing militarisation of public security functions in Mexico.

The predominance of the 5.56×45 mm calibre, accounting for over 82 per cent of military-style weapons, suggests that these imports are assault rifles used by military and police units and reflects the priority given to equipping law enforcement with military-grade weaponry. By contrast, the 7.62 × 39 mm calibre accounts for only about 2% of legal transfers, a discrepancy that points to a substantial contribution of illicit trafficking to its much higher prevalence among seized firearms.

Table 1 details the calibre distribution among military-style firearm imports.

CALIBRE	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	TOTAL
5.56×45 mm	3,144	7,877	4,078	1,292	6,947	23,338
.223 Rem	542	160	704	191	252	1,849
.308 Win	328	111	242	81	281	1,043
7.62×51 mm	300	8	148	233	214	903
7.62×39 mm					620	620
.243 Win	66	64	16	71	45	262
9×19 mm	224	2		14	10	250
300*	87	4	19	14	7	131
0.50					2	2
TOTAL	4,691	8,226	5,207	1,896	8,378	28,398

Table 1 Calibre distribution in military-style firearm imports, 2019–2023.

Source: Elaborated by authors based on SEDENA's firearm import database, 2019–2023.

The import records also include 288 machine guns and submachine guns, as well as two .50 BMG machine guns, and show that only in 2023 were firearms in calibre 7.62×39 mm imported, representing 7.4% of military-style firearms imported that year.

Thus, a substantial share of legally imported weaponry consists of high-powered firearms assigned to state institutions. The structure of the database records many firearms sharing the same brand, calibre and country of origin and therefore do not include serial numbers. In addition, there are gaps and inconsistencies in certain fields, such as the 143 records without a country of origin and entries that list generic calibres such as '300'. Taken together, the high volume of imported military-style firearms and the limitations in disaggregation and identification in the administrative records limit the precise tracking of these firearms and, consequently, the timely detection of losses, thefts or diversions.

When contrasted with the figures reported by Mexico under the Arms Trade Treaty and with international trade data, the SEDENA dataset also exhibits systematic discrepancies that may be attributed to differences in reporting periods, classification criteria (for example, firearms for hunting or sport registered under different categories) and recording or aggregation errors. While reports by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs generally show somewhat higher import volumes, both sources coincide in indicating a marked increase in imports of military-style firearms over time. Figure 3 illustrates these discrepancies, which are not uncommon in other countries.

4. SEIZURES OF MILITARY-STYLE FIREARMS

Articles 78 and 79 of the Federal Firearms and Explosives Law (Gobierno de México, 1972) require local, state or federal authorities to notify SEDENA of each firearm seizure, as a result of

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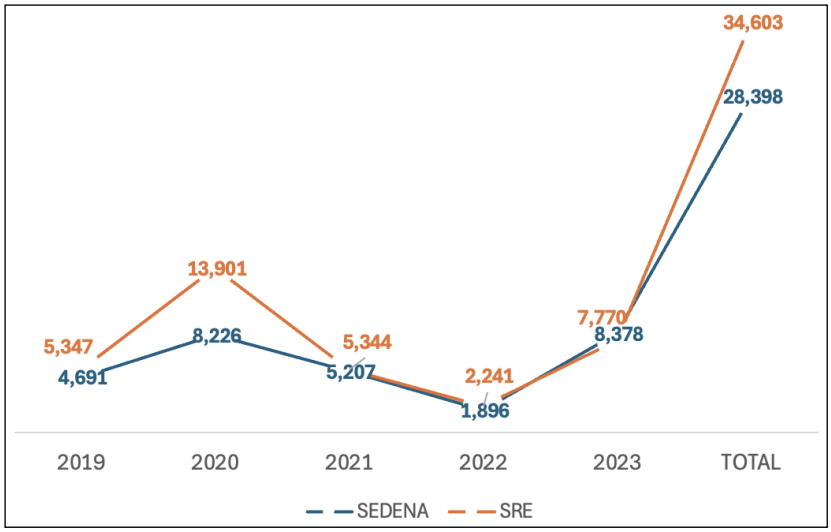


Figure 3 Legal firearm imports recorded by SEDENA and reported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Arms Trade Treaty, 2019–2023.

