

Firearms and Drugs: Partners in Transnational Crime

Joint Issue Paper

UNODC – Flemish Peace Institute



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Executive Summary

The multifaceted links between illicit drug trafficking and illicit firearms present a global challenge requiring a clear understanding and integrated responses.

These multidimensional links are characterized by:

- the demand for firearms that is created by the trafficking of illicit drugs, not least as drug traffickers are heavily armed with illicitly trafficked weapons;
- the connection between firearms and drug trafficking routes, actors and modi operandi, with drug traffickers accepting or demanding firearms as payment in-kind for illicitly trafficked drugs;
- gun violence that occurs as a direct result of the ability of drug traffickers to increase their capabilities through accessing a wide variety of illicitly trafficked firearms.

Drug trafficking fuels firearms trafficking

Global drug trafficking acts as a key driver for the use of illicit firearms as well as their illicit manufacturing, proliferation and trafficking. The long life cycle of firearms provides opportunities for diversion of firearms from legal possession into illegal possession. Drug criminals across the globe profit from such diversion opportunities and the affiliated firearms trafficking activities.

Firearms seizures in the context of drug trafficking occur on a global scale and are particularly prominent in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. Firearms trafficking is often funded by the profits generated by the illicit drug trafficking, with direct exchanges of firearms for drugs taking place in certain instances.

Demand for firearms is high in a drug-related criminal context due to the instrumental and reputational purposes that a firearm fulfils for actors involved in drug trafficking activities. Access to firearms allows drug criminals to carry out or expand their activities and protect their territory and themselves against competitors and law enforcement agencies.

Similar routes, actors and modi operandi in both types of trafficking

While drug trafficking is characterized by a global reach and firearms trafficking is generally limited to a regional dimension, significant interlinkages arise between both types of trafficking through the actors, routes and modi operandi used by the traffickers. Arms trafficking methods have often been pioneered by drug traffickers.

Frequently, firearms and drugs are smuggled together, or the firearms can be used as a means of protection for drug traffickers from both competitors and/or public security forces.

Global drug trafficking routes can also be exploited for firearms trafficking as firearms can be smuggled in the reverse direction or on the same drug trafficking route and incorporate the same facilitators and/or collaborators to successfully smuggle the contraband.

Drug trafficking fuels gun violence

Despite the largely non-violent dimension of the illicit drug trade, as most illicit drugs transactions and trafficking occur without violence, the linkages between firearms and drug trafficking can trigger, facilitate and intensify violence. Access to trafficked firearms tends to increase the use of violence in drug markets across the globe, with more lethal casualties and higher levels

of the use of automatic rifles being associated with the drug milieu than with other criminal contexts.¹

Drug-related gun violence is a global phenomenon and can occur at any point within the drugs lifecycle. Significant geographical differences can be observed in gun violence related to the production and trafficking of large quantities of drugs, which reflect to a certain extent the global distribution patterns of the various types of drugs. Drug-related gun violence connected to local consumer drug markets, on the other hand, can be observed across the globe.²

Gun violence related to drug trafficking can have devastating spill-over effects on local communities and, geographically, in the broader region in which drug trafficking occurs. The interlinkages between firearms and drug trafficking can fuel armed conflict and terrorism by facilitating the funding and acquisition of weapons by non-state armed groups and terrorists through drug trafficking criminal networks and activities.³

1 UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2023* (Vienna: UNODC, 2023). Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/2023/Global_study_on_homicide_2023_web.pdf

2 Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023). Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

3 UNODC, TOCTA Sahel: *Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel* (Vienna: UNODC, 2022) p.16. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_firearms_2023.pdf; UNODC, (Vienna: UNODC, 2023) p.10. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/Special_Points_WDR2023_web_DP.pdf

Introduction

Use of terms

Illicit firearms trafficking

The only legally binding international definition of firearms trafficking can be found in the Protocol Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition (Firearms Protocol) which supplements the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC).

The Firearms Protocol, in Article 3(e), states that ‘illicit trafficking’ means:

the import, export, acquisition, sale, delivery, movement or transfer of firearms, their parts and components and ammunition from or across the territory of one State Party to that of another State Party if any one of the States Parties concerned does not authorize it in accordance with the terms of this Protocol or if the firearms are not marked in accordance with article 8 of [the] Protocol.

In sum, illicit firearms trafficking encompasses cross-border transfers that have not been authorized by at least one of the States involved but does not include State-to-State transfers.⁴ It is important to note that while this definition is limited to cross-border trafficking, national laws and regulations designed to implement the Firearms Protocol can be stricter than required in the Protocol itself and generally also include unauthorized domestic transfers.

Illicit drug trafficking

Drug trafficking is defined in the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988. This Convention is a comprehensive treaty that provides a framework for international cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking. It has been ratified by 193 States, including all United Nations Member States. In addition to the 1988 Convention, there are two other international drug control conventions: the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1954 and the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971.

Article 3 of the 1988 Convention defines drug trafficking as the following:

“Illicit traffic” means the cultivation, production, manufacture, extraction, preparation, sale, offering for sale, distribution, purchase, delivery, brokerage, transport, import, export, transit, transshipment or shipment of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances contrary to the provisions of this Convention.

The 1988 Convention also defines a number of specific narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances that are subject to international control.

The 1988 Convention and the UNTOC are both key international instruments in the fight against global criminal activities. Both conventions share the overarching goal of promoting international cooperation to combat transnational organized crime, including drug trafficking, acknowledging the need for a global and coordinated response by the Member States. They provide frameworks for various forms of international cooperation, including extradition, mutual legal assistance, exchange of information between law enforcement agencies and other relevant authorities in different countries, and joint investigations and operations.

⁴ Lauren Pinson, *Addressing the linkages between illicit arms, organized crime, and armed conflict* (Geneva: UNIDIR and UNODC, 2022). Available at: <https://unidir.org/publication/addressing-the-linkages-between-illicit-arms-organized-crime-and-armed-conflict/>

Firearms trafficking does not happen in a vacuum, it is driven by supply and demand. On the supply side, illicit firearms, their parts and components and ammunition are trafficking commodities and have a price-tag. On the demand side, firearms are illegally acquired for use as tools to assert power and undermine the rule of law and local government, as well as facilitators of violent crime and terrorism. As such, illicit firearms are intrinsically linked to a wide range of criminal actors, terrorists and non-State armed groups. Extortion, robbery and kidnapping at gunpoint are only the most obvious manifestations of interlinkages between illicit firearms and criminal activities. Oftentimes, different forms of criminality are intertwined, such as human-, firearms- and drug-trafficking. In this blend of criminal activities, illicit firearms have emerged as a cross-cutting and multi-faceted security threat and impediment for peace and sustainable development. Responding to this reality requires a better understanding of not only illicit arms flows, but also of how these flows intersect with other forms of organized crime.

The present issue paper has been drafted in response to the 2022 Commission on Narcotic Drugs Resolution 65-25, which requested “the United Nations on Drugs and Crime to continue providing assistance to member States, upon request, with regards to data collection, research and, as appropriate, intelligence- and analysis-sharing to disclose the extent of the links between illicit drug trafficking and illicit firearms trafficking and to continue its already existing research on these links”. It has been developed by the UNODC Firearms Trafficking Section jointly with the Flemish Peace Institute, an independent peace research institute that is affiliated to the Flemish Parliament (Belgium), aiming to contribute to a better understanding of the interlinkages between illicit arms and drug trafficking in all their dimensions.

The research presented is predominantly a qualitative analysis characterizing the links between firearms and drug trafficking where they have been identified to better understand the underlying connections. Therefore, the paper focuses on cases where such links exist. However, it should be acknowledged that the drug trade has a largely non-violent dimension, as most illicit drugs transactions and trafficking occur without violence. That being said, there is, nevertheless, a criminal demand for firearms and at some point along the drugs supply chain firearms tend to play a role – be it for intimidation, protection or control – including, in some instances, firearms related violence.

The relationship between drug trafficking and firearms trafficking has been identified as being twofold: first, organized criminal groups (OCGs) involved in drug trafficking are among the primary users of and thus have a high demand for firearms and ammunition; and second, the illicit trafficking activity itself (of various commodities) presents connecting points such as routes, providers/facilitators to forge travel and transfer documents and the *modi operandi* to conceal consignments. Despite strong anecdotal evidence of various forms of interlinkages, there has not been sufficient research specifically into the interlinkages and dynamics between these two criminal phenomena.

There are also some important similarities and differences in nature between firearms and drugs. In legal terms, the possession and consumption of drugs is prohibited or strictly regulated in significant parts of the world, while firearms are predominantly regulated goods. On the consumer side, drugs end users are mostly civilians and criminals involved in the traffic, while for firearms both civilians and States as well as criminal organizations can be end users. Finally, and importantly, trafficked drugs are in their great majority illicit goods, whilst arms can have ei-

5 United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs, *Resolution 65-2 Strengthening international cooperation to address the links between illicit drug trafficking and illicit firearms trafficking* (2022). Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/Drug_Resolutions/2020-2029/2022/Res_65_2.pdf

ther a legal or illegal status, linked to each country’s licensing rules and the international arms trade.

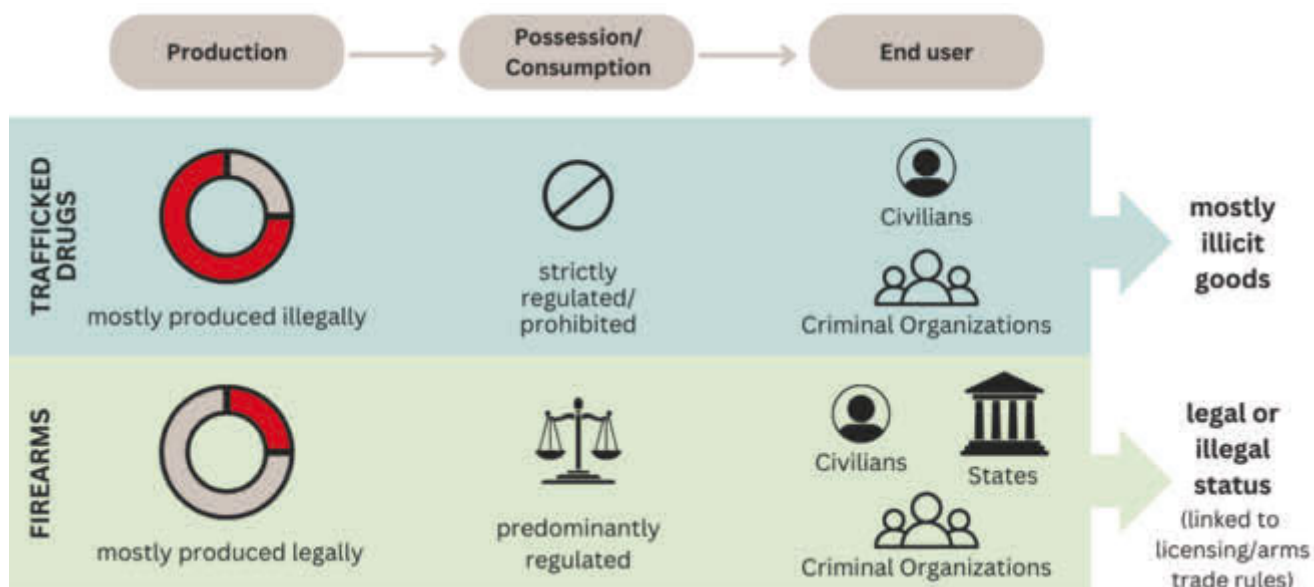


Figure 1 – Differences and similarities between firearms and trafficked drugs

This issue paper will analyze the linkages between firearms and drug trafficking by answering the following main research questions:

- How does drug trafficking stimulate and facilitate firearms trafficking?
- What are the direct and indirect linkages between the trafficking in firearms and the trafficking in drugs?
- What is the impact of firearms trafficking on drug-related violence?

To answer the above research questions, the current study applied a mixed-method approach, including the following components:

- An international literature review on drug trafficking, firearms trafficking and drug-related gun violence;
- An analysis of UNODC data on firearms trafficking and drug trafficking;
- Case-studies and a media analysis on drug seizures, firearms seizures and incidents of drug-related gun violence;
- Semi-structured interviews with law enforcement and judiciary experts.

1. Drug-related criminal demand for firearms

Drug markets across the globe create demand for firearms since firearms are a tool for drug criminals to use for offensive, defensive, and reputational purposes within the drug market. This acts as a catalyst for the convergence of these trafficking phenomena, which are observable on a global basis, with countries in all regions of the world reporting simultaneous seizures of both types of contraband. The drug market itself also creates opportunities for purchasing firearms because of the profits made from its activities, which creates an incentive to divert firearms from the legal to the illicit sphere.

1.1. Firearms as tools for criminals

Various actors and situations can fuel demand for trafficked firearms. In each region or even within a specific country, a different factor or combination of factors can drive demand for these weapons.⁶ Notwithstanding this general observation, **crime must be considered as the primary driver of firearms trafficking** in many countries across the world. Criminals often acquire and use firearms that are not accessible to them through legal means via the illicit market. Firearms – and especially handguns – are in high criminal demand in many illicit markets because they are often relatively cheap, extremely lethal, and easy to use, carry and conceal.⁷

Illicit firearms and ammunition are important enablers of various types of criminal activities since they are often instrumental for carrying out these activities. Firearms can be used by criminals in at least three varying general situations: offensive use, defensive use, and for reputational purposes.⁸ The offensive motive affords the criminal the ability to perpetuate power and increase territorial reach. The defensive role of a firearm provides them with the ability to self-protect and control already established territory from both competitors and public forces. In both these instances, OCGs and other criminal actors use firearms for instrumental purposes either to acquire power or for protection. While in some situations, for example in the drug cartel wars in Mexico, firearms are primarily used in an open conflict between competitors, in other situations the possession of firearms will mainly play a more deterrent role.⁹

The **offensive and defensive use of firearms can take many specific forms** depending on the context of their use. Merely by threatening to use them, for example, criminals can convey a sense of power that coerces others to follow instructions or can discourage opponents from attacking them. This power enables criminals from across the globe to acquire wealth through various types of illicit activities, such as racketeering or the smuggling of various types of commodities. Firearms can also be used by criminals in cases of extreme brutality to send a message, not only to direct criminal opponents, but also to catch the attention of the general public as well as State authorities.¹⁰

6 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.36. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

7 Nils Duquet and Dennis Vanden Auweele, *Project Target Targeting gun violence & trafficking in Europe* (Brussels: The Flemish Peace Institute, 2021), p.76. Available at: <https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/TARGET-OnlineVersion-v2022.pdf>

8 Nils Duquet, *Illicit Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts, Components and Ammunition to, from and across the European Union* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.61. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/firearms-protocol/2020/UNODC-EU-Report-A8_FINAL.pdf

9 UNODC, “Organized crime and organized criminal groups”, E4J University Module Series: Firearms (April 2020). Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/zh/firearms/module-7/key-issues/organized-crime-and-organized-criminal-groups.html>

10 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.36. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

The third motive for criminals to possess a firearm departs from the basic function of a firearm and instead uses it for **reputational and performative purposes**. In such a situation, the firearm itself can signal as well as increase the status that the owner has within the criminal market, especially when possessing top-branded or military-grade firearms.¹¹ The use of firearms in acts of extreme violence can also bolster their status within the criminal environment and keep competition at bay.¹²



Figure 2 – Purposes for the criminal use of firearms

1.2 Drug trafficking fuels the demand for the trafficking of firearms

Drug trafficking and illicit firearms possession go together. In the context of drug crime, due to the illicit nature of the drug market, its enormous monetary profits, and the many purposes firearms have for criminals, a strong nexus between firearms trafficking and drug trafficking is created. The strong demand for firearms by drug criminals has already been noted by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in its *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020*, which states that “data on significant cases of firearms seizures [...] corroborate[s] the strong link between drug trafficking and seized weapons. Aside from weapons-related items such as ammunition, parts and components, and explosives, drugs emerge as the most common commodity seized together with firearms”.¹³ In addition, the same study noted that, despite some variations, in general “the higher the homicide rate or rate of illicit drug seizures [in a country], the larger the share of firearms seized in those criminal contexts”.¹⁴

The criminal drug market and the firearms market demonstrate a synergistic relationship. The perceived necessity of criminals involved in drug trafficking to own a firearm because of the instrumental, defensive, and reputational uses that a firearm possesses, is also reinforced

11 Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, “The illicit fun market in Belgium: A lethal cocktail of criminal supply and terrorist demand”, *Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe: Research findings and policy recommendations of Project SAFTE* (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2018), p.34. Available at: https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/safte/files/project_safte_belgium.pdf

12 Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023), p.18. Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

13 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.78. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

14 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.77. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

by the profits acquired from the trafficking of drugs¹⁵ and the culture of violence that often accompanies and helps facilitate drug trafficking.¹⁶ These two aspects – the illicit drug market and the function and use of firearms – reinforce and mutually benefit both trafficking phenomena. In brief, therefore, the situational use of firearms for drug traffickers can be summarized as follows.

