

The Impact of American Guns on Violence in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

The Impact of American Guns on Violence in Mexico: Thousands of Mexican people have been killed by firearms and heavy weaponry. The guns used are mostly imported from the United States. The laxity of American gun laws is a gift for Mexican criminal groups. The present text is based on the following questions: Why is the guns and ammunition industry so powerful in the US? Is there any correlation between laxity of American guns laws and the increase of crime in Mexico? Have organised crime and violence levels increased in Mexico due to the accessibility of guns? Is it more important to increase of business with the US firearms sector, rather than to protect the wellbeing of the population? Does the US government bear responsibility for the development of violence and criminality in Mexico? In the following analysis of the role of the American gun manufacturing, trade, and US public policies contributing to the development of narcotics trafficking and violence in Mexico, the central hypothesis considers a preliminary correlation between prevalence of firearms and increase of violence in Mexico. Presenting a general view of the gun industry in the US reveals the social, political and economic consequences of the illegal weaponry traffic from US into Mexico, and the bilateral responsibility of the US and Mexico.

Keywords: US Guns, Firearms Trafficking, Mexico, Narcotics Trafficking / Armas de Estados Unidos, Tráfico de armas de fuego, México, Tráfico de estupefacientes

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INTRODUCTION

Gun killings in the United States (US) result in tens of thousands of deaths and injuries annually, without counting people killed by US weaponry on abroad. From 2014-2017, the number of Americans killed by guns was 56,755. Just in 2017, the number of Americans killed by guns was 15,590 (The week 2018). What's more, the total victims recorded by Gun Violence, a nonprofit organization that tracks shootings in the US, which account for 39,604 victims of gun violence incidents until 6 September 2018, leading to 9,935 deaths; 19,590 injuries and 10,079 minor accidents (Allen 2018). Regarding 2019, until November of the same year, there were recorded 366 mass shootings (Gould and Gal 2019).

The American citizens have a long history of victims killed in mass shooting¹ since 1999, for example, the tragic events in Columbine, Colorado in 1999 where 13 people were killed. Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009, with 13 victims. San Bernardino, California in 2015 with 14 victims. Parkland, Florida in 2018 with 17 killed, Texas in 1991, 23. Sutherland Springs, Texas in 2017 with 26. Sandy Hook, Connecticut in 2012 with 27. Virginia Tech, Virginia in 2007 with 32. Orlando, Florida, in 2016 with 49. Las Vegas, Nevada 2017 with 58 (BBC 2018), and at least two people were killed and three injured after a mass shooting at Saugus High School in Santa Clarita, California in November 2019 (Gould and Gal 2019).

Nevertheless, the gun trade continues operating in the US and abroad, without many restrictions. Americans are more likely to die from gun violence than many leading causes of death combined, with some 11,000 people in the US killed in firearm assaults each year (Gould and Gal 2019).

There are many theories, which explore the correlation between violent crime and gun availability from the perspective of the psychology behaviours, demographic groups, socioeconomic factors, historical backgrounds, and culture tolerance. Although, this text will take a socio-political perspective, using a descriptive methodology, based on empiric and theoretical literature, leaving the door open for future research projects.

¹ Gun Violence Archive, a US not-for-profit group, defines a mass shooting as any in which four or more people are shot, including those who are injured but survive, and not including the shooter (Allen 2018)

The laxity of American gun laws is a gift for criminal groups around the world, particularly in Mexico that shares borders with the US. This text raises the following research questions: Is there any correlation between laxity of American gun laws and increase of crime? Has US and Mexico geographical proximity an impact in the entrance of US guns into Mexico? Have organised crime and violence incremented in Mexico due to the accessibility of guns? Is it more important the increase of businesses in the US firearms sector than wellbeing of populations? Has US and Mexico intertwined responsibility over the dead of millions of Mexican people caused by organised crime?

The general objective of the present text is to analyse the role of the American gun manufacturing, trade and public US policies in the development of narco trafficking, as part of the organised crime,² and violence in Mexico. The particular objective is to explore the relation between firearms prevalence in Mexico and increase of violence in the country. This text is guided by the hypothesis that there is a correlation between prevalence of firearms and increase of violence in Mexico, considering that the main entrance of firearms into this country comes from the US, this text stresses the influence of the US in the development of organised crime in Mexico. Thus, this article presents a general view of the gun industry in the US, the consequences of the illegal weaponry traffic from US into Mexico, and a bilateral responsibility of US and Mexico.