Source: Elaborated by authors based on SEDENA's firearm import database, 2019–2023 and Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports to ATT 2019–2023.

crime or any other irregularity. Beyond the army and the police forces, the Navy (SEMAR) and Customs also have the power to seize firearms. In addition, the 2019 reform of the General Law of the National Public Security System requires authorities that seize firearms or ammunition to report them to the National Registry of Firearms and Equipment (RNAE). The RNAE records the make, model, calibre, serial number and ballistic fingerprint of the firearms under their custody. Under this scheme, seized firearms are initially taken into custody by the security forces that conduct the operation, reported to SEDENA and to the RNAE, and stored in depots administered either by SEDENA itself or by state or federal prosecutor's offices.

According to the Sixth Government Report, the Coordination Group for Combating Drug Trafficking and Public Security reported a total of 99,586 seized firearms between 2019 and 2023 (Gobierno de México, 2024). As shown in Figure 4, these seizures are distributed relatively steadily throughout the period.

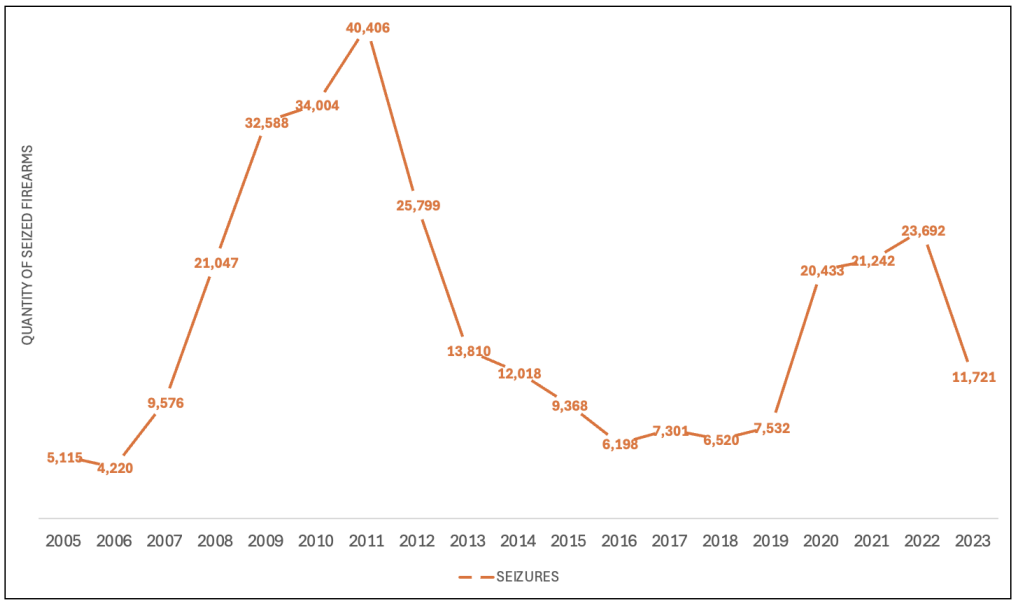


Figure 4 Number of firearms seized in Mexico according to the Sixth Government Report, 2019–2023.

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on data from the Sixth Government Report (Gobierno de México, 2024).

Over the past 19 years, authorities have confiscated significantly fewer illegal firearms than those estimated to enter the country each year. According to American and Mexican government figures—which estimate that approximately 200,000 firearms are trafficked illegally into the country annually (US Bureau of Industry and Security 2022)—the number of seized firearms would represent around 5% to 10% of the influx of illegal firearms.

The number of firearms seized declined significantly during the administration of President Peña Nieto, with some sources estimating a 70% reduction compared to the tenure of Calderón (2007–2012), during which more than 163,000 firearms were confiscated, 40% of them long guns (El Sol de México, 2024). However, the number of seizures increased again during the presidency of López Obrador, as the data examined in this study show. Although no single

factor can be identified as the cause of these fluctuations, it is generally assumed that changes in public security policies and enforcement strategies underpin them.

For the mentioned period, the database provided by SEDENA via freedom-of-information requests records 33,961 confiscated firearms, roughly one-third of the figure reported in the presidential report. These 33,961 firearms are distributed by recorded type as follows:

- Rifle (fusil): 18,776
- Pistol: 10,223
- Shotgun: 1,376
- Revolver: 1,299
- Rifle (rifle): 1,121
- Carbine: 593
- Machine gun: 266
- Submachine gun: 196
- Grenade launcher: 61
- Machine pistol: 18
- Sub-rifle: 16
- Rocket launcher: 12
- Double-barrel shotgun: 4

In aggregate terms, long guns (rifles, carbines and shotguns) account for around two-thirds of the total, handguns (pistols and revolvers) for about one-fifth, and the remaining share corresponds to automatic or semi-automatic firearms (machine guns, submachine guns, sub-rifles and machine pistols) and launchers.