The instrumental use of the firearm is a means of ‘out-gunning’ rivals and/or security forces. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Crime reported that the proliferation of firearms has enabled smaller gangs to compete with rivals and security forces.¹⁷ This is especially the case in Mexico, where smaller gangs have been able to fragment and diversify the drug market by using gun violence as a tool to seize territory from other previously established rivals.¹⁸ An example of the defensive use of a firearm occurred during a police operation in 2013, led by the United Kingdom’s Northwest Regional Crime Unit – TITAN¹⁹, which managed to apprehend couriers smuggling drugs and firearms into Northern Ireland. The couriers were protecting themselves with revolvers and sub-machine guns.²⁰ During court proceedings, the Preston Crown Court was told that the weapons were “no doubt available to be used if and when required in the drug dealing enterprise”.²¹

Firearms are also leveraged to acquire status and reputation within the drug trafficking environment. According to the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, the criminal violence used in the illegal drug market in the country is primarily aimed at boosting the reputation of the perpetrators in their pursuit of status and power.²² An example of firearms being used as an enabler to acquire status was the shooting of a man in Sweden in 2019, which was captured in a photo. The image depicts an injured man with a blood-stained t-shirt lying unnaturally next to a car. Such documentation of the victims by the perpetrators is intended to humiliate and intimidate online via social media.²³

15 Drug trafficking organizations on the US–Mexico border rely heavily on their access to weapons. The purchase of these weapons is funded through the revenue generated from their drug trafficking activities. Experts Interview dd. 12 July 2023.

16 According to Europol’s SOCTA report, 60 per cent of criminal networks in the EU use violence as part of their criminal business. Europol, *European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment, A Corrupting Influence: The Infiltration and Undermining of Europe’s Economy and Society by Organised Crime* (Europol, 2021), p.18. Available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/socta2021_1.pdf

17 Guillermo Vázquez del Mercado, *Arms Trafficking and Organised Crime: Global Trade, Local Impacts* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2022), p.13. Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GI-TOC-policy-brief-Arms-trafficking-web-1.pdf>

18 Guillermo Vázquez del Mercado, *Arms Trafficking and Organised Crime: Global Trade, Local Impacts* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2022), p.13. Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GI-TOC-policy-brief-Arms-trafficking-web-1.pdf>

19 John Siddle, “Gang who ran Merseyside multi-million pound drugs and guns empire jailed for 91 years”, *Liverpool Echo*, 20 November 2013. Available at: <http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/gang-who-ran-merseyside-multi-million-6319030>

20 Paul Holtom, Paul James and Connor Patmore, *From the IRA to ISIS: Exploring Terrorist access to the UKs illicit firearms market*, Project SAFTE (Flemish Peace Institute, Arquebus Solutions and SIPRI, 2018). Available at: https://flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/safte/files/project_safte_uk.pdf

21 John Siddle, “Gang who ran Merseyside multi-million pound drugs and guns empire jailed for 91 years”, *Liverpool Echo*, 20 November 2013. Available at: <http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/gang-who-ran-merseyside-multi-million-6319030>

22 Katharina Tollin, Li Hammar and Anna Jonsson, *Illegal drug markets in Sweden. A study of smuggling, street dealing, internet sales and buyers* (Stockholm: The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2021). Available at: <https://bra.se/download/18.282b7a80182ac29f6b780/1660809686672/2022%20Illegal%20drug%20markets%20in%20Sweden.pdf>

23 Frida Svensson, “Anhöriga i skottlinje – del av en större hänsynslöshet”, *Svd*, 31 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.svd.se/a/dOp-BXq/unga-kriminella-driver-pa-valdet-storre-hansynsloshet>; Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023). Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

1.3 Drug-related criminal demand for firearms: A global phenomenon

The Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020 notes that links emerge between trafficking patterns of firearms and broader regional contexts of prevalent criminal activity. While drug trafficking and violent crime are considered the types of criminal activity most often associated with firearms seizures, regional variations can also be observed. **As a context for firearms seizures, drug trafficking is very prominent in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean.**²⁴

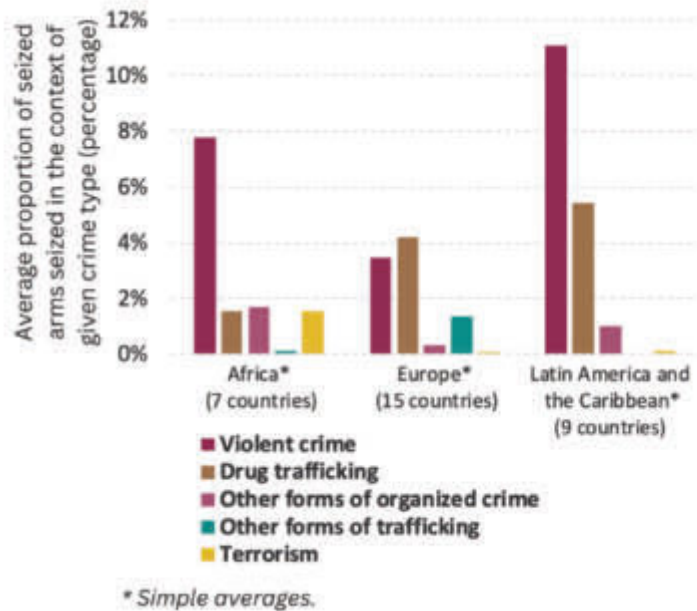


Figure 3 - Forms of crime (not connected to firearms offences) emerging in the context of arms seizures, regions with available data²⁵

Notwithstanding regional variations, we can conclude that **drug related firearm seizures occur on a global scale**. National authorities report their seizures of firearms in connection to other suspected offences to the UNODC via the Illicit Arms Flow Questionnaire (IAFQ). The data reported via the IAFQ can be used as a key indicator for the global scale of the link between firearms seizures and drug trafficking as well as other criminal offences. This data on firearms seized in connection with other crimes is illustrated in the figure below.

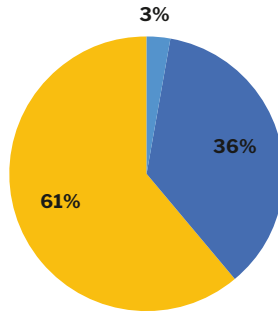
24 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.78. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

25 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.35. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

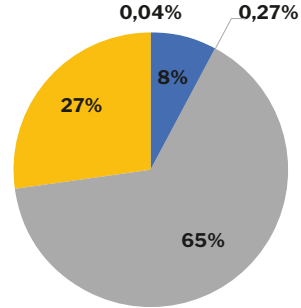
Americas

- Drug trafficking
- Illicit offences
- Other
- Other arms offences
- Other forms of organised crime
- Other trafficking
- Terrorism

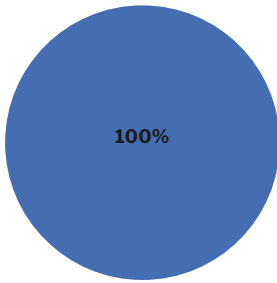
**Antigua & Barbuda
2016-2018**



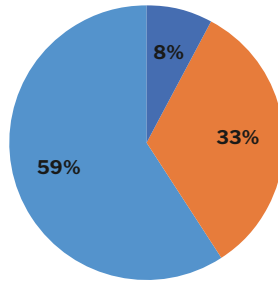
**Brazil
2016-2018**



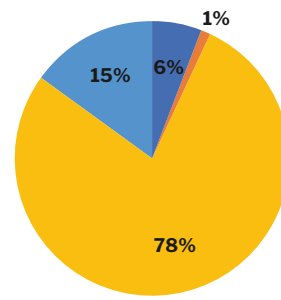
**Uruguay
2020**



**Guyana
2018-2020**

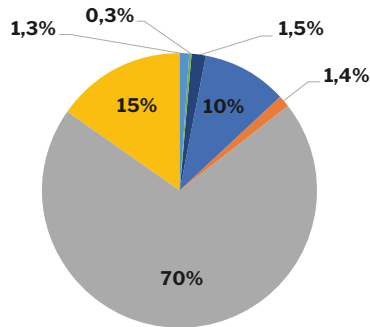


**Chile
2018-2019**

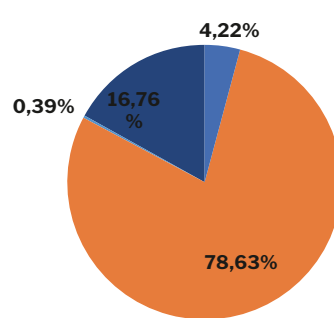


Africa

**Morocco
2016-2020**

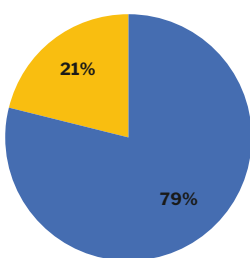


**Tunisia
2018**

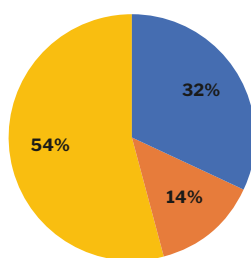


Asia

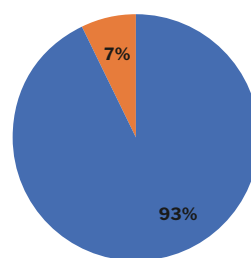
**Azerbaijan
2016-2018**



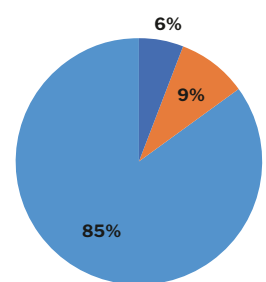
**Myanmar
2016-2018 & 2020**



**Qatar
2016-2018**

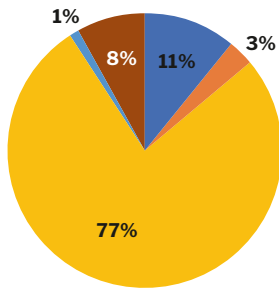


**Tajikistan
2016-2018**

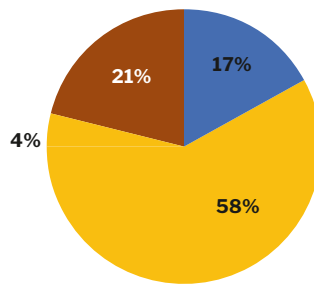


Europe

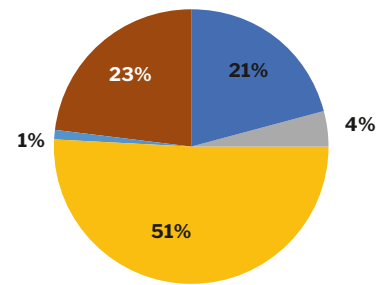
**Albania
2016-2020**



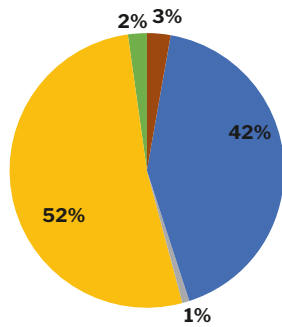
**France
2018-2019**



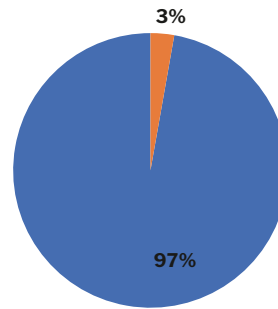
**Lithuania
2016-2020**



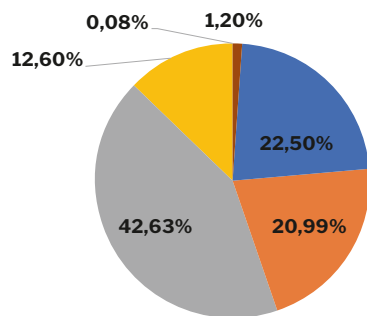
**Luxembourg
2016-2017 & 2019 - 2020**



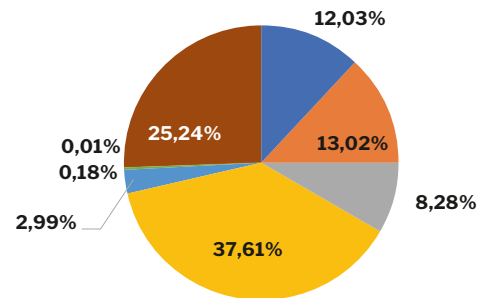
**UK of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
2016-2020**



**Portugal
2016-2018 & 2020**



**Spain
2016-2020**



Oceania

Australia & New Zealand
2016-2017

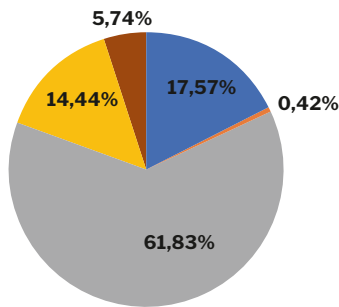


Figure 4 - Forms of crime (not connected to firearms offences) emerging in the context of arms seizures, selected countries²⁶

The majority of countries that submitted data to the IAFQ reported firearms seizures in connection with drug offences. This available data also demonstrates that **all five global regions have countries where drug related firearms seizures are prevalent** with varying degrees of frequency in comparison to other criminal offences.

For some countries drug trafficking is the most common offence related to firearms seizures – and this is not confined to only one geographical region. For instance, in 2020 Uruguay reported that 100 per cent of its firearms seizures that occurred in the context of another criminal offence were in relation to drug trafficking circumstances, while for 2016-2020 the United Kingdom had a rate of 97 per cent; for the 2016-2018 period, Qatar had a rate of 93 per cent. While these three countries can be considered anomalies compared to others because of the higher percentage, the States listed (see supra) all reported having had widespread drug related firearms seizures to varying degrees.

