



Highlights of [GAO-09-709](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In recent years, violence along the U.S.-Mexico border has escalated dramatically, due largely to the Mexican government's efforts to disrupt Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTO). U.S. officials note the violence associated with Mexican DTOs poses a serious challenge for U.S. law enforcement, threatening citizens on both sides of the border, and U.S. and Mexican law enforcement officials generally agree many of the firearms used to perpetrate crimes in Mexico are illicitly trafficked from the United States across the Southwest border.

GAO was asked to examine (1) data on the types, sources, and users of these firearms; (2) key challenges confronting U.S. government efforts to combat illicit sales of firearms in the United States and stem the flow of them into Mexico; (3) challenges faced by U.S. agencies collaborating with Mexican authorities to combat the problem of illicit arms; and (4) the U.S. government's strategy for addressing the issue. GAO analyzed program information and firearms data and met with U.S. and Mexican officials on both sides of the border.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to several departments, including the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Justice, to improve interagency coordination, data gathering and analysis, and strategic planning. State and DHS agreed with our recommendations. Justice did not comment on our recommendations.

View [GAO-09-709](#) or key components. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov.

FIREARMS TRAFFICKING

U.S. Efforts to Combat Arms Trafficking to Mexico Face Planning and Coordination Challenges

What GAO Found

Available evidence indicates many of the firearms fueling Mexican drug violence originated in the United States, including a growing number of increasingly lethal weapons. While it is impossible to know how many firearms are illegally smuggled into Mexico in a given year, about 87 percent of firearms seized by Mexican authorities and traced in the last 5 years originated in the United States, according to data from Department of Justice's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). According to U.S. and Mexican government officials, these firearms have been increasingly more powerful and lethal in recent years. Many of these firearms come from gun shops and gun shows in Southwest border states. U.S. and Mexican government and law enforcement officials stated most firearms are intended to support operations of Mexican DTOs, which are also responsible for trafficking arms to Mexico.

The U.S. government faces several significant challenges in combating illicit sales of firearms in the United States and stemming their flow into Mexico. In particular, certain provisions of some federal firearms laws present challenges to U.S. efforts, according to ATF officials. Specifically, officials identified key challenges related to restrictions on collecting and reporting information on firearms purchases, a lack of required background checks for private firearms sales, and limitations on reporting requirements for multiple sales. GAO also found ATF and Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the primary agencies implementing efforts to address the issue, do not effectively coordinate their efforts, in part because the agencies lack clear roles and responsibilities and have been operating under an outdated interagency agreement. Additionally, agencies generally have not systematically gathered, analyzed, and reported data that could be useful to help plan and assess results of their efforts to address arms trafficking to Mexico.

U.S. law enforcement agencies have provided some assistance to Mexican counterparts in combating arms trafficking, but these efforts face several challenges. U.S. law enforcement assistance to Mexico does not target arms trafficking needs, limiting U.S. agencies' ability to provide technical or operational assistance. In addition, U.S. assistance has been limited due to Mexican officials' incomplete use of ATF's electronic firearms tracing system, an important tool for U.S. arms trafficking investigations. Another significant challenge facing U.S. efforts to assist Mexico is corruption among some Mexican government entities. Mexican federal authorities are implementing anticorruption measures, but government officials acknowledge fully implementing these reforms will take considerable time, and may take years to affect comprehensive change.

The administration's recently released National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy includes, for the first time, a chapter on combating illicit arms trafficking to Mexico. Prior to the new strategy, the U.S. government lacked a strategy to address arms trafficking to Mexico, and various efforts undertaken by individual U.S. agencies were not part of a comprehensive U.S. governmentwide strategy for addressing the problem. At this point, it's not clear whether ONDCP's "implementation plan" for the strategy, which has not been finalized, will include performance indicators and other accountability mechanisms to overcome shortcomings raised in our report.