Within the universe of 33,961 firearms, 19,879 correspond to military-style calibres, representing 58.53% of all seized firearms. This figure includes:

- 490 machine guns, submachine guns, machine pistols or sub-rifles.
- 450 firearms in .50 calibre (362 of them, Barrett rifles).

The share of military-style firearms within all seizures shows a strong upward trend: 47.50% in 2019, 55.80% in 2020, 58% in 2021, 63.70% in 2022 and 62.80% in 2023, as shown in Figure 5.

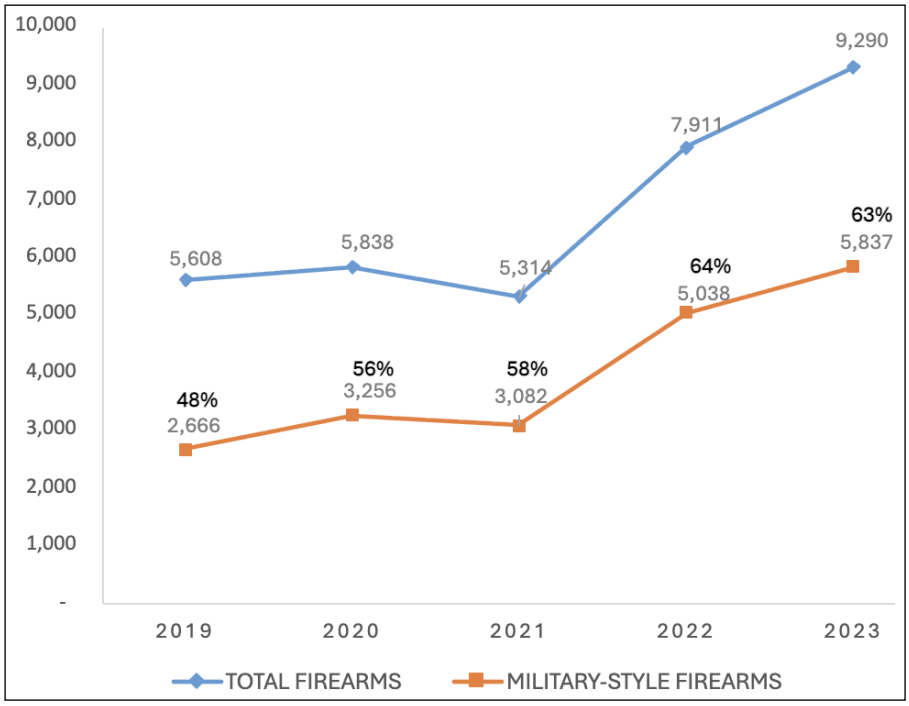


Figure 5 Annual proportion of military-style firearms within the total number of firearms seized recorded by SEDENA, 2019–2023.

Source: Elaborated by authors based on SEDENA's firearm seizures database, 2019–2023.

Of the 19,879 military-style firearms recorded by SEDENA, 13,272 (66.76%) lack a valid serial number. Among this group, there are non-standardised entries that combine cases in which the serial number appears to have been intentionally removed or altered (e.g., 'erased', 'altered') with other, less conclusive cases (e.g., 'illegible', 'pending', 'not visible', 'no serial

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number', 'blurred'). This deficiency is significant because it also reveals poor record-keeping practices in this area, which prevent distinguishing—within the group of invalid or non-existent serial numbers—between numbers intentionally removed or altered (which could constitute a criminal offence), markings that are simply worn or illegible, and firearms that were never marked at all, the latter potentially indicating illicit manufacture.

Furthermore, some recorded serial numbers are very short (only two or three digits), contrary to standard industrial practices. Firearm identification manuals typically show alphanumeric serial numbers of between eight and twelve characters, often combining letters and numbers in long sequences, which reinforces the interpretation that such short codes may reflect data-entry errors, partial records, or the use of internal classification codes that do not correspond to the manufacturer's serial number. There are also 684 entries where the field reads 'PENDIENTE' or a similar word. In all of these cases, however, the firearm lacks a valid serial number that can be used for tracing.

A similar pattern emerges regarding manufacturers. Of the 19,879 military-style firearms seized, 15,697 (almost 80%) are recorded with the make 'Illegible'. Companies based in the United States predominate, such as Century Arms Inc., Colt Industries, Smith & Wesson and Barrett Firearms Manufacturing. The database also records firearms from Norinco in China and Romarm in Romania and lists 'AR-15 rifle' as a make in eleventh place, even though it actually refers to a model designation and not a brand or manufacturer. Table 2 shows the ten leading manufacturers.