According to the data provided to UNODC via the IAFQ, 7.4 per cent of all firearms seizures occur in the context of drug trafficking on a global basis, while drugs are the most common commodity seized alongside firearms seizures.²⁷ Interestingly, **the demand for firearms is not limited to specific or more prominent drug markets such as cannabis and cocaine**. Other illicit drug markets also make use of firearms. This is particularly the case with synthetic drugs and their precursors such as fentanyl, which have been legally approved for pain relief purposes but possess high misuse potential. Specific trafficking routes around the globe can be connected to the smuggling of specific drugs. These routes, as well as commonly smuggled drugs, will be addressed in Chapter 2.

The global scale of the impact of drug trafficking on illicit arms flows is also evident from media and other non-governmental sources. Reviewing such sources has the advantage of providing contextual data, that can also illuminate the international scope of the relationship between firearms and drugs and the intended use of firearms by the traffickers. This is exemplified by the case studies, which highlight the interlinkages between firearms and drug trafficking for three different countries.

²⁶ Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire data (2016-2020). Available at: <https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-firearms-arms-seized>

²⁷ UNODC, "Firearms trafficking". Available at: <https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-firearms-arms-seized>.

Case study: Increased drug trafficking triggering firearms trafficking

According to investigative media source InsightCrime, **Ecuador's** spate of drug trafficking seizures, as a result of increased drug trafficking activity and subsequent police enforcement to address this issue, has confirmed police suspicions that the country has become a hub for arms trafficking in Latin America.²⁸ Ecuador serves as a critical transit point for arms moving from Chile into Colombia, but firearms are also being found in the hands of Ecuadorian gangs.²⁹ This has resulted in Ecuador also becoming a destination country for firearms. The widespread deterioration of the security environment around the country, because of drug trafficking gangs, has led the Government of Ecuador to allow citizens to also carry and use firearms.³⁰

A pattern of increase in drug trafficking leading to an uptick in firearms trafficking is also observable in **Australia**, albeit on a much smaller and less drastic scale than in Ecuador. Within Australia there has been parallel growth in both criminal markets. Presently, illegal drug markets continue to increase while a larger number of groups are trafficking firearms. This has led the Australian Criminal Intelligence Agency to highlight that the illicit firearms market in Australia is driven by the trafficking of illegal commodities such as drugs.³¹ In 2022, an Australian local media outlet report on a police raid highlighted the link between drug trafficking and firearms trafficking: seven semi-automatic firearms and three pistols were seized as well as a significant quantity of methamphetamine, MDMA and cocaine, with the firearms intended for OCGs.³²

The connection between firearms and drugs is also evident in **Belgium**, a country that has more recently become a 'hotspot' for illegal firearms.³³ This label has also coincided with Belgium, and in particular its port in Antwerp, becoming a prominent entry point for illicit drugs shipped from Latin America to Europe. Belgium is also an important producing country for cannabis and synthetic drugs.³⁴ A recent case that exhibits the connection between drugs and firearms was a largescale police operation in June 2023 against an international criminal organization with many of those arrested coming from Albania or Colombia and in which six drug laboratories were dismantled as well as dozens of firearms discovered in the process.³⁵ This case highlights the international scope of OCGs and the use of the firearms, discovered in the laboratory, for protection purposes.

Despite all the countries in the case studies above having widely different scales and modalities of drug and firearms trafficking, each of them is subject to the interlinkages of these two phe-

28 Mark Wilson, "Ecuador: The New Corridor for South American Arms Trafficking", *InsightCrime*, 4 October 2021. Available at: <https://insightcrime.org/news/ecuador-new-corridor-south-american-arms-trafficking/>

29 Mark Wilson, "Ecuador: The New Corridor for South American Arms Trafficking", *InsightCrime*, 4 October 2021. Available at: <https://insightcrime.org/news/ecuador-new-corridor-south-american-arms-trafficking/>

30 Reuters, "Ecuador's Lasso authorizes civilian use of guns, citing insecurity", 2 April 2023. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuadors-lasso-authorizes-civilian-use-guns-citing-insecurity-2023-04-02/>

31 Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *Illicit Firearms in Australia* (2016), p.6. Available at: https://www.acic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-08/illicit_firearms_in_australia.pdf; Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, *Illicit Drug Data Report 2019-2020* (2019), p.9. Available at: https://www.acic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/IDDR%202019-20_271021_Full_0.pdf

32 Louisa Rebgetz, "Queensland police operation shuts down drug and gun trafficking linked to organised crime, nine men facing 75 charges", *ABC News*, 23 August 2022. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-23/qld-police-shut-down-drug-and-gun-operation/101362552>

33 Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, "The illicit fun market in Belgium: A lethal cocktail of criminal supply and terrorist demand", *Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe: Research findings and policy recommendations of Project SAFTE* (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2018), p.21. Available at: https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/safte/files/project_safte_belgium.pdf

34 EMCDDA, "Port of Antwerp welcomes officials following continued rise in cocaine seizures", 7 February 2023. Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/news/2023/port-antwerp-welcomes-officials-following-continued-rise-cocaine-seizures_en

35 Chris Verhaeghe, "Megaproces op komst: 128 verdachten doorverwezen in grootste Sky ECC-dossier van Brussel", *Vrt*, 5 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnews/nl/2023/06/05/megaproces-op-komst-127-verdachten-doorverwezen-in-grootste-ky>

nomena. In all three, the demand is marked for firearms generated from illicit drug related activities. Evidently, the flow-on effect of drug trafficking transcends borders and further compounds the global threat of illicit arms flows. In addition, these case studies suggest a strong link between the availability of illegal firearms and the incidence of firearm usage and gun violence within the illicit drug sphere. We will further elaborate on this link in Chapter 3 of this report.

1.4 Firearms and drugs connection to the trafficking of a broad range of commodities

The mutually reinforcing attributes between firearms and drug trafficking also provide linkages to other trafficking phenomena. This includes the trafficking of persons, wildlife, and minerals. “Operation Trigger VIII”, a recent Interpol-led international police operation, conducted under the joint UNODC-Interpol project DISRUPT³⁶, covered eight countries in Africa and resulted in seizures of not just firearms and drugs but also gold, counterfeit medication, wildlife products and cash.³⁷ In African mining areas, the insecurity and organized criminal involvement in these areas lead to both the demand of firearms and the attraction of other illicit commodities, such as drugs.³⁸

The lucrative nature of the drug trafficking and the security and enabling features of firearms for criminals also provide actors involved in various trafficking markets with **the opportunity to reinvest and participate in other illicit activities**. In addition, criminal connections can be developed and previously established trafficking routes used to facilitate the movement of various other contraband. This was noted by Interpol in the comments on Operation Trigger VII in the Caribbean region, which highlighted that firearms are clear enablers of a full range of activities carried out by OCGs.³⁹

1.5 Funding firearms purchases with drugs and drug money

An important factor fuelling firearms trafficking in the drug trafficking environment is the sheer **profitability of the drug trade**. Profits generated from drug trafficking create the opportunity for drug traffickers to invest in firearms for reasons of either self-protection or status. Therefore, these profits can then stimulate an ‘arms race’ between rival OCGs and/or the possibility of engaging in combat with security forces due to the calibre of firearms available.⁴⁰ According to the Global Initiative against Transnational Crime, over the last 15-20 years, OCGs in Mexico have been matching public forces in terms of purchasing similar types of weapons.⁴¹ It is perceived as a necessity for OCGs to be able to compete with the advanced weaponry that the public forces can use to stifle and limit their illegal activities. The consequences of such escalatory ‘arms races’ can then manifest themselves into such extreme violence that it overwhelms a country’s law enforcement, becoming a national security – and not merely a public security –

36 Global Illicit Flows Programme of the European Union, “DISRUPT: Disrupting firearms trafficking flows”, n.d. Available at: <https://illicit-flows.eu/projects/disrupt/>

37 Interpol, “Arrests, thousands of seizures in African clampdown on firearms trafficking”, 30 June 2022. Available at: <https://www.interpol.int/News-and-Events/News/2022/Arrests-thousands-of-seizures-in-African-clampdown-on-firearms-trafficking>

38 Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak, *The West Africa-Sahel Connection Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2019), p.14. Available at: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/west-africa-sahel-connection-mapping-cross-border-arms-trafficking>

39 Interpol, “Hundreds of firearms and 12.6 tonnes of drugs seized in Caribbean operation”, 13 October 2022. Available at: <https://www.interpol.int/News-and-Events/News/2022/Hundreds-of-firearms-and-12.6-tonnes-of-drugs-seized-in-Caribbean-operation>

40 Guillermo Vázquez del Mercado, *Arms Trafficking and Organised Crime: Global Trade, Local Impacts* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2022), p.13. Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GI-TOC-policy-brief-Arms-trafficking-web-1.pdf>

41 Romain Le-Cour-Grandmaison, “Illicit Firearms trafficking and its nuances in Latin America”, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 23 May 2023. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnyX9VoC_Nk

threat.⁴² The acquisition of military-grade firearms, such as those purchased by OCGs in Mexico, would not be possible without the lucrative profits that they are able to generate from drug trafficking.

Firearms and drugs are also known to be exchanged for each other. The UNODC's *Global Study on Firearms* notes that firearms hold monetary value, particularly for those operating in illicit markets such as the drug market.⁴³ An exchange of drugs for firearms avoids the creation of a money trail, which is also advantageous for criminals.⁴⁴ Such exchanges have been observed across the globe, with, for instance, a 2018 UNODC report on the Afghan northern trafficking route noting that "weapons are smuggled from Tajikistan to Afghanistan and exchanged for drug loads".⁴⁵

The phenomenon of the cross-border trade of firearms for drugs is also observable in other regions in the world, such as the Caribbean. According to a Jamaican law enforcement officer, for example, the trade of ganja (marijuana) by Jamaican fishermen in return for firearms from Haiti is an issue confronting customs officials of both countries.⁴⁶ Jamaica has recently seen a surge in firearm seizures with a 37 per cent increase in the number of firearms seized at the beginning of 2022 in comparison to the same period of 2021.⁴⁷ While the guns-for-drugs trade between the two countries is facilitated by local OCGs and gangs, it is ordinary Jamaican fisherman – with knowledge of the waters and the canals that are patrolled by the coastguards – who act as both couriers and middlemen in the trade of these commodities.⁴⁸ Investigations have also documented that despite an arms embargo on Haiti, due to the ongoing instability in the country and also its large porous borders⁴⁹, firearms originating from the United States ultimately arrive in Jamaica via the Haiti and Jamaica guns-for-drugs trade.⁵⁰ However, it should be noted that the guns-for-drugs trade between these two countries has been in decline over the past two years.⁵¹

42 Vanda Felbab-Brown, "A State-building Approach to the Drug Trade Problem", *UN Chronicle*, No. 2, Vol. L, Security (August 2013). Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/state-building-approach-drug-trade-problem>

43 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.36. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

44 Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023). Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

45 UNODC, *Afghan Opiate Trafficking Along the Northern Route* (Vienna: UNODC, 2018), p.136. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/publications/NR_Report_21.06.18_low.pdf

46 Rosalee Thompson, "Illicit Firearms trafficking and its nuances in Latin America", Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 23 May 2023. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnyX9VoC_Nk

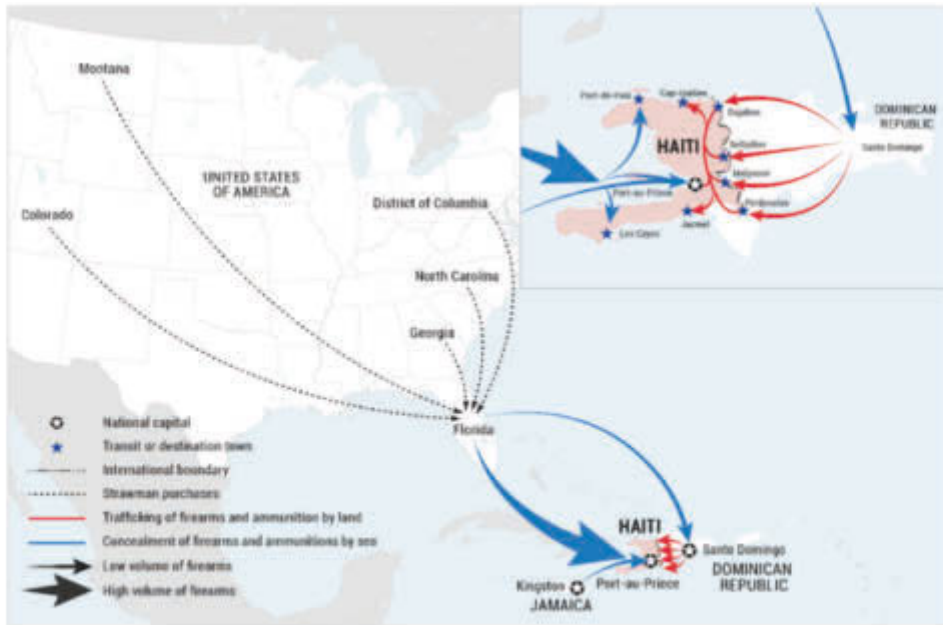
47 Jamaica Constabulary Force, "Firearms Seizures 2022", n.d. Available at: <https://jcf.gov.jm/significant-increase-in-firearms-seizures-since-january/>

48 Seth Robbins, "Jamaica and Haiti Swap Drugs for Guns", *InSight Crime*, 23 June 2020. Available at: <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/jamaica-haiti-drugs-guns>

49 UNODC, *Haiti's criminal markets: mapping trends in firearms and drug trafficking* (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), p.11. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/toc/Haiti_assessment_UNODC.pdf

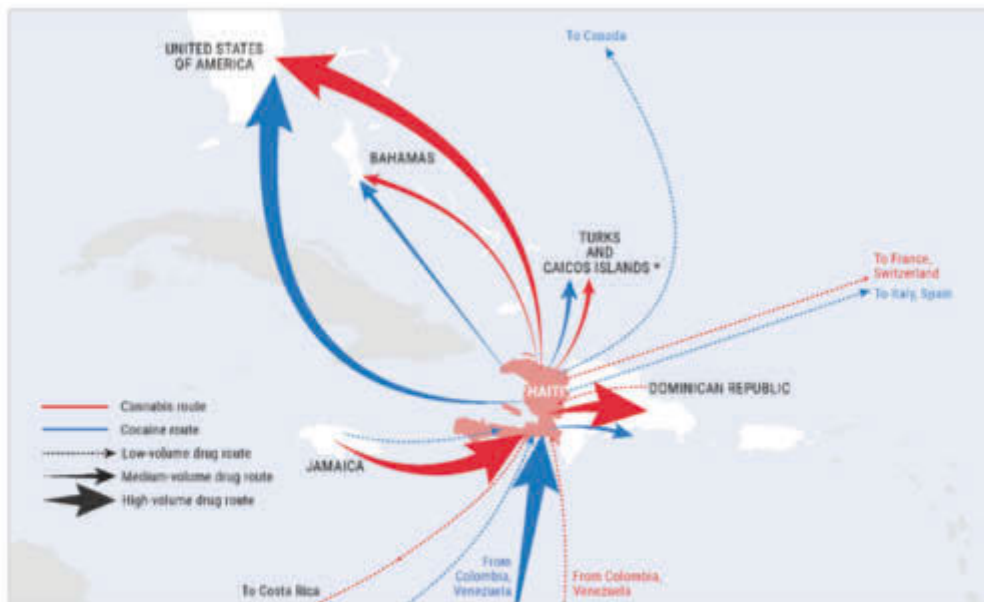
50 UNODC, *Haiti's criminal markets: mapping trends in firearms and drug trafficking* (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), p.11. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/toc/Haiti_assessment_UNODC.pdf

51 Experts interview dd.13 July 2023.



Source: UNODC, based on responses to the UN-IAFQ. Strawman purchases flows based on US Justice/Attorney General records. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Figure 5 - Indicative volume of firearms seized by source in Haiti (2020-2022)⁵²



Source: UNODC, based on responses to the annual report questionnaire in the past five years.