MAIN THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

One of the most important theoretical contributions in the studies of violent crime and gun availability is the work of Karimov, who studies the US society, during a 10 years period, across different ethnic groups. He identifies a correlation between gun ownership and violent crime reflected

2 The text uses the term of organised crime to describe any form of criminal activity planned and controlled by powerful groups that operate a large scale or internationally, and the narco trafficking is part of these activities. The narco trafficking is used as drug trafficking defined as a global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances which are subject to drug prohibition laws (UNOCD 2018). The narco trafficking involve other forms of serious crimes such as firearms, sexual and modern slavery, immigration, trafficking of human organs, endangered animals among the most important type of crimes (Nieto 2018).

in an increase in homicide levels, domestic violence, aggravated assault, rape and robbery (Karimov 2018).

Another important contribution in the studies of gun prevalence and violence is the research of Brennan and Moore, who study the American society, crossing not only the variables of ethnicity, but also variables of age, gender, cultural background, social and economical status. They conclude that there are different factors at different levels that may contribute to the increase of violent crime and weapons use (Brennan and Moore 2009, 216).

Among the factors that Brennan and Moore identify are psychosocial features such as individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity and mental health), socialization environment, including cultural, social, historical and economic background, as well as availability of weapons: market conditions, cultural acceptance and personal initiative to use guns (Brennan and Moore 2009, 216).

The work of Karimov, Brennan and Moore help to understand the factors that may intervene in the increase of violent crime and gun availability (including gun ownership, gun use and gun carrying) in different societies, where the weapons have negative impact on population.

In the same context, Siegel and Rothman (2016) suggest that there is a strong relationship between higher levels of gun ownership and higher firearms killings and suicide rates. They study 50 states of the US from 1981 to 2013.

Following to Siegel and Rothman, the relationship between high firearm ownership and high levels of gun killings and suicide rate is influenced by several variables among the most important are the public policies, profits for manufacturing companies, people's attitude regarding control of gun ownership reflected on culture tolerance (Siegel and Rothman 2016).

Certainly, the public policies and weapons manufacturing companies have a great influence in the development of violence and gun killings. The global guns and ammunition industry³ is dominated by a small number of major

3 The guns and ammunition industry involved mainly the following activities and products: small weapons (including shotguns, rifles, revolvers, pistols, machine guns, handguns and grenade launchers), ammunition, artillery and complementing accessories, gun magazines, grenades manufacturing, mines, artillery and tank ammunition, howitzers and man-portable and vehicle installed rockets and rocket launchers manufacturing (IBISWorld 2020).

US corporations such as Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, Northrop Grumman Corporation, General Dynamics Corporation, BAE Systems PLC, Vista Outdoor Inc., Smith and Wesson Brands Inc. Olin Corporation, Sturm, and Ruger & Company Inc. These firms concentrate the manufacturing and distribution of the firearms and ammunition, and they have huge influence on the political establishment, which promotes weapon use. This industry has also lobbied on civil society to encourage and promote a culture of guns, without any concern for consequences of the citizens, and privileging profits before social well-being.

The arms trade is a global business with a privileged place in the heart of all governments, particularly in the US. In practice, this means arms companies are incredibly skilled at taking taxpayers' money and convincing governments that the arms trade should be promoted rather than restrained (CAAT 2018, 4) The gun lobbies display massive marketing campaigns, persuasive messages and lobbying activities among civil organizations in order to convince people about the need to buy arms to protect themselves.

The gun production worldwide is estimated, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), between 36 and 46 million units per day, with more than one thousand companies producing weapons in around 100 countries. SIPRI estimates that between 2010 and 2014, the global volume of gun trading increased 16% as compared to the 2005-2009 period (SIPRI 2018; Fernández 2017).

The US is the biggest exporter of firearms by far (2011-2015), accounting for 33% of all international sales, with Russia in second place and China in third place (Fernández 2017). Guns and ammunition are the most successful industries in the US "Just in 2015, arms sector generated \$49.3 billion US, created 21,000 new jobs, and brought \$6.2 billion taxes to the US Government" (Fernández 2017, 8).