MANUFACTURER	UNITS
ILEGIBLE	15697
CENTURY ARMS INC. (C.A.I.)	560
COLT INDUSTRIES	500
SMITH & WESSON	368
BARRETT FIREARMS MANUFACTURING, INC.	361
NORINCO	315
BUSHMASTER FIREARMS	178
ROMARM	175
PALM ETTO STATE ARMORY	171
RUGER	121
FUSILAR-15	98

Table 2 Main manufacturers of military-style firearms seized in Mexico, 2019–2023.

Source: Elaborated by authors based on SEDENA's firearm seizures database, 2019–2023.

In this section, it is also important to note that five firearms were identified as FX05 rifles: four standard FX05 Xiuhcóatl assault rifles (full-length barrel version) and one carbine, all chambered in 5.56 calibre. The FX05 Xiuhcóatl is an assault rifle of national design and manufacture, produced by the DirectorateGeneral for Military Industry of the Secretariat of National Defence (SEDENA) as a standard issue weapon for the Army, Air Force and National Guard. Its presence among firearms seized from non-state actors therefore constitutes direct evidence of the diversion of military firearms into illicit circuits.

The calibre analysis shows that the 7.62 × 39 mm cartridge accounts for nearly half of all military-style firearms seized, followed by .223 Remington (22.71%) and 5.56 × 45 mm (14.02%). These proportions are summarised in Figure 6.

These proportions were obtained after a harmonisation process was applied to the calibres recorded in the original database, where many entries were abbreviated or incomplete. Methodologically, the following steps were taken:

- Inferring 5.45 × 39 mm in '5.45' entries associated with assault rifles of Russian or former Soviet origin.
- Recording '5.56 mm' as 5.56 × 45 mm NATO for contemporary assault rifles.

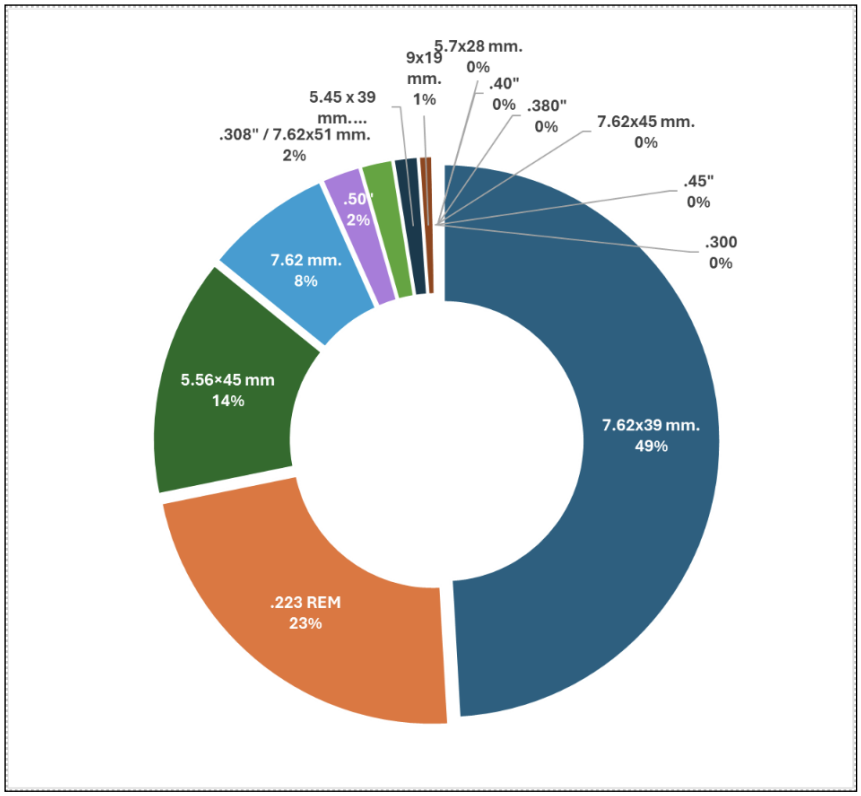


Figure 6 Calibre distribution of military-style firearms in the firearms seized by SEDENA, 2019–2023.

Source: Elaborated by authors based on SEDENA's firearm seizures database, 2019–2023.