* Non-Self-Governing Territory

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Figure 6 - Cumulative drug routes involving Haiti (2020-2022)⁵³

Another interesting case of the exchange of drugs for firearms involves the trade of cocaine from Colombia for firearms from Afghanistan. In May 2023, more than 130 ‘Ndrangheta mafia members were arrested in a joint operation – Operation Eureka – by various national law en-

52 UNODC, *Haiti’s criminal markets: mapping trends in firearms and drug trafficking* (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), p.17. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/toc/Haiti_assessment_UNODC.pdf

53 UNODC, *Haiti’s criminal markets: mapping trends in firearms and drug trafficking* (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), p.25. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/toc/Haiti_assessment_UNODC.pdf

forcement agencies supported by Europol and Eurojust. The arrested suspects were part of an Italian criminal network involved in international drug trafficking from South America to Europe, as well as Australia. In exchange for cocaine shipments facilitated by the Colombian organized crime group known as Gulf Clan and a crime group operating in Ecuador, the 'Ndrangheta members organized the illegal shipment from Pakistan of firearms originating from Afghanistan to the notorious Brazilian criminal group, Primeiro Comando da Capital.⁵⁴

1.6 Drug traffickers exploitation of the diversion of firearms to the illicit drug sphere

Drug criminals in general do not have legal access to firearms and, therefore, rely on illicit gun markets to acquire their firearms. The overwhelming majority of firearms on these illicit markets were initially legally produced and traded, but at a certain point diverted from the legal market to the illicit sphere. The **durability and long lifecycle of firearms offers several opportunities for diversion**. This occurs because firearms can be diverted at any stage along the supply chain⁵⁵, often following demand created by criminal activity in the illicit market or conflict-affected regions.⁵⁶ As a result, the diversion of legally manufactured and used firearms to illicit markets appears to be a major contributor driving the supply of firearms.⁵⁷ Ultimately, the rerouting and/or the appropriation⁵⁸ of firearms into the illicit drug sphere is a significant factor for the perpetuation of drug trafficking.² The linkages between firearms and drug trafficking

Case study: Diversion of firearms fuelling organized crime

The exploitation of the **United States'** domestic gun laws by **Mexican** drug cartels facilitates the diversion of firearms between the two countries. According to a report by the United States' Department of Justice's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, from the years 2014-2018, 70 per cent of all firearms seized in Mexico were sourced in the United States.⁵⁹ An investigative media article from Harvard University even reports this number as being as high as 90 per cent.⁶⁰ This indicates that US manufactured and diverted firearms are widely used by Mexican drug cartels. The diversion of firearms between these two States is facilitated by their contrasting firearms policies and overland smuggling routes from Texas and Arizona. The large number of weapons easily available in the United States, because of widespread availability of licences, permissive import regulations, and unregulated owner-to-owner sales is in stark contrast to Mexico and the significant restrictions on firearms that it main-

54 Europol, "132 'Ndrangheta mafia members arrested after investigation by Belgium Italy and Germany", 3 May 2023. Available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/132-ndrangheta-mafia-members-arrested-after-investigation-belgium-italy-and-germany>

55 United Nations Human Rights Council, *Impact of arms transfers on human rights* (A/HRC/44/29, 2020), p.2.

56 Lauren Pinson, *Addressing the linkages between illicit arms, organized crime, and armed conflict* (Geneva: UNIDIR and UNODC, 2022), p.9. Available at: <https://unidir.org/publication/addressing-the-linkages-between-illicit-arms-organized-crime-and-armed-conflict/>

57 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.36. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

58 Brian Wood identifies "the unauthorized rerouting and appropriation of arms" as the most consistent definition of diversion. Brian Wood, "The Arms Trade Treaty: Obligations to Prevent the Diversion of Conventional Arms", ATT Issue Brief No.1 (Geneva, Switzerland: UNIDIR, Conflict Armament Research, and the Stimson Center, 2020), p.33. Available at: <https://unidir.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/ATT%20%20Issues%20Brief%20No%201.pdf>; Peter Danssaert, "Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation and Violence: Estimating its Scale and Forms", Briefing Paper (IANSA and IPIS, June 2022), p.3. Available at: <https://iansa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/IANSA-AND-IPIS-Small-Arms-and-Light-Weapons-Proliferation-and-Violence-Estimating-its-Scale-and-Forms-June-2022-1.pdf>

59 U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Firearms Trafficking: U.S Efforts to Disrupt Gun Smuggling into Mexico Would Benefit from Additional Data and Analysis", 22 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-322>

60 Liz Mineo, "Stopping toxic flow of guns from U.S to Mexico", The Harvard Gazette, 18 February 2022. Available at: <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/02/stopping-toxic-flow-of-gun-traffic-from-u-s-to-mexico/>

tains.⁶¹ Once the firearms are legally purchased in the United States, they are then trafficked across overland smuggling routes along the southwest border conjoining the two countries.⁶²

Another example of widespread diversion that covers a larger geographical scope is the route from **European States to Brazil via Paraguay**. Brazilian authorities have previously reported on the IAFQ that pistols from Austria and Czechia and assault rifles from Romania, Hungary and other Eastern European countries are commonly seized in Brazil.⁶³ These firearms are found to be legally transferred to authorized arms dealers in Paraguay. The firearms are then diverted from Paraguay into Brazil, where they are acquired by Brazilian criminals. Similar to the above example between the United States and Mexico, this case is connected to differences in firearms legislation between two States. Brazil in this case labels various calibre firearms as “restricted use” and these firearms cannot, therefore, be acquired or possessed by private civilians. However, several of these firearms can be acquired in Paraguay with less restrictions. This in turn creates grounds for diversion, as the firearms are then smuggled between the two neighbouring countries. According to the Brazilian authorities, the diversion route and method used for firearms are similar to the ones for smuggling marijuana and cocaine between the two countries.⁶⁴

The **reactivation and conversion** of firearms and blank firing weapons is also an important diversion method, most noticeably in European countries.⁶⁵ For instance, a recent Europol-coordinated operation known as “Conversus”, led by Bulgaria and Romania, targeted individuals purchasing alarm and signal weapons from firearms traffickers.⁶⁶ Some blank firing weapons can easily be converted to discharge live ammunition and are also used by drug traffickers. This was, for example, the case in southern Spain, where the drug trafficking milieu experienced a spike in gun crime between 2018-2020, which was partly attributed to the trafficking of Flobert-calibre firearms from Eastern Europe, especially Slovakia.⁶⁷ The reconversion of these firearms occurred in the destination country (Spain) in clandestine warehouses that had been established specifically to convert firearms and were discovered and dismantled by Europol’s “Operation Bosphorus”.⁶⁸

61 Topher McDougal, David A. Shirk, Robert Muggah and John H. Patterson, *The Way of the Gun: Estimating Firearms Traffic Across the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Igarapé Institute and University of San Diego Trans-Border Institute, March 2013). Available at: https://catcher.sandiego.edu/items/peacestudies/way_of_the_gun.pdf.

62 José Pablo Ampudia, “A Gram per Gun How U.S guns fuel Mexican cartels’ drug empire”, *Think Global Health*, 2 August 2022. Available at: <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/gram-gun>.

63 Example first listed in Nils Duquet, *Illicit Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts, Components and Ammunition to, from and across the European Union* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p. 103. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/firearms-protocol/2020/UNODC-EU-Report-A8_FINAL.pdf. Example is based on the response from Brazil to the IAFQ.

64 Ibid.

65 Nils Duquet and Dennis Vanden Auweele, *Project Target Targeting gun violence & trafficking in Europe* (Brussels: The Flemish Peace Institute, December 2021), p. 15. Available at: <https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/TARGET-OnlineVersion-v2022.pdf>.

66 Europol, “22 firearms traffickers arrested across Europe”, 3 April 2023. Available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/22-firearms-traffickers-arrested-across-europe?mtm_campaign=newsletter

67 Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union*, (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, October 2023) p. 12. Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

68 Nils Duquet, *Illicit Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts, Components and Ammunition to, from and across the European Union* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p. 136. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/firearms-protocol/2020/UNODC-EU-Report-A8_FINAL.pdf

2. The linkages between firearms and drug trafficking

The synergistic relationship between firearms and drug trafficking manifests itself in varying ways. **Firearms trafficking methods have been adopted from methods pioneered by drug traffickers and their networks.**⁶⁹ The flows of the specific commodities can often follow similar routes or be trafficked together on a regional basis. The major variation between the two forms of trafficking arises from the geographic flows of the commodities, but this also joins the two phenomena together as the global flows of drugs and their routes are used to smuggle firearms on a regional level. The following chapter will explore these linkages.

2.1 Global drug trafficking flows and regional illicit arms flows

Drug trafficking is a global phenomenon that encompasses all regions of the world and connects them via various distribution channels. Yet, the three most widely cultivated drugs – cannabis, opium poppy, and coca bush – can be distinguished by their different countries of origin and individual trafficking dynamics. According to the UNODC’s 2022 World Drug Report, cannabis cultivation is a global phenomenon and the drug is generally consumed in the same country in which cultivation occurs.⁷⁰ This is in contrast to both opium poppy and the coca bush cultivation, as just three countries (Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Mexico) account for 95 per cent of the global cultivation of the former, while another three countries (Colombia, Peru, and the Plurinational State of Bolivia) account for virtually all the global cultivation of the latter.⁷¹ Despite such concentrated areas of cultivation, the global demand for cocaine and opioids results in global and diverse trafficking routes of the products.

Case studies: Global drug trafficking patterns

The UNODC’s 2023 World Drug Report emphasizes that the Americas and Western and Central Europe remain the two principal consumer markets for cocaine.⁷² The report also specifies that cocaine is mostly trafficked by sea and through a wider geography of routes, with 90 per cent of seizures outside of South America linked to **maritime trafficking**.⁷³ For instance, a recent local media source reported the seizure by Peruvian police of 58 one-kilo packages of cocaine in a shipping container on a vessel destined for a port in Belgium.⁷⁴ In addition, other drug trafficking routes from Peru include small planes that carry cocaine to Bolivia on its way to Atlantic ports.⁷⁵ The traffickers do not always chose to smuggle the contraband along the short-

69 Richard Norton-Taylor, “Sea trafficking report reveals how ships move guns and drugs”, *The Guardian*, 30 January 2012. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/30/sea-trafficking-report-guns-drugs>.

70 Despite this general observation, there are discrepancies between the trafficking of cannabis herb and cannabis resin. According to the UNODC’s *World Drug Report* (2022), the trafficking of cannabis herb primarily takes place within the same region or subregion, while cannabis resin seizures are geographically concentrated but key trafficking flows are interregional. Seizure and other data provided to the UNODC suggests that most trafficking of cannabis resin takes place from Morocco to Spain.

71 UNODC, “Global Overview: Drug Demand and Drug Supply”, *World Drug Report* 2022 (Vienna: UNODC, 2022), p.53. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/res/wdr2022/MS/WDR22_Booklet_2.pdf

72 UNODC, “Special Points of Interest”, *World Drug Report* 2023 (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), p.22. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/Special_Points_WDR2023_web_DP.pdf

73 UNODC, “Special Points of Interest”, *World Drug Report* 2023 (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), p.22. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/res/WDR-2023/Special_Points_WDR2023_web_DP.pdf

74 AP reporters, “Cocaine Packages emblazoned with Nazi flag seized in Peru”, *The Irish Times*, 26 May 2023. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/americas/2023/05/26/cocaine-packages-emblazoned-with-nazi-flag-seized-in-peru/>

75 AP reporters, “Cocaine Packages emblazoned with Nazi flag seized in Peru”, *The Irish Times*, 26 May 2023. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/americas/2023/05/26/cocaine-packages-emblazoned-with-nazi-flag-seized-in-peru/>

est geographical route, but rather their strategy to deliver the drugs to the next buyer is aimed at avoiding law enforcement.⁷⁶

In 2021, **Afghanistan** accounted for 86 per cent of the global illicit production of **heroin**, with Afghan opium as a major supply for markets across Eurasia and Africa.⁷⁷ The principal routes for heroin to be smuggled from Afghanistan are either the **Balkan route** that passes through Iran and Turkey; or the **southern route** that passes through Pakistan and then Iran, India or by sea from the southern Makran coast and Karachi port to European, African, Asian or Australian markets.⁷⁸ In April 2022, the Taliban announced a ban on opium cultivation in the country. Taliban anti-narcotics units are actively destroying poppy fields, stating that they imposed the ban because of the harmful effects of the drug and because it does not align with their religious beliefs.⁷⁹ Immediately after the ban, opium prices soared and resulted in the most profitable year for opium farmers since 2017.⁸⁰ It remains to be seen how the authorities will further enforce the opium ban and how this will affect the opium trade.

Synthetic drugs and new psychoactive substances (NPS), and their precursors, also have established global trafficking routes. A region that has seen a significant increase in synthetic drugs production and distribution is **Southeast Asia**. This is primarily facilitated by the historical opium hub of the Golden Triangle (Myanmar, Laos and Thailand).⁸¹ Whilst Southeast Asia is an origin region for synthetic drugs, locations in **East Asia** such as Hong Kong/China are important transit locations for synthetic drug shipments from outside the region (Mexico) destined for countries such as Australia.⁸² Similarly, China and India are important source countries for precursors and NPSs destined for Europe.⁸³

76 UNODC, *Global report on Cocaine 2023 – Local dynamics, global challenges* (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), p.162. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf

77 UNODC, “Drug Market Trends Cannabis Opioids”, *World Drug Report 2022* (Vienna: UNODC, 2022), p.74. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/res/wdr2022/MS/WDR22_Booklet_3.pdf

78 Shehryar Fazli, *Narcotics Smuggling in Afghanistan: Links between Afghanistan and Pakistan*, SOC ACE Research Paper No.9 (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, 2022). Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/narcotics-smuggling-in-afghanistan-paper.pdf>

79 Yogita Limaye, “Inside the Taliban’s war on drugs – opium poppy crops slashed”, *BBC News*, 6 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-65787391>

80 UNODC, “Opium cultivated in Afghanistan. Latest findings and emerging threats” (Vienna: UNODC, 2022).

81 Daniel Dickinson, “Huge increase in transnational crime and synthetic drugs in SE Asia requires cross-border cooperation”, *UN News*, 2 June 2023. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1137182>

82 UNODC, *Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia Latest development and challenges* (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), p.13. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/roseap/uploads/documents/Publications/2023/Synthetic_Drugs_in_East_and_Southeast_Asia_2023.pdf

83 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction, *European Drug Report 2023: Trends and Developments* (2023). Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/european-drug-report/2023/new-psychoactive-substances_en