In the same vein, IBISWorld reported that revenues of guns and ammunitions of US industry increased annually 2.3% producing \$15.1 billion over 2015- 2020, including an increase of 7.5% in 2020 alone in US national defense spending, and generating 46,235 jobs in this industry in 2020 (IBISWorld 2020).

The US revenues related to the guns and ammunitions industry are categorized as essential critical infrastructure by the Department of Homeland

Security. For example, all facilities and distribution centers were permitted to remain open during lockdowns in 2020, while demand for guns has spiked in the first half of the year due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic and security fears (IBISWorld 2020)

However, the human suffering that this industry generates is quite significant for American citizens and for the countries where these products are exported legally or illegally, and Mexico is a case in point, where the impact of US guns has had devastating effects.

The development of the narco trafficking, criminal groups and violence in Mexico would not be possible without the possession of powerful guns. The laxity of American gun laws is a spring blooming for Mexican criminal organizations, because the US market is their single best source of arms (Parakilas 2013). It is estimated that there are over 200 drug trafficking cells in Mexico, whose main firearms supplier is the US. The number of deaths since 2006 due to organized criminal violence in Mexico goes from 80,000 to 100, 000 people officially recorded, more of those crimes go unreported (CFR 2018).

A GENERAL VIEW OF THE US FIREARM INDUSTRY

The firearms⁴ ownership is a deep- rooted issue in American Society. Pew Research data reveals that half of all Americans polled in 2017 agreed that gun violence is a “very big problem” in US society, and gun owners and non-gun owners are deeply divided on how to tackle it (Parker et al. 2017).

The report also indicates that 80% of non-gun owners were in favour of a federal registry to track gun sales, an initiative supported by only 54% of gun owners. Meanwhile, the majority of gun owners believe that stricter regulations will not lead to fewer mass shootings (Parker et al. 2017).

4 In this text the term Firearm is used according to the definition of firearms in article 3 of the Firearms Protocol of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: “Firearm shall mean any portable barrelled weapon that expels, is designed to expel or may be readily converted to expel a shot, bullet or projectile by the action of an explosive, excluding antique firearms or their replicas. Antique firearms and their replicas shall be defined in accordance with domestic law. In no case, however, shall antique firearms include firearms manufactured after 1899” (UNODC 2015)

The studies of Siegel and Rothman (2016) are quite pertinent in the context of the US society, as the frequency of gun killings are strongly related with the public policies to control gun ownership and gun availability, manufacturing company's interests and culture of tolerance regarding gun use.

Gun ownership in the US has been associated directly as part of the American identity, for example, "89% of gun owners who see owning a gun as very or somewhat important to their overall identity say they can't see themselves ever not owning a gun, compared with 58% of those who say owning a gun is not too important or not at all important their sense of identity" (Parker et al. 2017).

Although, this perception is changing, while in 2002, 49% of Americans were satisfied with the US gun laws against 32% who were dissatisfied. In 2018, 39% of Americans are satisfied with the US gun laws against 46% who are dissatisfied with the US gun regulations and want stricter rules (BBC 2018).

The support for gun control in America is highest among 18 to 29-year-olds. According to the study of Pew Research, one third (75%) of over-50s said they owned a gun. The rate of gun ownership was lower for younger adults - about 28% (BBC 2018).

Certainly, the United States is the country with highest firearms in the world accounted per 100 residents with 89 out of 100. Yemen is second place with 55 out of 100. Switzerland is third place with 47 out 100. Finland is in fourth with 45 out of 100 (BBC 2018).

The American's gun culture is also encouraged by the relatively cheap price to purchase them in the US. For example, after the mass shooting in Las Vegas committed in October 2017, by Stephen Craig Paddock, in which 59 people died including himself, the police found in his hotel room an arsenal of weapons such as handguns, which can cost from as little \$200 (£151) comparable to a Chromebook laptop; rifles, which cost \$1500 (£1,132) approximately comparable to a Macbook laptop. In addition to the 23 weapons at the hotel, a further 19 were recovered from Paddock's home. It is estimated that he may have spent more than \$70,000 (£52,800) on firearms and accessories such as tripods, scopes, ammunition and cartridges (BBC 2018).