- Retaining the generic category '7.62 mm (calibre undetermined)' except where available documentation allowed specific identification as 7.62 × 39 mm or 7.62 × 51 mm.
- In the case of the .300 calibre, the database records it simply as '300', with no further disaggregation, which makes it impossible to distinguish between different variants.

The database also records 495 machine guns and submachine guns, 36 of which are .50-calibre machine guns. The remaining firearms in this calibre correspond to 417 .50-calibre rifles. The records do not specify which .50 cartridge is used (e.g., .50 Browning Machine Gun, employed in heavy rifles and machine guns, or .50 Action Express, used in semi-automatic pistols), so for the purposes of this analysis they remain under the general category '.50 calibre'. No pistols are recorded as having .50 calibre.

States with the highest number of seized military-style firearms are Tamaulipas, Michoacán, Sonora, Zacatecas and Jalisco, as shown in Figure 7, all of them with high levels of violence and a strong presence of criminal organisations. The mapping of cities with the largest number of seized military-style rifles shows a concentration along the northern border—e.g., Ciudad Juárez, Nogales and Tijuana—but also in central and western regions such as Guanajuato and Michoacán, again areas with a visible presence of criminal groups.

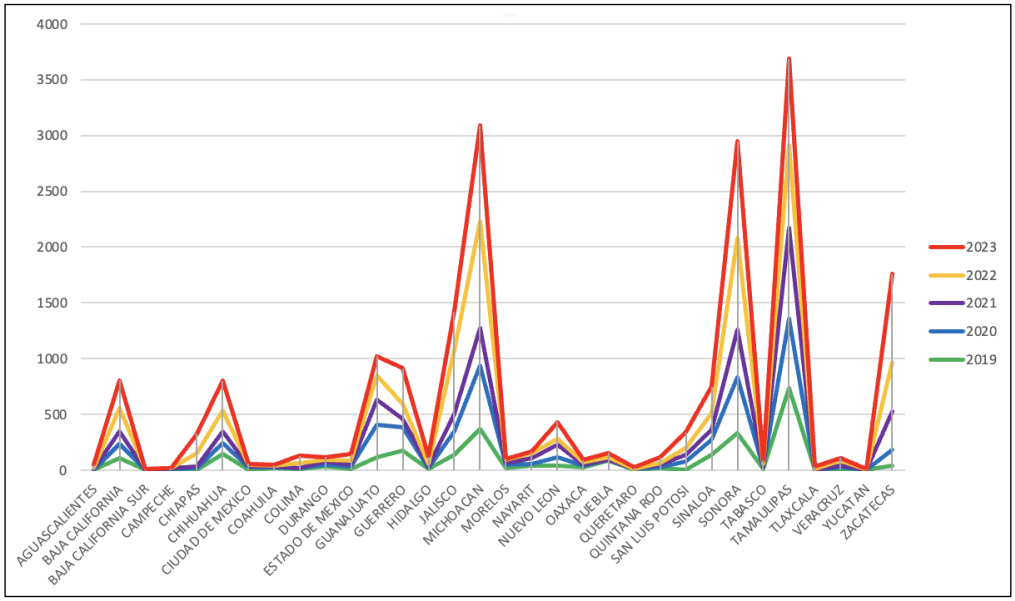


Figure 7 States with the highest number of military-style rifle seizures, 2019–2023.

Source: Elaborated by authors based on SEDENA's firearm seizures database,2019–2023.

The information provided by the National Customs Agency complements this picture. Between 2019 and 2023, the nine customs posts with the highest number of seized military-style firearms were Nogales (Sonora), Nuevo Laredo (Tamaulipas), Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua), Sonoyta (Sonora), San Luis Río Colorado (Sonora), Reynosa (Tamaulipas), Mexicali (Baja California), Matamoros (Tamaulipas) and Tijuana (Baja California). Nogales accounts for 27% of all military-style firearms seized by customs, followed by Nuevo Laredo (12%) and Ciudad Juárez (9%). Sonora and Tamaulipas host six of the nine customs posts with the highest number of seizures.

Handguns represent the majority of confiscated firearms in border seizures. Among the military-style firearms seized by customs, the 5.56 × 45 mm calibre accounts for 44% and 7.62 × 39 mm for 38%. Overall, 34 per cent of all firearms seized by customs are in 9 mm calibre, which is compatible with pistols as well as with submachine guns and other semi-automatic firearms that can be illicitly modified to fire in fully automatic mode.