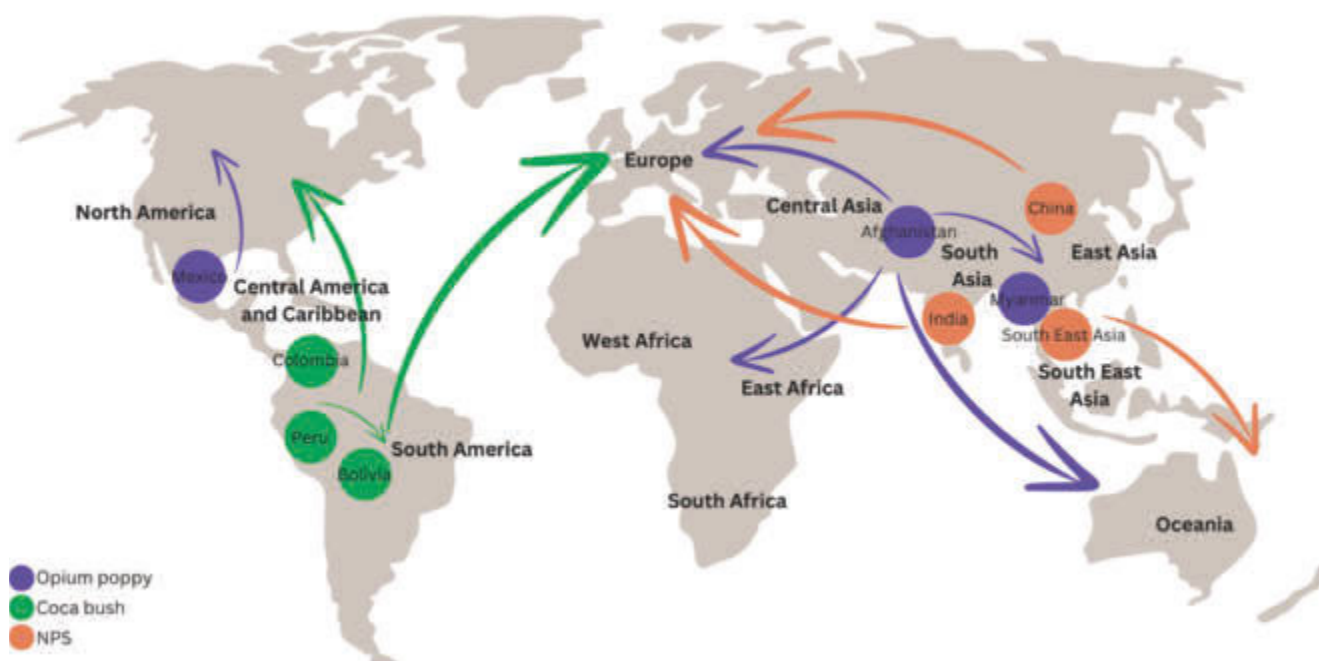


Figure 7 - Global drug trafficking patterns

Unlike drug trafficking where the contraband is often moved between continents, the **transnational trafficking flows of firearms seem mostly concentrated within continents** and, thus, at the subregional level.⁸⁴ The *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking* notes that seized weapons are overwhelmingly manufactured outside the country of seizure. Furthermore, there is often little connection between the country of manufacture and the country of seizure of the firearm.⁸⁵ As the report notes, this is facilitated by the phenomenon of diversion (see Chapter 1). Diversion adds a domestic component to the trafficking of firearms as the firearm is transferred from the licit to the illicit sphere before moving, suggesting that vulnerability to firearms trafficking is mostly found in countries where firearms are diverted.⁸⁶ For instance, Panama is a key hotspot for the diversion of US manufactured firearms because of its acceptance of duty-free arms purchases and the availability of legally purchased North American weapons, which can then either be smuggled into other Central American or South American countries.⁸⁷

84 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction, *European Drug Report 2023: Trends and Developments* (2023), pp.9-10.

85 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction, *European Drug Report 2023: Trends and Developments* (2023), p.9.

86 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction, *European Drug Report 2023: Trends and Developments* (2023), p.9.

87 Eduardo Salcedo-Albarán and Diana Santos Cubides, "Firearms Trafficking: Central America", *The Global Observatory of Transnational Criminal Networks*, Vol. 31, No. 17 (November 2017), p.14. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322341037_Firearms_Trafficking_Central_America

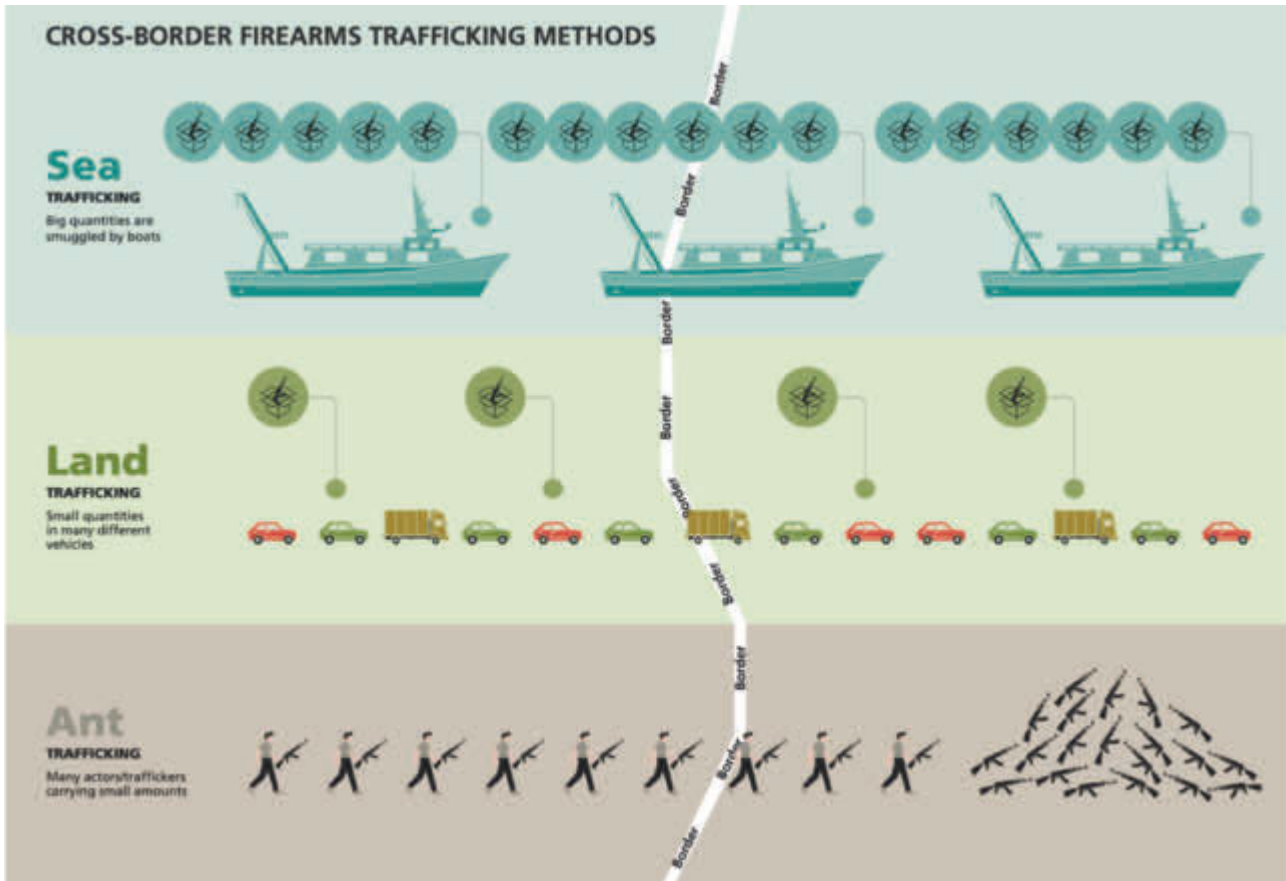


Figure 8 - Cross-border firearms trafficking methods⁸⁸

Despite the importance of diversion as a component of firearms trafficking, it is not always the prevalent mode of firearms acquisition for traffickers, as is shown in the West African and Sahel region. In this region, the majority of illicit arms being trafficked come from older stockpiles of weapons that have moved from one place to another, rather than from the direct diversion from the legal to illicit sphere.⁸⁹ It is because of movements such as this, and the durability of the firearm, that often the country of manufacture of the firearm(s) is far removed from the country of seizure.

Cross border firearms trafficking itself can be undertaken in various ways, depending on the quantity of firearms being trafficked and the routes via which and/or region where the trafficking occurs. Generally, **larger consignments of firearms are smuggled via sea and ships, and smaller quantities are smuggled using several vehicles on land**, or through strategic ‘ant trafficking’.⁹⁰ Both these forms of firearms trafficking have linkages to drug trafficking.

The smuggling of larger consignments of arms usually occurs because of a large demand created in countries that have been affected by certain events and/or crises, such as conflict.⁹¹ For instance, a one-off seizure conducted in 2017 by EUNAVFORMED on board a vessel travelling

88 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.11. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

89 Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak, *The West Africa-Sahel Connection Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2019), p.5. Available at: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/west-africa-sahel-connection-mapping-cross-border-arms-trafficking>

90 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), pp.10-11. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

91 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.11. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

from Italy to Libya led to the seizure of several types of weapons, including machine guns, AK47 rifles, RPG bullets, RPG launchers, mortar grenades and ammunition.⁹² Actors involved in the smuggling of larger consignments of small arms, light weapons and heavy weapons across borders are also increasingly linked to drug trafficking, as is the case with the transfer of firearms from Niger to Mali and beyond.⁹³

The trafficking of smaller amounts of firearms, also called ‘ant-trafficking’, is the most prominent form of firearms trafficking along cross-border land routes. This type of trafficking involves many people transporting small consignments – often only what could be considered a violation of possession regulations – to avoid potential trafficking charges, while still meeting the demand for firearms in the destination region.⁹⁴ Evidence suggests that this method is utilized to transport firearms from the United States to Mexico, while it is also the most prevalent form of firearms trafficking across Europe, and in particular the Balkan route, where firearms are often smuggled alongside other commodities such as drugs.⁹⁵

The increased use of fast parcels⁹⁶ and the dark web⁹⁷ for both illicit firearms and drugs sales is also noteworthy.

The far reaching and global scale of the illicit drug trafficking market presents connecting points to the more regionally constrained phenomena of firearms trafficking. Other than drug-related criminal demand for firearms interlinking the two phenomena, there are similarities and advantages to both from occurring in the illicit sphere. The trafficking of illegal commodities presents opportunities to use established routes, incorporate similar actors, whether to transport the contraband or for logistical purposes such as the forging of travel and transfer documents, and modi operandi to conceal consignments. The following subsections frame these linkages according to two types of trafficking: the separate trafficking of the respective contrabands and the joint trafficking and movement of firearms and drugs.

2.2 The interlinking of drugs and firearm trafficking

Drugs are the most common commodity seized alongside firearms, with the UNODC’s *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking* confirming the interconnectedness of seized firearms on the one hand, and drug trafficking as well as armed violence on the other.⁹⁸ **When drugs and firearms**

92 European External Action service, “EUNAVFORMED operation SOPHIA seizes weapons on board a vessel in International waters”, Press release, 2 May 2017. Available at: https://www.operationsophia.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/eeas_-_european_external_action_service_-_eunavformed_operation_sophia_seizes_weapons_on_board_a_vessel_in_international_waters_-_2017-05-02.pdf

93 Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak, *The West Africa-Sahel Connection Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2019), p.11. Available at: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/west-africa-sahel-connection-mapping-cross-border-arms-trafficking>

94 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), pp.10-11. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

95 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.11. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf; Nils Duquet and Dennis Vanden Auweele, *Project Target Targeting gun violence & trafficking in Europe* (Brussels: The Flemish Peace Institute, 2021), p.130. Available at: <https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/TARGET-OnlineVersion-v2022.pdf>

96 International Narcotics Control Board, “INCB convenes operational meeting to counter trafficking in dangerous synthetic drugs and chemicals through postal, courier and air cargo services”, Press release, 6 September 2022. Available at: https://www.incb.org/incb/en/news/news_2022/incb-convenes-operational-meeting-to-counter-trafficking-in-dangerous-synthetic-drugs-and-chemicals-through-postal--courier-and-air-cargo-services.html

97 Europol, “288 dark web vendors arrested in major marketplace seizure”, Press release, 27 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/288-dark-web-vendors-arrested-in-major-marketplace-seizure>; Persi Paoli, Giacomo, Judith Aldridge, Nathan Ryan, and Richard Warnes, *Behind the curtain: The illicit trade of firearms, explosives and ammunition on the dark web* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017). Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2091.html

98 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.88. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

are seized together, the purpose of the firearm(s) can be twofold, either as contraband being trafficked alongside drugs and/or as a means of protection for the trafficker(s). This can be illustrated by the following two differing examples from two notable global trafficking routes

Case studies: Firearms use along trafficking routes

The **Western Balkans** is a principal departure point for firearms intended for trafficking throughout Europe. This can be attributed to the oversupply of legacy firearms dating from conflicts in the 1990s.⁹⁹ In addition, the region remains a thoroughfare for drugs moving between continents, via the so called ‘Balkan route’¹⁰⁰. This route acts as a connector for global drug trafficking routes, with heroin from Afghanistan being the most common drug smuggled into the European Union via this route. Also, cocaine, trafficked from Latin American, and cannabis, which is either produced in Albania or passes through the Western Balkans from Afghanistan or Central Asia, converge onto this route.¹⁰¹ Concurrently, firearms traffickers use the ‘Balkan route’ to smuggle their contraband on a regional basis and, often, simultaneously with drugs that have been smuggled from various continents. A Flemish Peace Institute report commenting on firearms trafficking from the Western Balkans notes: “Most of the time, large shipments of illegal drugs are accompanied by illegal firearms. Firearms seizures are then a by-product of attempts to stem the illegal trade in drugs.”¹⁰² One such instance of trafficking routes facilitating the smuggling of both firearms and drugs was discovered by a joint action coordinated by the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) in 2022. The operation led to the arrest of 382 criminals who were alleged drug and firearm traffickers using the Balkan route but also allegedly participating in other criminal activities such as the facilitation of illegal immigration and document fraud. Overall, the action led to the seizure of 106 firearms and 304 kg of heroin, 147 kg of cannabis, 5,402 plants of marijuana and 1.3 kg of cocaine.¹⁰³

Firearms can also converge on drug trafficking routes simply as a means of protection or deterrence for criminals against rival gangs and/or police forces. A local media source reported on a drug seizure in **Myanmar**, in 2023, that highlighted the use of firearms along the trafficking route as a means of protection rather than for trafficking purposes. Initially, local police seized 100 grams of stimulant powder and one firearm from the alleged culprits. In addition, the ensuing interrogation led to a search of the culprit’s home, which in turn led to the discovery of 6.5 million stimulant tablets and a further six firearms by the Myanmar Police Force.¹⁰⁴

99 Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023), p.4 and 8. Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

100 Sanja Čopić and Mirjana Dokmanović, *A snapshot of illicit firearm-trafficking and gun violence in Serbia*, Project Target, (Brussels: The Flemish Peace Institute, October 2022), p.19, Available at: https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TARGET_Serbia6.pdf

101 Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023), p. 8. Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

102 Nils Duquet and Dennis Vanden Auweele, *Project Target Targeting gun violence & trafficking in Europe* (Brussels: The Flemish Peace Institute, 2021), p.145. Available at: <https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/TARGET-OnlineVersion-v2022.pdf>

103 Europol, “382 arrests during joint actions against traffickers using the Balkan route”, 4 November 2022. Available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/382-arrests-during-joint-actions-against-traffickers-using-balkan-route>

104 Myanmaritv, “Drug seizure: Stimulant tablets, arms and ammunitions seized”, 21 November 2023. Available at: <https://www.myanmaritv.com/news/drug-seizurestimulant-tablets-arms-and-ammunitions-seized>

2.3 Firearms trafficking benefits from established drug trafficking routes and vice versa

Firearms trafficking can follow similar patterns to drug trafficking but not be related to specific drug trafficking operations. For instance, firearms trafficking can follow the same routes, be carried out by the same actors, and/or by using a similar modus operandi as in the drug trafficking milieu. However, the commodities are generally moved separately or at the same time but in opposite directions. The interlinkages that arise between the two activities are mutually beneficial and can increase the trafficking of both commodities on a global scale.