The American gun culture is also promoted by the firearm industry through massive marketing campaigns and lobbying activities. The National Rifle Association (NRA) campaigns against all forms of gun control in the US and argues that more guns need to be purchased to make the country safer. The NRA officially spends about \$3 million per year to influence gun policy. The former US President, Barrack Obama (2009-2017) struggled to get any new gun control laws. While for Donald Trump (2017-2020) approved in the last year of his government (2020) a law, which was effective from March 9, 2020 and it became into force in September 3, 2020. The law indicates that the President “No Longer Warrant Control Under the United States Munitions List (USML)”, meaning that the US government through their agencies mainly the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) not longer obliged to track and trace the arms produced in the US (BIS 2020, 1-53).

The US regulations on arms exports were established by the Arms Export Control Act of 1976. The US system until March 2020 obliged gun sellers to be registered with the State Department. The gun sellers needed to provide detailed information about their sales, including the ultimate recipients -“end users”- of the weapons. The State Department approved any further transfer of the weapons to new end users, and US Embassies were responsible for ensuring the guns wind up in the correct hands as Heinz (2020) describes. The State Department notified to Congress of any sales over a million dollars, and the Congress had the ability to block deals through an informal process. According to Heinz, in recent years, the US Congress has blocked large weapons sales to state security forces in the Philippines and Turkey over human rights concerns (Heinz 2020, 1)

The regulations approved by Trump will weaken the US control on trade guns, putting profits of the gun industry before lives in Latin America, which may encourage crime and gun trade in Mexico and in the rest of region.

The growth in manufacturing and sales of US firearms is confirmed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) that indicates in its annual statistical reports a sharp increase in firearms manufactured in the US from a total of 3,040,934 in 1986 to 9,358,661 in 2015 (ATF 2017b, 1) In terms of US firearms manufacturers’ exports there is also registered an increase from a total 217,448 in 1986 to 343,456 in 2015

(ATF 2017b, 3).

According to the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, between March 2015 and November 2017, more than 4000 civilians were killed by US-made weaponry, and more than 7000 were badly wounded (Fernandes 2017). The US Government condemned the multiple attacks but always refused to change its military support, and firearm sales policies to those countries, who are the main clients such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Mexico.

IMPACTS OF ILLEGAL WEAPONRY TRAFFIC FROM US INTO MEXICO

The production and trade of US gun has different impacts. The most direct is the increase of the violence not only in the US territory, but also in the countries who become their firearm clients. One example is Mexico where the consumption of guns of different calibres has increased in recent years legally and illegally. This part of the text aims to explore the consequences of the illegal traffic weaponry from US to Mexico.

The entrance of US guns into Mexican territory has been more notorious, particularly after the former Mexican president Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), who declared “the war on drugs” in December 2006. He sent 6,500 troops to Michoacán, state with high levels of violence. Although, the guns and strength of the narco traffickers proved to be more effective, since criminal groups had more powerful firearms than the Mexican army.

From 2006 to 2012 President Calderon waged a US backed offensive against drug cartels. Fighting between rival gangs and security forces led to between 47,000 and 70,000 deaths. More than 20,000 disappeared and a quarter of a million people were displaced (Grillo 2013, 253-260).

In Mexico, the number of deaths related to drug trafficking⁵ has exceeded those of a civil war. While the number of deaths to civilians in Afghanistan reached more than 26,000 from 2001 to 2014; and in Iraq, it was 160, 500 from 2003 to 2014. In Mexico, the number of homicides related to

5 Drug trafficking is a global illicit trade involving the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of substances which are subject to drug prohibition laws. UNODC is continuously monitoring and researching global illicit drug markets in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their dynamics (UNODC 2018).

drug trafficking reached 164,000 between 2007 and 2014. Even in the same period (2007-2014) the number of deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan was approximately 103,000, fewer than in Mexico (Breslow 2015). These figures show that the human costs are higher in Mexico, under a silent civil war caused by organized crime, than in Iraq or Afghanistan under civil wars and declared by foreign interventions (Breslow 2015).