Taken together, the figures from SEDENA and the National Customs Agency outline a seizure profile in which military-style firearms account for a large share of all confiscated firearms, with a strong concentration in 7.62 × 39 mm and 5.56 × 45 mm calibres, a predominant presence of U.S.-based manufacturers, and a territorial distribution that underscores both the centrality of the northern border and the importance of specific regions in the circulation and use of this type of weaponry.

The proportion of military-style firearms in the seizures recorded in Mexico is unusually high from a comparative perspective. Based on SEDENA data, these weapons account for around 58–60% of all firearms seized between 2019 and 2023, a magnitude that contrasts with other Latin American countries. In Brazil, Langeani and Pollachi (2025) show that, despite the growth in rifles and other restricted-use weapons, military style firearms still constitute between 1.7 and 2.4% of national seizures and around 3–4% in the Southeast region. Similarly, recent studies in Ecuador indicate that rifles and other long guns barely reach around 12% of the annual seizures (El Universo, 2025). These differences suggest that in Mexico, military style firearms are not only present but actually make up most of the firearms seized as a result of crimes.

5. ILLEGAL TRAFFICKING OF FIREARMS

Illegal trafficking of firearms between the US and Mexico has been a serious concern. According to the study 'The Way of the Gun: Estimating Firearms Trafficking across the US–Mexico Border', it is estimated that between 85,000 and 135,000 firearms are trafficked from the US to Mexico annually. Mexican authorities estimate that around 200,000 firearms enter the country illegally every year. Of these, between 70% and 90% are believed to originate in the US (SRE, cited in La Jornada, 2023; Flores Liera, 2020). For their part, ATF and Mexico's federal prosecutor's office have attempted to document routes and supply modalities through bilateral cooperation.

Over the past two decades, arms smuggling into Mexico has become more sophisticated, with complex logistical chains and specialised actors in charge of purchasing, modifying and transporting weapons (UNODC, 2020; Coss, 2012). The literature also documents collusion and corruption schemes within armed forces, police agencies, and customs personnel in both countries, which facilitate the diversion of weapons from state inventories and the evasion of controls at border crossings (ATT Monitor, 2018; Astorga and Shirk, 2019).

In this context, US authorities have strengthened the prosecution of cross-border trafficking through initiatives such as Operation Without a Trace and Operation Southbound, carried out by the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice. Official sources indicate that since the launch of Operation Southbound, investigations into trafficking to Mexico have increased by approximately 40%, and the number of firearms seized in those investigations has grown by around 11% (White House, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

ATF's National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment reports that, between 2017 and 2021, Mexico accounted for 59% of all international firearms trace requests (97,791 requests) and that 68% of the firearms traced and recovered in Mexico had originally been manufactured or imported in the US (ATF, 2023b).

A report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on seizures and traces of firearms linked to Mexico indicates that, among the weapons seized and traced back to purchasers in the US, roughly one third correspond to rifles in general, though not specifically to military-style rifles (U.S. GAO, 2021).

ATF data also show that, among successfully traced firearms, pistols constitute the most numerous category, ahead of rifles and shotguns (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, 2023a, 2023b). This contrasts with the high prevalence of military-style calibres (7.62 × 39 mm, .223, 5.56 × 45 mm) observed in seized weapons in Mexico.

Data from the National Firearms Registry (RNAE) help illustrate specific points at which weapons may be diverted from the legal market into illicit circuits.

First, the concentration of imports of military-style firearms under SEDENA's control—with records that group batches of weapons rather than individual serial numbers—creates possibilities for losses or thefts that remain largely invisible within military and police inventories.

Second, studies on the implementation of the Mexican regulatory framework document cases of private security companies operating with expired licences or without complete records of their armaments, which opens up spaces for diversion of firearms (Villarreal Peralta, 2026).

Finally, the literature on corruption highlights practices such as the illegal sale of seized weapons by law enforcement officers, the 'loss' of firearms issued to officers, and the substitution of parts in official stockpiles, all of which are linked to weaknesses in inventory control and traceability (Astorga and Shirk, 2019; UNODC, 2020).

Various studies have examined the relationship between changes in U.S. regulations and the availability of assault weapons in Mexico. Astorga and Shirk (2019) argue that the expiration in 2004 of the federal ban on certain semiautomatic weapons—the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994—facilitated legal access to rifles in the U.S. civilian market, which in turn increased opportunities for diversion to Mexico. Also, Pérez Esparza, Johnson, and Gill (2020) show how the relaxation of controls in some border states, combined with uneven enforcement of background checks, has contributed to an increase in semiautomatic rifles and key components being supplied to organised crime in Mexico.