The important role of already established trafficking routes and the overlap of actors in facilitating the trafficking of both firearms and drugs can, for example, be observed throughout West Africa. Prior to the year 2000, the principal form of trafficking in the region of West Africa involved the export of natural resources for cash or weapons – to satisfy the demand for firearms created by conflicts in the region – while drug trafficking amounted to a negligible amount of the overall profits generated by criminals.¹⁰⁵ This changed in the early 2000s, as South American traffickers redirected their flows of cocaine through West Africa due to the increased demand for cocaine in Europe and the weak governance and fragile political institutions in West Africa.¹⁰⁶ More recently, the amount of drugs seizures in West Africa has reached record breaking levels, despite a very low number of drug seizures occurring from 2013-2019 within the region.¹⁰⁷ Coinciding with this has been the continuing strategic importance of firearms as a trafficked commodity. According to the Small Arms Survey, some of the illicit arms trafficking occurring in West Africa involves (1) the militarization of traditional smuggling routes facilitated by the diversion and shipments of arms, as arms traffickers and non-State armed groups work with high-level connections to acquire military grade weapons¹⁰⁸, as well as (2) more common small to medium sized shipments that increasingly occur together with other illicit and licit commercial flows.¹⁰⁹ It is also noted that the linkages between weapons trafficking and other illicit flows result mainly from an overlap of the actors involved and the trafficking routes used.¹¹⁰ Weak and/or contested governance structures amongst the States of West Africa and the Sahel enable traditional trafficking routes to be continuously exploited.¹¹¹ The serious deficits in law enforcement capacity in Sahel countries allows militants and criminals to act with a large degree of impunity, fuelling frictions between communities and enabling firearms trafficking, namely through militant control of transportation routes.¹¹²

105 Côte Dechery and Laura Ralston, *Trafficking and Fragility in West Africa* (World Bank, 2015), p.6. Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/401851468184741492/pdf/98903-WP-AFR-P148420-Box-393185B-PUBLIC-Trafficking-FINAL.pdf>

106 Côte Dechery and Laura Ralston, *Trafficking and Fragility in West Africa* (World Bank, 2015), p.8. Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/401851468184741492/pdf/98903-WP-AFR-P148420-Box-393185B-PUBLIC-Trafficking-FINAL.pdf>

107 Lucia Bird, *West Africa's Cocaine Corridor, Building a subregional response*, Policy Brief (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021). Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/GB-W-Africa-Corridor.July22.REV-web.pdf>

108 Savannah de Tessières, *Measuring Illicit Arms Flows – Niger*, Briefing Paper (Small Arms Survey, 2017), p.5. Available at: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP1-Niger.pdf>

109 Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak, *The West Africa-Sahel Connection Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2019), p.9. Available at: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/west-africa-sahel-connection-mapping-cross-border-arms-trafficking>

110 Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak, *The West Africa-Sahel Connection Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2019), p.5. Available at: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/west-africa-sahel-connection-mapping-cross-border-arms-trafficking>

111 Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak, *The West Africa-Sahel Connection Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2019), p.3. Available at: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/west-africa-sahel-connection-mapping-cross-border-arms-trafficking>

112 UNODC, *TOCTA Sahel: Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel* (Vienna: UNODC, 2022) p.17. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_firearms_2023.pdf

Pre-established drug trafficking routes also deepen a country’s vulnerability to other trafficking phenomena, such as firearms, particularly if the country suffers domestic political and economic crises. Specific crises, such as Myanmar’s 2021 coup and ensuing civil war, facilitate increased firearms trafficking along preestablished drug trafficking routes.¹¹³ The cross-border trafficking of firearms from Thailand to Myanmar has become a major source of arms meeting the demand in Myanmar.¹¹⁴ The proliferation in Myanmar of firearms originating in Thailand has resulted from the legal loopholes in Thailand’s legislation and from the diversion of firearms, under the oversight of law enforcement or military, to the illicit sphere.¹¹⁵ These firearms are then smuggled across the open and porous border between Myanmar and Thailand, traditionally associated with the trafficking of drugs. Borders and routes such as these facilitate the smuggling of firearms and drugs because of the difficulty for customs and law enforcement officials in patrolling them.¹¹⁶ Notably, a local newspaper commented on the strikingly diverse range of firearms that have been trafficked from Thailand into Myanmar, which included US-produced AR-15 semi-automatic rifles, Belgian FN-FAL automatic rifles, Singaporean Ultimax light machine guns, Turkish Derya semi-automatic shotguns and an assortment of conflict legacy firearms that dated back to the Indo-China wars of the 1970s and 1980s.¹¹⁷

The trafficking of firearms and drugs is also linked by issues of supply and demand.

A complementarity will arise when actors in one country are able to supply a commodity they possess in abundance to actors in another country that lacks it. And, in exchange, the actors in the second country supply the commodity that the actors in the first country lack. Such conditions can see contraband moving in opposite directions, alongside existing trafficking routes, to fulfil the demands of the recipient actors and their markets. Evidently, trafficking routes allow traffickers to be able to adapt their modus operandi to the environment and supply and demand opportunities or constraints that are placed onto them.

113 VOA news, “Myanmar Border Gun Seizures Stoke Fears of Illicit Post-Coup Arms Trade”, 12 June 2021. Available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_myanmar-border-gun-seizures-stoke-fears-illicit-post-coup-arms-trade/6206939.html

114 Anthony Davis, “Myanmar PDFs getting the guns to turn the war”, *Asia Times*, 19 May 2023. Available at: <https://asiatimes.com/2023/05/myanmar-pdfs-getting-the-guns-to-turn-the-war/>

115 VOA news, “Myanmar Border Gun Seizures Stoke Fears of Illicit Post-Coup Arms Trade”, 12 June 2021. Available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_myanmar-border-gun-seizures-stoke-fears-illicit-post-coup-arms-trade/6206939.html

116 VOA news, “Myanmar Border Gun Seizures Stoke Fears of Illicit Post-Coup Arms Trade”, 12 June 2021. Available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_myanmar-border-gun-seizures-stoke-fears-illicit-post-coup-arms-trade/6206939.html

117 Anthony Davis, “Myanmar PDFs getting the guns to turn the war”, *Asia Times*, 19 May 2023. Available at: <https://asiatimes.com/2023/05/myanmar-pdfs-getting-the-guns-to-turn-the-war/>

Case studies: Supply and demand determining trafficking flows

The so-called **Northern route**, a principal opiate trafficking route that connects Northern Afghanistan to the Russian Federation via several Central Asian countries, for example, has been used to traffic drugs and firearms in opposite directions to fulfil the demand for these products.¹¹⁸ It sees Afghan opium and/or heroin trafficked into the Russian Federation, responding to the significant demand for these drugs in the Russian consumer market.¹¹⁹ The Northern route has, however, also been used to traffic weapons in the opposite direction, for example, to meet the demand for weapons in Afghanistan during the Taliban's insurgency. This was initially reported by local media, which discovered firearms were being trafficked from the Russian Federation, traded for Afghani drugs in Tajikistan, and then finally trafficked into Afghanistan.¹²⁰ As government authority diminished in Afghanistan's northern provinces from 2014, a similar pattern was observed by UNODC, as weapons were trafficked from Tajikistan into Afghanistan, although the source of the weapons was unknown.¹²¹ In this instance, demand for the individual commodities led to the facilitation of the trafficking along the same route to meet the demand for either firearms or drugs on each side of the route.

A similar situation can be observed in the Americas. The flow of firearms from North America into the Caribbean and of drugs transiting from and/or through the Caribbean into the North American countries has long been a pattern in the region.¹²² However, traditional contraband flows can change over time, and this is evident within the North American and Caribbean regions, which have seen reverse trafficking flows also taking place. Operation Trigger VII, a joint operation in September 2022, led by Interpol and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS), resulted in the seizure of 350 weapons, 3,300 rounds of ammunition and included record drug hauls across the Caribbean.¹²³ This operation uncovered a noticeable trend of reverse trafficking on established routes as reported by several countries involved. In this instance seizures of cannabis originating from Canada and the United States were being moved into the Caribbean region. Previously, the Caribbean, together with Mexico, had been major foreign sources of cannabis consumed in the United States.¹²⁴

118 UNODC, *Opiate flows through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia A Threat Assessment* (Vienna: UNODC, 2012). Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghanistan_northern_route_2012_web.pdf

119 Filippo De Daniele, "Beyond the drug-terror nexus: Drug trafficking and state-crime relations in Central Asia", *International Journal of Drug Policy* (2014), p.3. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0955395914000164>

120 Jerome Starkey, "Drugs for guns: how the Afghan heroin trade is fuelling the Taliban insurgency", *The Independent*, 29 April 2008. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/drugs-for-guns-how-the-afghan-heroin-trade-is-fuelling-the-taliban-insurgency-817230.html>

121 UNODC, *Afghan Opiate Trafficking Along the Northern Route* (Vienna: UNODC, 2018), p.136. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/publications/NR_Report_21.06.18_low.pdf

122 Laura Dowrich-Phillips, "Crime in the Caribbean: US manufactured guns fueling violence", *Loop Caribbean News*, 17 April 2023. Available at: <https://caribbean.loopnews.com/content/crime-caribbean-us-manufactured-guns-fueling-violence>

123 Interpol, "Hundreds of firearms and 12.6 tonnes of drugs seized in Caribbean operation", Press Release, 13 October 2022. Available at: <https://www.interpol.int/News-and-Events/News/2022/Hundreds-of-firearms-and-12.6-tonnes-of-drugs-seized-in-Caribbean-operation>

124 Liana Sun Wyler et al., *Latin America and the Caribbean: Illicit Drug Trafficking and U.S Counterdrug Programs* (Congressional Research Service, 2012), p.1. Available at: https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20120319_R41215_44d35e7f08b596e5162b7d20e428270ed1d0f495.pdf

Interlinkages can also occur between the two trafficked commodities because of the complex and diverse cast of actors (facilitators and collaborators) that operate along both supply chains. According to a Jamaican expert on both forms of trafficking, the country's ports, and the facilitators and collaborators at these points of entry, act as principal linkages for both illicit drugs and firearms, despite the trafficking not being linked in any other manner and the commodities travelling in opposite directions through the country to their intended destinations.¹²⁵ The diverse range of criminals along the illicit market supply chain can act as both a catalyst for the linkage of firearms and drug trafficking and for gun violence linked to increased competition amongst rival groups.

125 Experts interview dd. 13 July 2023.

3. Violence connected to the interlinkages between firearm and drug trafficking

The linkages between firearms and drug trafficking can trigger, facilitate and intensify violence in various ways. First of all, access to trafficked firearms tends to increase the use of violence among drug traffickers. In addition to this drug market related gun violence, the interlinkages between firearms and drug trafficking can also facilitate the acquisition and use of these weapons by non-State armed groups and terrorists.

3.1 Drug market related gun violence

The illegal character of drug trafficking moulds the criminal behaviour surrounding it. The reason for this is because actors taking to the drug market are not able to rely on legal enforcement measures to rectify violations of agreements or to protect their business against rivals. They, therefore, resort to violence more readily than legal businesses.¹²⁶ Depending on the type of drug or the phase in the distribution chain, the use of violence might differ per region. In this section, we distinguish between violence related to the production and wholesale level, violence related to the consumer market, and explore the societal impact of this type of violence.

3.1.1 Production and wholesale trafficking of drugs

Significant geographical differences can be observed in gun violence related to the production and wholesale trafficking of drugs. These differences to a certain extent reflect the global distribution patterns of various types of drugs.

Several countries in Latin-America are characterized by high levels of drug-related gun violence connected to the production and distribution of drugs, in particular cocaine.¹²⁷ The violence employed by Mexican drug cartels has some characteristics that distinguish it from other criminal violence incidents. First, these groups use specific types of weapons such as AK- and AR-style rifles. They use specific tactics: assassinations of law enforcement agents and journalists; street gun battles; and the employment of extreme forms of violence such as torture, dismemberment, decapitation, and corporal inscription. The violence serves as an overt message to authorities and rivals. They do not shy away from leaving public evidence of their violence, such as bodies hanging from bridges. A study on drug-related homicides in Mexico finds clear patterns of their relationship to the wholesale level, as the highest rates of homicides are concentrated in areas associated with the production or transit of illicit drugs.¹²⁸

These killings constitute a form of communication towards rivals, government officials and the public, aimed at instilling fear. In January 2023, for example, a 24-hour battle between Mexican federal forces and drug cartel gunmen resulted in the deaths of at least 29 people. The Culiacán international airport became the latest frontline of a Latin American drug conflict that had already claimed tens of thousands of lives every year. This time, an attempt to stop the transport of an arrested high-level cartel member led to a shootout between Mexican soldiers and

126 Martin Bouchard, Melvin Soudjin and Peter Reuter, "Conflict management in high-stakes illegal drug transactions", *British Journal of Criminology* (January 2021), Vol.61, No.1, pp.167-186. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azaa054>

127 David Shirk and Joel Wallman, "Understanding Mexico's Drug Violence", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (December 2015), Vol.59, No.8, p.3. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24546346>

128 David Shirk and Joel Wallman, "Understanding Mexico's Drug Violence", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (December 2015), Vol.59, No.8, p.7. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24546346>

cartel criminals who wielded machine guns.¹²⁹

A similar situation can be observed in Ecuador, which is confronted with a steep increase of homicides in the criminal sphere. Police attribute about 80 per cent of these murders to conflicts between rivalling criminal groups competing for the control of the distribution and export of drugs, primarily cocaine. The targets of the violence are high-level officials and civilians believed to be involved in drug trafficking or money laundering for rival groups. Evidence of this dynamic can be found in August 2022, when gunfire and an explosion in Ecuador’s most populous city – Guayaquil – led to five people being killed and 20 more injured. Authorities described this attack as a “declaration of war on the State” by organized crime.¹³⁰