Only in 2017 (from January to October) there were 20, 878 homicides reported officially, plus homicides that were left unreported, unidentified bodies or missing bodies, which means that every 16 minutes a victim was registered a homicide. There was also registered an increase in extortion, robbery with violence, business theft (Meléndez 2017, 8).

According to Meléndez (2017) the number of killings related to drug issues between 2007-2017 increased sharply. In 2007, it was recorded 8 530; in 2008 represented 10 646, in 2009, 13 193; in 2010, 17 455; in 2011, 19 344; in 2012, 18 337; in 2013, 15 483; in 2014, 13 149; in 2015, 13 995; in 2016, 16 881; and 2017, 20 878. These figures shows that the number of killings related to drug violence increased drastically in 2011 and 2017 (Meléndez 2017, 8-9).

It is important to notice that many homicides in Mexico are not recorded as many families preferred not to denounce them for fear of reprisal, which increase the number of homicides related to drug issues and organized crime.

According to Chomsky (2017), the geographical closeness between Mexico and the US make the drug trafficking an issue more complex as 70% of weapons confiscated in Mexico come from the US:

In Mexico alone, tens of thousands of people have been killed related to drug trafficking. The United States is the source of the problem, in two senses, currently - in terms of demand, which is obvious, and also in supply, which is little discussed. The arms of the Mexican cartels come from the United States. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, a federal government office, analyzed the provenance of weapons confiscated in Mexico. According to their data, about 70% came from the United States (Chomsky 2017, 162).

The illegal and legal entrance of firearms in Mexico has eased the

development of narco-trafficking, kidnapping, child and women abuse, including development of ethno-pornography (pornography related to exploitation of indigenous people), human trafficking, and extortion among other crimes, as the criminal group have more powerful guns than local police.

The trade, production and use of weapons represents a serious problem for the national security in Mexico, where illegal entrance of weapons is causing massive problems: a brutal fight among cartels and criminal groups, a frontal war between police, army and government, an increase of all kind of crimes.

The firearms traffic⁶ in Mexico is a national security issue both Mexico and the US. The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) in its reports called “Four Facts about Gun Legislation and Cartel Violence in Mexico” indicates: “Mexican drug cartels get most of their guns from the United States. 70% of guns recovered in Mexico and submitted for tracing between 2007 and 2011 came from the United States” (WOLA 2013, 5). The reasons are obvious: it is almost impossible to purchase legally a gun in Mexico, while in the US, buying a gun is easier than buying a car. There are more than 8,000 gun dealers in the US border states. Mexican drug cartels can easily acquire guns in the United States through straw purchasers or at gun shows (WOLA 2013).

WOLA recognizes that the main supplier of guns to Mexican gangs and cartels are the American gun manufacturers and dealers, since in Mexico is quite difficult to buy weapons destined to the use of the army (WOLA 2013). The illegal gun sales in the US is minimal and the acquisition of weapons is given by third parties,⁷ who buy the weapons from different

6 Firearms trafficking is used in terms of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, which considers that the arms trafficking is multidimensional phenomenon, and goes from the legal manufacturing and selling to the use of the firearms in the unregulated market. “Firearms are manufactured and traded both licitly and illicitly thus making the identification and tracing of illegally manufactured and trafficked firearms very complex. Further complicating matters, most firearms are produced legally and then diverted into the illicit market. Notably, illicit arms are present in most forms of violent crimes and increase the power of organized criminal groups” (UNODC 2015).

7 In the context of firearms trafficking, the person or entity acting as an intermediary, bringing together relevant parties and arranging or facilitating a potential transaction in return for financial or other benefit is referred to as a “broker”. Some brokers have even been known to do business and sell weapons to both sides of the same conflict (UNODC 2015)

stores or during gun shows (Amaya 2010), and taking into account that there are more than 180 gun shows yearly, the probability to buy firearms legally is quite high.

Many US states, such as Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, do not have a limit to the number of purchases of revolvers, assault weapons or ammunition cartridges. There are some legal checks required to purchase weapons from authorized dealers, but a criminal may pay people without criminal records to buy weapons in their name. In addition, the arms sales in arms fairs do not require a background check, facilitating the purchase of high-calibre weapons without any requirement (Astorga 2010).