5.1 MODES OF TRAFFICKING

The main mechanism identified in U.S. court proceedings is third party purchasing (straw purchasing): individuals who are legally allowed to buy firearms acquire them on behalf of traffickers, who then move them across the border (ATF, 2024a; 2024b).

A paradigmatic example of straw purchasing of complete firearms is the Texas case unsealed in 2024, in which five men were accused of acquiring more than 100 military-grade firearms while using false representations in firearms transactions (United States District Court, Western District of Texas, San Antonio Division, 2024; Texas Tribune, 2024; U.S. Department of Justice, 2024). The case shows how a relatively compact network can combine straw purchasers, private sellers, cross-district sourcing, and cash returns from Mexico to move complete rifles into cartel supply chains in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas.

A second model of illegal trade is that of trafficking in parts and components that can later be assembled in Mexico. In 2023, prosecutors charged Chandler Britain Bradford with sending AR-15 parts, tools, and technical guidance from Texas to associates in Monterrey between 2018 and 2022. The operation allegedly generated more than $3.5 million and supplied enough parts to support the assembly of approximately 4,800 semiautomatic rifles (KSAT, 2023). These actors exploit the lower visibility of components and parcel shipments and strengthen assembly capacity on the Mexican side.

A third model of trafficking combines clustered purchases, multiple straw buyers, and sophisticated internal routes inside the US before weapons cross into Mexico. Reuters documented how a network linked to the Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación obtained Barrett .50 calibre rifles and AR-15-style weapons through legally purchased firearms in Wisconsin, then routed them through California and onwards to Mexico (Kinosian, 2023). Investigators reconstructed the network after a Barrett rifle recovered in Mexico led them back to purchases in Racine, where a small group of U.S. citizens had bought more than $600,000 worth of

high-end firearms in less than a year (Kinosian, 2023). This shows how ostensibly lawful retail transactions can feed cartel arsenals through layered domestic transport routes that originate far beyond the border region.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study indicates that military-style firearms play a central and growing role in the landscape of armed violence in Mexico. Between 2019 and 2023, they accounted for a significant proportion of legal imports recorded by SEDENA (59.9%) and also of the firearms seized recorded by that same institution (58.5%). Yet the profiles of legal and illicit firearms are not identical. Legal imports are dominated by the 5.56 × 45 mm calibre, which is intended for armed forces and law enforcement agencies and a concentrated group of foreign suppliers, particularly the US and Israel. In contrast, military-style firearms seized by SEDENA are concentrated primarily in the 7.62 × 39 mm, .223, and 5.56 mm calibres, with a notable presence of U.S. manufacturers. Notably, the 7.62 × 39 mm calibre is almost entirely absent from legal imports, accounting for only about 2% of the total recorded by SEDENA, yet it ranks among the most frequently seized calibres and, according to ATF data, is the second most commonly recovered rifle calibre in seizures along the US-Mexico border. This asymmetry between a marginal legal footprint and a disproportionate presence among seized firearms is difficult to explain through diversion from Mexico's own legal market and instead points to illicit trafficking as the main channel supplying this calibre to criminal organisations. Although handguns dominate the calibres most frequently traced by the ATF, the prominence of the 7.62 × 39 mm among seizures in Mexico (one-third of all seized firearms in Mexico recorded by SEDENA) suggests that trafficking patterns for military-style rifles operate through distinct channels that are only partially captured by U.S. tracing statistics.

The proportion of military-style firearms among seizures rose from 45% in 2019 to over 60% in 2022 and 2023, confirming their growing presence in illicit markets and in the dynamics of violence linked to organised crime. This confirms a structural shift in the arsenal available to criminal organisations, which increases their operational capacity and challenges the state's ability to control the territory and the circulation of high-powered weapons.

The geographic distribution of the seizures confirms the connection between military-style weapons and areas of criminal activity. Tamaulipas, Michoacán, Sonora, Zacatecas and Jalisco account for the highest number of seizures, while several border crossings—particularly Nogales, Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Juárez, Sonoyta and San Luis Río Colorado—stand out in the records of Mexico's National Customs Agency. These data are consistent with the significance of routes originating in the United States, as well as with small-batch trafficking, the use of intermediary buyers and the growing shipment of disassembled weapons or components for subsequent assembly in Mexico.