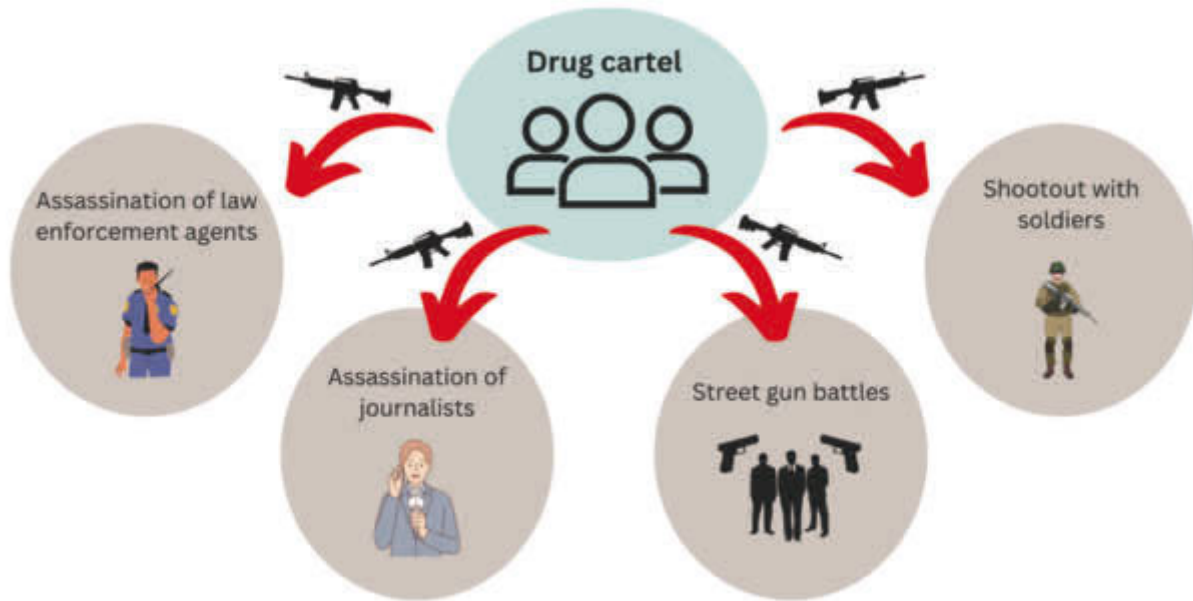


Figure 9 - Common targets of violence by drug cartels

Compared to Latin-America, **Europe** is traditionally characterized by relatively low levels of gun violence related to the production and wholesale trafficking of drugs. As violence attracts unwanted attention, drug criminals in Europe are inclined to use violence only in a strategic way. Nevertheless, several European countries have seen an escalation in the frequency and severity of drug-related gun violence related to the wholesale cocaine market in Europe, which is believed to be connected to developments in South America. After the 2016 Colombia peace agreement¹³¹, an increased fragmentation in the cocaine-related criminal landscape in Colombia has been observed, which has led to changing trafficking patterns of cocaine to Europe, the biggest consumer market of this drug. While in the past dominant OCGs from Colombia tended to supply cocaine to a limited number of established and well-connected OCGs in Europe, now new alliances between South American suppliers and European criminal networks have been fostered with numerous smaller European trafficking networks gaining direct access to wholesale quantities of cocaine. This has led to increased levels of drug-related gun violence in key

129 Tom Phillips and Analy Nuño, “Twenty-four hours of terror as cartel violence engulfs Mexican city”, *The Guardian*, 6 January 2023. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/06/terror-cartel-violence-engulfs-mexican-city-el-chapo-son>

130 International Crisis Group, “Ecuador’s High Tide of Drug Violence”, 4 November 2022. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/lat-in-america-caribbean/andes/ecuador/ecuadors-high-tide-drug-violence>

131 Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace

entry points for cocaine in Europe.¹³²

Belgium and the Netherlands, home to the two largest European ports (Antwerp and Rotterdam), have become key entry points of cocaine into Europe and have been confronted with a high level of drug-related violence, including numerous shootings. The flexible, loosely structured nature of the criminal networks on the drug market has enabled more actors to try and conquer a segment of this lucrative market. This competition has increased as a result of the recent hacking of the encrypted app SkyECC by law enforcement, which led to several arrests of key actors involved in drug trafficking and, thus, attracted rivals trying to fill in the gaps in the market. However, higher-level criminals involved in drug trafficking have continued giving orders from abroad or from prison to the often very young lower-level actors¹³³ to keep defending their turf. As a result, the number of drug-related shootings and attacks with hand grenades in Antwerp increased from 30 incidents in 2021 to 60 incidents between January and mid-August 2022.¹³⁴ The increased drug-related gun violence was, however, not limited to victims involved in drug trafficking themselves. In the Netherlands, for example, in September 2019 the lawyer of the key witness in a trial against a high-level drug criminal was lethally shot in Amsterdam.¹³⁵ Two years later, in July 2021, a famous Dutch crime reporter, who had a good connection with the same witness, was also lethally shot in Amsterdam.¹³⁶ In addition, several plans made by drug criminals to kidnap the Belgian Minister of Justice in 2022 were foiled after Belgian police discovered automatic firearms in a vehicle outside the house of the Minister. Because of the high threat level, the Minister was moved a safehouse twice. It is believed that kidnapping the Minister would have served to negotiate the release of prominent figures of the drug milieu from prison.¹³⁷

Gun violence connected to the large-scale production and trafficking of drugs can also be observed in other parts in the world, but this violence is mainly directed at other drug criminals. According to an interview with a Nigerian judicial expert, for example, **drug-related gun violence in West Africa** often pertains to dealings within criminal groups and networks. This violence is, however, rather exceptional as these criminals realize that they need each other to facilitate their trafficking business. The relationship between the criminal groups and networks is, therefore, generally of a more cooperative nature.

In Central Asia levels of gun violence connected to the production and trafficking of drugs, primarily heroin, are rather low. Yet, also in this region drug-related gun violence occurs, for in-

132 Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023). Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

133 Experts interview dd. 11 July 2023.

134 Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023). Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

135 Yelle Tieleman and Koen Voskuil, "Advocaat (44) van kroongetuige Nabil B. op straat doodgeschoten in Amsterdam", AD, 18 September 2019. Available at: <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/advocaat-44-van-kroongetuige-nabil-b-op-straat-doodgeschoten-in-amsterdam-a13a07c7/>

136 Hanne Decre, "Misdaadjournalist versus onderwereld: moest Peter R. de Vries boeten voor zijn rol in "grootste drugsproces ooit"?", VRT NWS, 7 July 2021. Available at: <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2021/07/07/de-vries/>; Freek Willems, "Nederlands Openbaar Ministerie: "Alle schijn dat moord op misdaadjournalist De Vries verband houdt met zijn werk"", VRT NWS, 18 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2021/10/18/proces-moord-peter-r-de-vries/>

137 Mark Eeckhaut, "Opdracht ontvoering Van Quickenborne komt van drugsmafia", *De Standaard*, 26 September 2022. Available at: https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220925_97914502; Cedric Lagast and Jonathan Folens, "Waarom wil het drugsmilieu een justitieminister kidnappen? "Ze wilden hem mogelijk omruilen"", *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 26 September 2022. Available at: https://www.gva.be/cnt/dmf20220925_97294925#:~:text=een%20justitieminister%20kidnappen%3F-%E2%80%9CZe%20wilden%20hem%20mogelijk%20omruilen%E2%80%9D.kwam%20uit%20het%20internationale%20drugsmilieu; Hans Verbeke and Alexander Haezebrouck, "Minister Van Quickenborne en gezin opnieuw in safehouse na nieuwe dreiging", *De Morgen*, 8 December 2022. Available at: <https://www.demorgen.be/snelnieuws/minister-van-quickenborne-en-gezin-opnieuw-in-safehouse-na-nieuwe-dreiging-bf7bb9d0/>

stance, on the Northern route between Afghanistan and the Russian Federation (see earlier). An example of drug-related gun violence along this trafficking route is the murder in Tajikistan of a high-ranking security officer following a conflict with drug traffickers at the Afghan border in 2023. Three attackers dumped their drugs, weapons and ammunition and were able to flee back to Afghanistan. Their three Tajikistani accomplices were apprehended. The drug traffickers are reported to have left 45 kg of heroin, one Kalashnikov assault rifle, four magazines, 74 cartridges, night-vision goggles, and USD 10,000 in cash.¹³⁸

In Australia, outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs) are increasingly taking to drug trafficking. In recent years, OMGs have become synonymous with organized crime as they are increasingly involved in crimes such as drug and firearms trafficking. The results of a recent study indicate that OMGs in Australia are moving away from their traditional tribal identity towards the promise of easy money to be made in drug trafficking, stating that “a model of criminal entrepreneurship takes over”. They retain their violent disposition, but their motives may be shifting, and recent killings seem to be more related to inter-personal relationships rather than to the criminal business.¹³⁹ In May 2022, for example, a Comancheros biker boss and his brother were shot at a gym in Sydney’s West. The youngest brother had multiple gunshot wounds to his stomach, arms and legs, and died. The Comancheros boss was shot up to ten times, including a gunshot to the head, but survived.¹⁴⁰

3.1.2 Consumer market drug trafficking

On a global scale local consumer drug markets account for most of the violence, especially if these consumer markets are so-called ‘open markets’ in which drugs are easily accessible. In such markets, often centralized in vulnerable or disadvantaged neighbourhoods, a buyer can acquire drugs without prior introduction to the seller.¹⁴¹ Since consumer drug markets are more locally embedded and more geographically spread out, the coinciding violence is also more spread out.¹⁴²

Gun violence related to the consumer market is also very common in **North America**, where disputes over drug dealings are frequently gang-related and often seem to escalate and result in fatal shootings.¹⁴³

In **Europe**, for example, France and Sweden are disproportionately affected by this type of violence. Much of the drug-related gun violence tied to the European consumer market is concentrated in big cities with poor and vulnerable neighbourhoods, such as the French city of Marseille and the Swedish cities of Stockholm, Goteborg and Malmö. The drug violence in these cities is characterized by gang-related shootings, where young criminals have access to guns

138 Eurasianet, “Tajikistan reports unrest on its Afghanistan border”, 28 April 2023. Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-reports-unrest-on-its-afghanistan-border>

139 David Bright et al., “Co-offending networks among members of outlaw motorcycle gangs across types of crime”, *Trends in Organized Crime*, 11 October 2022.

140 Jenny Noyes et al., “Comanchero bikie boss Tarek Zahed shot, brother Omar killed”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/auburn-fatal-shooting-20220510-p5ak7y.html>

141 Tiggery May and Mike Hough, “Drug Markets and Distribution Systems”, *Addiction Research and Theory* (December 2004), Vol.12, No.6, pp.549-563.

142 Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023). Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

143 Jesenia M. Pizarro, “Gang homicide in the United States”, *Handbook of Homicide* (2017), pp.71-88; Drug Enforcement Administration, “DEA launches new initiative to combat drug-related violence and overdoses in communities across America”, *US Department of Justice*, 8 February 2022. Available at: <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2022/02/08/dea-launches-new-initiative-combat-drug-related-violence-and-overdoses>

and display an eagerness to use them.¹⁴⁴ Even though the so-called *Juggemaffian*, a Yugoslavian mafia-style group which dominated the organized crime landscape in Sweden in the 1990s, is no longer operational in Sweden, criminal connections to the Western Balkans are still active. Swedish gangs continue to have access to drugs and weapons as organized crime groups from the Western Balkans, mostly based in Serbia, set up proxies in Sweden who serve as receivers for drugs and weapons.¹⁴⁵ For these young persons, living in vulnerable neighbourhoods, joining a gang holds the promise of fast money, protection and a “career” path.¹⁴⁶ In Europe, the use of violence and firearms is often a way of gaining status within the gang and advancing the criminal career.¹⁴⁷ The drug-related gun violence in Marseille, for example, is marked by the involvement of very young actors: over 60 per cent of the people injured or killed in these violent drug-related incidents were under 25-year-olds.¹⁴⁸ These young criminals have access to automatic weapons¹⁴⁹ and are not afraid to use them.

In recent years, **South Africa** has experienced a steep increase in drug-related violence, as well as gun violence.¹⁵⁰ In April 2023, for example, a news broadcast reported on a shooting in KwaZulu-Natal in which six people were killed. In the aftermath the police found drugs in the home where the shooting occurred, also reporting that there were already suspicions of drug dealings going on at the house. Shortly after, the police arrested an 18-year-old on suspicion of having committed these murders. The news broadcast linked this incident to the broader phenomenon of the increase of mass-killings and drive-by-shootings connected to drug trafficking in KwaZulu-Natal.¹⁵¹ These smaller criminal groups profit from the significant arms flow within the country being sourced from weapons stolen from or lost by local legal firearms owners, as well as siphoned off from State institutions.¹⁵²

3.1.3 Societal impact of drug market related gun violence

The violence that coincides with drugs and firearms trafficking does not stay contained to the criminal environment. These shootings also impact the broader community and create spill-

144 Elin Jönsson and Erik Nilsson, *Shootings in criminal milieu. An interview study* (Stockholm: The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2019). Available at: https://bra.se/download/18.62c6cfa2166eca5d70e4041/1615396537354/2019_Shootings_in_criminal_milieu.pdf; Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023). Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

145 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, “Guns for gangs in Sweden: the Balkan connection”, *Risk Bulletin* No.4 (January–February 2021). Available at: <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/see-obs-004/02-guns-for-gangs-in-sweden-the-balkan-connection.html>

146 Elin Jönsson and Erik Nilsson, *Shootings in criminal milieu. An interview study* (Stockholm: The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, 2019). Available at: https://bra.se/download/18.62c6cfa2166eca5d70e4041/1615396537354/2019_Shootings_in_criminal_milieu.pdf; Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023). Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

147 Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023). Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

148 Thomas Saintourens and Simon Piel, “Drug trafficking in France, Perpetrators and victims of violence are increasingly younger”, *Le Monde*, 24 May 2023. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2023/05/24/drug-trafficking-in-france-perpetrators-and-victims-of-violence-are-increasingly-younger_6027864_7.html

149 Angelique Chrisafis, “Marseille murders spark political row over drug gang turf wars”, *The Guardian*, 24 August 2023. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/24/marseille-murders-spark-political-row-over-drug-gang-turf-wars>

150 Thuso Khumalo, “South Africa: Spike in gun crime angers citizens”, *Deutsche Welle*, 7 March 2023. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/south-africa-spike-in-gun-crime-angers-citizens/a-64903654>; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, “The Eastern and Southern Africa Commission on Drugs (ESACD) was created to address the serious and multifaceted drug problem facing parts of Eastern and Southern Africa”, 6 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZ6cHj1jPW8>

151 South Africa Tonight, “Spike in gun and drug violence in KZN”, eNCA, 3 April 2023. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wB1nEXdeNKg>

152 Data for South Africa 2021 drawn from the Africa Organised Crime Index. Available at: https://africa.ocindex.net/country/south_africa

over effects on other parts of societal life.