The report of WOLA also indicates: “Gun traffickers attempted to smuggle 250,000 guns into Mexico between 2010 and 2012 [...] and only about 15 % of these guns were intercepted, which means that 85% reached their destination” (WOLA 2013).

The research of WOLA reports a correlation between gun trafficking in Mexico and increase of violence in the country, which is affected not only Mexican people but also US citizens: Drug related violence continues to devastate communities in Mexico. More than 60,000 people been killed in drug related violence in Mexico since 2006, and there were nearly 1,000 executions in December 2012, during the government of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018). US citizens have also been victims of violence in Mexico; the State Department reported that more than 100 US citizens were murdered in Mexico in 2011 (WOLA 2013).

In the same context, the Center for American Progress in its report called “Beyond our borders. How Weak US Gun Laws Contribute to Violent Crime Abroad” indicates that the impact of US sourced guns on other nations is to look at the immediate neighbours such as Mexico, where it is estimated that around 213,000 firearms are smuggled across the US-Mexico border each year (CAP 2018).

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) recognizes the 70 % of the guns used in Mexico by criminal groups were originally purchased from a licensed gun dealer in the United States, based on 106,001 guns recovered by law enforcement as part of a criminal investigation in Mexico from 2011 to 2016 and submitted for tracing (ATF 2017a).

Following the report from the Centre for American Progress, “many of these US-sourced crime guns were legally exported and were not diverted for criminal use until they crossed the border. The United States is a major manufacturer and a leading exporter of firearms, legally exporting an average of 298,000 guns each year” (CAP 2018, 5). Although, weaknesses in US gun laws contribute to illegal gun trafficking on abroad, mainly in Mexico due to its geographical position.

Certainly, the development of the narco trafficking in Mexico has been influenced by several factors such a widespread unemployment, high levels of corruption⁸ and impunity in the country, increase on global crimes and international crime networking, and of course a mayor variable to take into account: the laxity of American gun laws, which facilitates the legal and illegal entrance of firearms into the Mexican territory.

Following to the Organization Impunity Zero, in terms of impunity, the probability of a crime being denounced and cleared in Mexico is 1.14% (Arellano 2018, 14). The impunity existing in Mexico makes the perfect land for the development of the firearms trafficking. Even if in Mexico the gun entry is controlled by the State.

The Mexican Constitution grants the right to use guns to citizens, but under the State control as it says in the article 10: “ The inhabitants of the United Mexican States are free to possess arms of any kind, for their security and self- defense, made exception of those prohibited by law and those ones that the nation reserves for the exclusive use of the Army, National Guard Army; but they –inhabitants- will not be able to carry them in the towns without being subject to police regulations” (Constitución 1917).

Mexico also has the Federal Law on Firearms and Explosives, which set up rules for the use of arms, manufacturing and trade of guns, and expresses sanctions for the crime of possessing and trafficking weapons (Reglamento 2015).

8 The term corruption is taken as the abuse of public power for private purposes. This definition assumes the distinction between public and private roles. In many societies is not very clear the frontier between both spheres, and it seems to be natural to give some gifts in exchange of assigning contracts and jobs. The distinction between public and private spheres seems to be strange and not clearly defined. However, in developed societies the difference between the two spaces is more pronounced (Rose-Ackerman 1999, 91).

Besides, the Mexican Senate approved in 2016 a new law, which gives a prison sentence between 7 and 15 years for the crime of carrying, manufacturing, importing or stocking instruments, which can be used to attack people. The fines will increase according to the size of the weapon seized. It also specifies that there will be prison sentences between 15 and 30 years for the illegal introduction of weapons into the Mexican territory (Ballinas and Becerril 2016, 4).

The illegal entry of guns in Mexico is sanctioned up to 30 years of prison; however, this activity continues growth even after the new regulations on gun ownership. The control of firearms in Mexico represents a huge challenge for the government and a threat for the peace in the country, and of course a massive business for the US firearms companies.

BILATERAL RESPONSIBILITY US-MEXICO

The firearms trafficking from the United States to Mexico is a central issue in the bilateral relationship, closely related to drug trafficking and particularly to the lethal violence displayed by Mexican trafficking organizations (Astorga 2010).