The high prevalence of the 7.62 × 39 mm calibre in seizures, compared to its relatively low share in the legal imports analysed, suggests that a significant portion of these weapons enters the country through illicit cross-border channels. However, the discovery of FX05 Xiuhcóatl military-style firearms manufactured by SEDENA itself confirms a share of internal diversion of firearms from law enforcement to illegal markets.

Indeed, the relationship between the militarisation of security, imports of military-style weapons and the risks of diversion emerges as a central theme: between 2019 and 2023, nearly 60% of imported weapons were military-style weapons allocated primarily to state institutions, yet they are registered in batches without serial numbers, which prevents their individual tracking. In this context, the growing use of the armed forces in public security tasks creates conditions in which losses, thefts and leaks from state inventories remain invisible in official statistics, even as seizures of military-style weapons continue to rise.

The investigation also documents systematic gaps in information. Mexico does not yet have a comprehensive, interoperable, reliable and sufficiently transparent system for tracking the lifecycle of firearms. Thus, 47% of the records for firearms seized by SEDENA lack complete information on the manufacturer, model, or serial number, and more than two-thirds of the military-grade firearms seized do not have a legible or registered serial number. Furthermore, there are persistent discrepancies between the databases of SEDENA, customs, RNAE, and

reports under the Arms Trade Treaty. These gaps limit the traceability of firearms, make it difficult to identify diversion routes and links, sources of supply, diversion patterns, trafficking networks and institutional responsibilities, and they reduce the state's ability to design and implement evidence-based policies regarding the illicit arms market.

The findings of this study show that military-style firearms are not a statistical anomaly but rather a defining feature of the contemporary armed landscape in Mexico and a key lens through which to understand the convergence of the militarisation of security, illicit markets, and everyday violence. The analysis highlights both the state's existing capabilities and its blind spots in controlling the life cycle of these weapons and underscores the urgency of policies that prioritise traceability, accountability and the protection of lives, especially those of people living in the most affected areas.

7. PUBLIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed in order to reduce the availability and impact of military-style firearms in Mexico.

7.1. STRENGTHEN REGISTRIES AND TRACEABILITY

- Consolidate the RNAE as the sole mandatory registry for all firearms in state custody, ensuring that every seizure recorded by SEDENA, prosecutors' offices and police agencies includes the type of weapon, calibre, make, model, serial number and the location and date of seizure.
- Establish standardised protocols for populating databases (required fields, data entry formats, automatic validations) and periodic audit mechanisms.
- Replace generic labels ('handgun', 'long gun') and models (AR, AK) with detailed information (rifle, carbine, pistol, submachine gun, etc.). Adopt uniform definitions of military-style weapons based on calibres and technical characteristics aligned with international standards (C.I.P., SAAMI) for the LFAFE so that all institutions report the same categories.
- Programme registration systems to automatically identify exclusive use of the armed forces to facilitate detection of diversions.

7.2. TRAIN PUBLIC OFFICIALS

- Develop training programmes for personnel at SEDENA, the Customs Agency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, prosecutors' offices, police agencies and state authorities responsible for registering, safeguarding, securing and reporting firearms. The training should harmonise registration and reporting methodologies, with an emphasis on the technical identification of weapons and on the use of standardised categories.

7.3. REDUCE THE RISK OF DIVERSION FROM STATE ARSENALS

- Review and strengthen protocols for the storage, inventory and destruction of firearms under the responsibility of the state and private security companies, with an emphasis on military-style weapons.
- Separate, to the extent possible, the functions of promoting and regulating the lawful arms trade from those of customs control and combating illicit trafficking.
- Incorporate criteria regarding the risk of diversion into decisions regarding the purchase and allocation of weapons (e.g., limiting the concentration of arsenals in certain units).

7.4. STRENGTHEN BILATERAL AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

- Deepen cooperation with the US to trace military-style firearms, with an emphasis on calibres such as 7.62 × 39 mm and .50 BMG, which appear frequently in Mexican seizures and are not fully reflected in ATF's tracing statistics.
- Promote regional agreements in Latin America to share registration methodologies, early warnings regarding the diversion of weapons and best practices in destruction and marking.

7.5. INCORPORATE A GENDER AND HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE

- Incorporate indicators on sex, age, the victim-perpetrator relationship and the location of the incident into records of firearms-related crimes in order to identify how military-style weapons affect different groups.
- Design prevention and disarmament strategies tailored to specific contexts that acknowledge the impact of high-powered firearms on life trajectories and gender inequalities.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Annex 1.** Information provided by each institution. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.324.s1

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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