Certainly, the trafficking of firearms, like that of drugs, implies a relationship of co-responsibility between the countries of origin and destination; the responsibilities and capacities of the states to fight this phenomenon are different (Astorga 2010). Therefore, actions and policies must be undertaken for both countries in this case for US and Mexico, if they want to reduce violence and organized crime in Mexico.

The US government under Barack Obama (2009-2017) recognized its responsibility in the development of gun trafficking into Mexico, however the government of Donald Trump (2017-2020) eased firearm export for US weapons manufacturers, which could increase the already high number of US-sourced firearms used in criminal activities in Latin America, mainly in Mexico (Asmann 2018).

The proposal, published May 14, 2018, would shift authority to regulate exports of certain firearms and related products from the State Department to the Commerce Department. The move aims to streamline the approval

process for arms exports so US manufacturers —suffering from decreased domestic sales in the Trump era— can sell more guns, ammunition and accessories abroad” (Asmann 2018) as a way to stimulate US firearms companies and US economy.

It is not a secret that the US weaponry industry is a massive business for manufacturers, traders and taxes translated into revenues for the US government. Any national conflict becomes a massive business for firearms manufacturers, since both sides of the clash needs arms to fight each other: “When the drug war in Mexico heated up, the firearm market conditions were great both on the supply and demand side for an increased flow of military-grade weaponry. The drug war becomes helpful to the gun industry because the premise of the drug war is that the United States and its allies are going to fight drug trafficking through military and policing means, so therefore they’re going to be armed -and be important gun clients-” (Asmann 2018).

The challenges for US and Mexico are huge in terms of gun trafficking and reducing the high levels of violence and drug trafficking. However, Mexico is more likely to suffer the most since represents a key geographical point to smuggle drugs, people, species close to extinction, human organs and human beings, and so on into US.

Mexico is a territory where the battle between criminal groups and army forces is taking place, but it is also a country, which drags huge historical problems dating from colonial times to contemporary problems reflected on high levels of social inequality, corruption and impunity, together with high levels of illiteracy and social exclusion mainly in its indigenous population.

CONCLUSIONS

Understanding US gun ownership is not a simple issue, resumed “to who does and does not own a gun”, either the consequences of the laxity of US laws regarding firearms sales at national and international level. This is a complex issue, which deserves serious attention from governments, civil society, gun industry and international organisations.

The studies of violence and gun killings start to be more consistent from

different disciplines, although Siegel and Rothman (2016) identify three key elements, which go beyond the individual predisposition, ethnicity and social-economic background. These three factors reach the structure of the State: public policies, dividends of manufacturing companies and people's attitude regarding gun control. These elements become paramount to the study of violent crime and weapon use in Mexico, which help to describe the development of the nacre trafficking in the country.

Certainly, the three factors are connected, on one hand, the US public policies help increase the laxity on gun control, and on the other hand, the firearms industry has the financial resources to influence both public policies and attitude of tolerance of the civil society regarding use and ownership of guns.

The US society is a key example of the social acceptance towards gun use and ownership: "For many American adults who own guns, exposure to guns happened at an early age. About two-thirds of current gun owners (67%) say there were guns in their household growing up, and 76% report that they first fired a gun before they were 18" (Parker et al. 2017). This early exposure to firearms in US is a clear indicator of the "normality" of gun ownership, and even the social acceptance of having firearms at home.

Americans have a different assessment of how people in their own communities view gun owners. Most (61%) say people in their community generally view gun owners in a positive way, and this is particularly the case among those who live in rural communities. About eight-in-ten adults who live in a rural area (79%) say people in their community generally have a positive view of gun owners; just 47% of those in urban areas say the same about people in their community (Parker et al. 2017).

Gun ownership and the social acceptance is a complex phenomenon in US society, however the influence of the firearms companies is significant, due to the amount of financial and political resources that they use to lobby in their favour. Keeping high levels of sales is the ultimate goal of any business, particularly for the firearms industry, which puts outside any ethical principle, regardless of who is the consumer or which is the use of their products.

According to the Organisation Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) “selling arms to a country in conflict – whether internal or external - makes the conflict more deadly and last longer. If there is tension between countries or within a country, arms purchases are likely to increase this tension and make a conflict more likely to last long time” (CAAT 2018, 2), which generates better dividends for the firearm industry.

There are many studies showing that the arms trade provides weapons to those who can pay for them, as long as they have the money, what the buyers do with the arms is largely irrelevant to the seller. In this way, arms trade is a global business, which supports conflict, is and development of organized crime, and it is driven by the criterion of the increase of revenues (CAAT 2018, 2).

Mexico is a clear example of the negative effects of the US laxity on gun sales, as more than 70% of the guns used by the criminals in Mexico come from the US. This is important because violence in Mexico is not simply an internecine war between drug traffickers. Targeted victims of the conflict have included police officers, journalists, peace activists, and migrant workers. The dead have also included civilians, who either were misidentified or were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. In all of these cases, “the scope and lethality of these attacks are vastly enhanced by easy access to military-grade small arms” (Parakilas 2013).

According to Siegel and Rothman (2016), the profitability for firearms manufacturing companies is the final goal of the business, and reducing controls to increase sales is part of the business development strategy, regardless the buyer. This principle is applied to the Mexican case, since the levels of violence are strongly correlated with the entrance of firearms to the country.

The cost of acquiring weapons is negligible for trafficking groups whose profits are estimated in the billions of dollars, for example, variants of the AR-15 rifle (the civilian version of the US military’s M-16) can be bought brand new for a little over \$1000. Pistols and shotguns can be bought for a few hundred dollars, and the hugely powerful Barrett M82 for about \$10,000. Even factoring in the labour cost of the straw purchaser (an individual with a clean criminal record who legally purchases the weapons at an American firearms dealer), the cost of procuring ammunition and the

cost of moving the weapons across the border are minimal, and the advantages to traffickers are considerable higher (Parakilas 2013).

Given the profitability for the US firearms companies and for the criminal groups, regarding guns trafficking from US to Mexico, and given the lack of will of the US president to control the gun sales, the problem of violence in Mexico does not look to be solved in short term as the former Mexican Foreign Minister Claudia Ruiz Massieu (2015-2017) indicated: “Mexico’s efforts are limited by the thousands of illegal weapons that arrive in our country every year from our northern border” (Bargent 2016).

According to Ruiz Massieu, “Mexican authorities have traced 70 % of weapons seized in the country to buyers or distributors in the United States. She added that 60 % were manufactured in the United States, compared to 30 % in Europe and 10 % in the rest of the world” (Bargent 2016). Taking into account that it is estimated that 2000 illegal Weapons cross US-Mexico Border per day, and they come from the United States (Gagne 2015), the problem doesn’t seem very simple as a better customs control in the Mexican Border.

Certainly, new president Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO, from July 1st 2018-predicted to 2024) has the best intentions to stop gun trafficking by reducing corruption, impunity and launching a program of pacification with criminal groups.⁹ The confiscation of weapons from the US into Mexico accounts of, by November 2019, 5,087, which is half of 2018, which were recorded 10,282 guns. AMLO has reinforced the control on the Mexican Border, but according to SEDENA (Secretariat of National Defence), there are still 1,679,884 arms to recover (Jiménez and Urrutia 2019). However, the problem of gun trafficking from US into Mexico seems to be more global and deep-rooted. The geographical position of Mexico does not seem to help either to solve the problem.

Besides, the Trump administration’s new rules on arms exports will not reduce the violence in Mexico, quite the opposite, they will strengthen the

9 The pacification plan is one of the 10 points contemplated by Andrés Manuel López Obrador: “First is to close the cycle of war, second, to achieve a turning point of criminal violence within 180 days, three, to recover the confidence of society in the security forces, projected in three years and, finally, deliver a country in peace and tranquillity in 2024” (Fregoso 2018, 1).

firearms industry at the expense of human lives in Mexico and in rest of the world, as the absence of sales regulations will provide more weapons to criminal organizations and security forces.

In this way, we observe that the gun industry in the US has a huge responsibility in the levels of violence and gun killings in the US and abroad, particularly in Mexico, where the consequences of the illegal weaponry traffic from the US into the country has caused the death of thousands of people. The violence in Mexico will not solve without a bilateral responsibility between US and Mexico, this is why it is paramount for both governments to tackle the illegal weaponry issue together rather than blame each other as each one has its own responsibility.

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