The local community can be directly impacted by drug-related shootings when residents or individuals working in the community are threatened or extorted. For example, a dock-worker who was repeatedly approached to take part in drug trafficking and help criminals extract drugs from shipping containers in the port of Antwerp, Belgium. As a result of his refusal to comply, his house was shot at while his wife and son were upstairs sleeping.¹⁵³

Drug-related shootings can also directly affect bystanders who are not involved in the criminal dealings. The events in Denver, in June 2023, where a drug deal gone wrong led to a shooting amid fans who were celebrating their club winning the National Basketball Association (NBA) title, are illustrative of the possible consequences for innocent bystanders. The shooting took place roughly a mile from the arena where the sports game was held and left ten people injured. Police believe five or six of the wounded to be bystanders not involved in the drug deal.¹⁵⁴

Another example is the death of an 11-year-old girl as a result of shots fired at the garage door of her home in Merksem, Belgium. The shooting seems to be related to the dealings of her uncle, who is suspected of large-scale cocaine trafficking and is currently residing in the United Arab Emirates.¹⁵⁵ Experts state that these **shootings, directed at homes of family members of the drug criminals are a very effective way of intimidation** and removing the competition. Drug criminals then want to protect their family and either go underground or move abroad, which affects their drug dealings in the area and frees up territory for take-over by rival drug networks. Shootings directed at houses and businesses of the family of rival criminals also draw law enforcement's attention to the targeted criminals. This often leads the targeted criminals to have to shut down or reduce their criminal business as well.¹⁵⁶

Entire communities, families and children can experience social, emotional and physical trauma following the culture of fear and violence that can be found in communities affected by gun violence.¹⁵⁷ Especially in regions where firearms are easily accessible, these environments of constant threat and fear instil the dynamic of “guns for protection” among its residents, as well as criminals. The increased need of firearms for protection further impacts the local illicit firearms market and generates a parallel increase in (criminal) demand and a matching rise in firearms trafficking. This dynamic creates a vicious circle of guns and fear, fueling violence and firearms trafficking.¹⁵⁸

153 Gazet van Antwerpen, “Ekeren: Drugsmaffia beschiet alweer foute woning”, 15 July 2022. Available at: <https://web.belga.press/explore/kiosk/publications/277687/4?date=1657843200000&edition=Kempen&mediumType=NEWSPAPER&page=6&subId=4>

154 David Zalubowski, “Drug deal probably sparked Denver mass shooting after Nuggets’ NBA win, police say”, *Los Angeles Times*, 13 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-06-13/denver-mass-shooting-after-nuggets-win-nba-final>

155 Jasper De Spiegeleer and Jasper Van Der Schoot, “11-jarige Firdaous komt om na beschieting in Merksem: wat weten we vanochtend al meer over dodelijke schietpartij”, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 10 January 2023. Available at: <https://www.hln.be/merksem/11-jarige-firdaous-komt-om-na-beschieting-in-merksem-wat-weten-we-vanochtend-al-meer-over-dodelijke-schietpartij-br-ab40f07c/>; Mark Eeckhaut, “‘Oom’ Othman, de drugsbaron die officieel alleen luxehorloges verhandelt”, *De Standaard*, 11 January 2023. Available at: https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230110_93753608

156 Experts interview dd. 11 July 2023.

157 Manne Gerell et al., “Open drug markets, vulnerable neighbourhoods and gun violence in two Swedish cities”, *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* (March 2021), Vol.16, No.3, pp.223-244; Julie Collins and Emily Swoveland, “The Impact of gun violence on Children, Families and Communities”, *Children’s Voice* (2014), Vol.23, No.1, pp.10-13.

158 Astrid De Schutter and Nils Duquet, *The nexus between drug markets and gun violence in the European Union* (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drugs Addiction/Flemish Peace Institute, 2023). Available at: https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/drugs-library/nexus-between-drug-markets-and-gun-violence-european-union_en

Drug-related gun violence comes at a high cost for the broader society.¹⁵⁹ A 2022 study on the social cost of gun violence in general estimated that gun violence in America accounted for “an economic consequence” of USD 557 billion per year. This estimation included costs of long-term medical care, criminal justice system resources, lost wages, lower worker productivity, and diminished quality of life for victims and family. While specific studies on the cost of drug-related gun violence are not available, several studies do provide an estimation of the costs related to the socioeconomic impact of drug-related crimes. In 2006, for example, the socioeconomic impact of Chile’s drug-related crime was estimated to be USD 268 million per year. The study showed that the largest share of drug enforcement costs was attributed to police intervention (32 per cent) and penitentiaries (25 per cent). Productivity loss due to incarceration for drug-related crimes made up 29 per cent of the total impact.¹⁶⁰ The costs attributable to crime relating to alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs, and psychoactive pharmaceuticals in Belgium are estimated at EUR 864 million per year. In addition to these financial costs, in the year 2012, 10,900 life years were lost due to interpersonal violence in Belgium. The study noted that 796 of these lost life years can be attributed to illicit drugs.¹⁶¹

3.2 The connections between drug trafficking, firearm trafficking and armed conflict

Trafficked firearms are not only connected to criminal activities and, therefore, linked to criminal gun violence. **Trafficked firearms can also be key enablers of various types of political or inter-communal armed violence since these weapons are very suitable tools of violence in contemporary armed conflict, especially for non-State actors.** These lethal weapons provide non-State armed groups with a boost in firepower, often matching and sometimes even exceeding the firepower of armed forces and other security forces in a country. Since they require relatively little maintenance and little training, they are particularly suited for armed conflicts that involve untrained combatants. In addition, they are durable goods that generally remain operable for many decades and can be easily transported. Because they are rather small and easy to conceal, they may be trafficked into conflict settings quite easily as well. Since non-State armed groups do not have access to the legal firearms market, they need to illegally acquire them either by looting them from State stockpiles, by capturing them from enemies, or by relying on criminal networks to acquire trafficked firearms. The illicit proliferation of such firearms has resulted in their widespread availability in many conflict-affected regions, which means these weapons are generally cheap to acquire (and much cheaper than larger conventional weapons systems).

Access to significant amounts of firearms provides non-State armed groups with increased opportunities to engage in a conflict. As a result, it can also strongly intensify and prolong existing conflict.¹⁶² Non-State armed groups use these trafficked firearms to engage in combat and as tools for enforcement to exercise de facto control over a certain territory.¹⁶³

159 Various types of social costs of crime and/or drugs can be distinguished. For more information, see for example: Delphine Lievens et al., *The social cost of legal and illegal drugs in Belgium* (Antwerpen-Apeldoorn-Portland: Maklu, 2016); Berta Rivera et al., “The social cost of illicit drug use in Spain”, *International Journal of Drug Policy* (June 2017), Vol.44, pp.92-104; Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig, “Gun violence is THE problem”, *Vital City*, March 2022; Philippe Fenoglio, Véronique Parel and Pierre Kopp, “The Social Cost of Alcohol, Tobacco and Illicit Drugs in France, 1997”, *European Addiction Research* (2003), Vol.9, No.1, pp.18-28; Matías Fernández, “The socioeconomic impact of drug-related crimes in Chile”, *International Journal of Drug Policy* (November 2012), Vol.23, No.6, pp.465-472.

160 Matías Fernández, “The socioeconomic impact of drug-related crimes in Chile”, *International Journal of Drug Policy* (November 2012), Vol.23, No.6, pp.465-472.

161 Delphine Lievens et al., *The social cost of legal and illegal drugs in Belgium* (Antwerpen-Apeldoorn-Portland: Maklu, 2016).

162 Lauren Pinson, *Addressing the linkages between illicit arms, organized crime, and armed conflict* (Geneva: UNIDIR and UNODC, 2022), p.4. Available at: <https://unidir.org/publication/addressing-the-linkages-between-illicit-arms-organized-crime-and-armed-conflict/>

163 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.36. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

The availability of firearms is, therefore, often closely connected to conflict dynamics. Even in post-conflict settings, the availability of these weapons entails significant security risks since their continued presence in civilian hands poses the danger of their use for criminal purposes or even a quick return to political or inter-communal violence. **The availability of such conflict-legacy weapons can, thus, significantly undermine peacebuilding and stabilization efforts.**

While access to firearms provides non-State armed groups with opportunities to engage in armed conflict and control territories, **drug trafficking can also fuel armed conflict since this lucrative activity can finance the violent activities of non-State armed groups.** An analysis of hundreds of government documents and court records, for example, has revealed that operatives from the Lebanese organization Hezbollah have been engaged in large-scale drug trafficking and other criminal activities in dozens of countries around the world to finance their political activities and violent attacks. According to several analysts, Hezbollah appears to be growing increasingly reliant on criminal activities, such as the trafficking of counterfeit Captagon, to finance its operations.¹⁶⁴ Europol noted that a network of collaborators linked to Hezbollah in the European Union is suspected of managing the transportation and distribution of illegal drugs into the European Union, money laundering (also for other criminal organizations) and firearms trafficking.¹⁶⁵ An investigation into the criminal activities of this network has led to the arrest of several people who are accused of drug trafficking, money laundering, and procuring weapons for Hezbollah.¹⁶⁶ Other examples of this dynamic have also been observed, for example, in Eastern Africa, where members of armed groups from Darfur engaged in drug smuggling in Libya by providing safe passage to drug convoys that crossed southern Libya.¹⁶⁷ The transit of cannabis (resin) is mainly managed by smugglers from the Tebu or Tuareg tribes. They guide and manage the logistics for convoys of 4x4 vehicles through the desert terrain, being paid for their protection and guidance.¹⁶⁸

Armed conflict can fuel gun violence in various ways. First of all, because **armed conflict tends to increase the demand for weapons and, therefore, may also result in increased firearms trafficking. Drug trafficking can facilitate these flows** not only by providing non-State armed groups with the financial resources to acquire weapons, but also by allowing the trafficking of firearms through the same smuggling routes used for drug trafficking.

The relationship between firearms, drugs and armed conflict is, however, not one-directional. A recent report by UNIDIR and UNODC highlights the interconnected nature of armed conflict, firearms and organized crime. The conflict is not only a ‘destination’ in this complex scheme, but it can also be a ‘source’ since State fragility also provides opportunities for the diversion of firearms and other types of weapons into the illicit market, also allowing criminal

164 Joby Warrick and Souad Mekhennet, “Hezbollah operatives seen behind spike in drug trafficking, analysts say”, *The Washington Post*, 4 August 2020. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/hezbollah-operatives-seen-behind-spike-in-drug-trafficking-analysts-say/2020/08/03/fa286b1a-d36a-11ea-8c55-61e7fa5e82ab_story.html

165 Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* (2022), p.20. Available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Tesat_Report_2022_0.pdf

166 Gonzalo Saiz and Stephen Reimer, *Missing connections. Crime-Enabled Terrorism Financing in Europe*, Occasional Paper (Brussels: RUSI Europe, 2023). Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e399e8c6e9872149fc4a041/t/64706a64d830b35a11efa48a/1685088876314/rusi-op-crime-enabled-terrorism-financing.pdf>

167 ENACT, *Organized crime and armed conflicts in Eastern Africa* (Interpol, 2022).

168 Fiona Mangan, *Illicit drug trafficking and use in Libya: highs and lows* (United States Institute of Peace, 2020). Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/05/illicit-drug-trafficking-and-use-libya-highs-and-lows>

groups to prosper (see Figure 10).¹⁶⁹

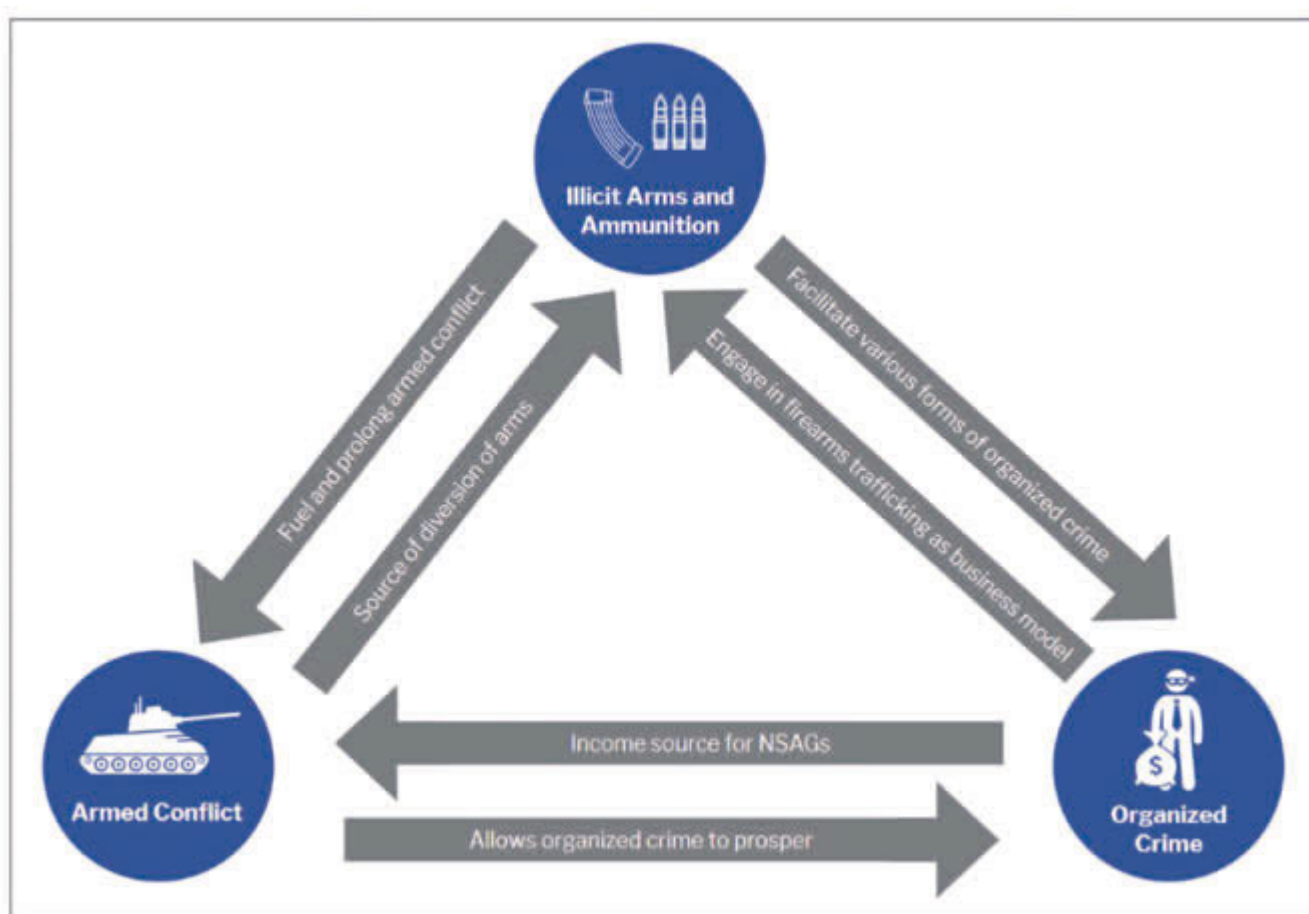


Figure 10 - Linkages between illicit arms and ammunition, organized crime and armed conflict

Armed conflict may not only drive demand for weapons but **can also provide a source for arms trafficking** since, during conflict, it is often more difficult for authorities to maintain effective control over State stockpiles.¹⁷⁰ It is important to stress that various types of diversion of weapons can occur during an armed conflict, with so-called 'battlefield capture' as a very important diversion method. A detailed assessment by Conflict Armament Research of the weapons of the Islamic State (Daesh, IS) in Iraq and Syria, for instance, concluded that at the very least 12 per cent of the weapons recovered from IS forces originate from Iraqi national stockpiles. This included weapons captured during a major offensive against Iraqi armed forces in the Mosul region in mid-2014, which significantly increased the war fighting capacity of IS. The findings from the same assessment further suggest that some of the ammunition used by IS was captured from Syrian armed forces.¹⁷¹

Even after the end of an armed conflict, **firearms can still be sourced from the affected country or region** and end up in the hands of criminals or non-State armed groups in other countries. Armed conflicts can result in a pool of weapons that remain accessible outside of the le-

169 Lauren Pinson, *Addressing the linkages between illicit arms, organized crime, and armed conflict* (Geneva: UNIDIR and UNODC, 2022), p.4. Available at: <https://unidir.org/publication/addressing-the-linkages-between-illicit-arms-organized-crime-and-armed-conflict/>

170 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), pp.36-37. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

171 Conflict Armament Research, *Weapons of the Islamic State: A three-year investigation in Iraq and Syria* (2017), pp.32-34. Available at: <https://www.conflictarm.com/reports/weapons-of-the-islamic-state/>

gal control mechanisms in post-conflict settings. The proliferation of conflict legacy weapons may facilitate their use in criminal activities and enable a quick return to armed violence in the post-conflict setting itself¹⁷², but it also facilitates international trafficking of these weapons. A case in point is that the conflict legacy weapons from the wars in the former Yugoslavia were not immediately trafficked in significant amounts to criminals in the rest of Europe. The first indications of significant smuggling of these weapons to Western European countries only emerged about a decade after the end of the hostilities in the former Yugoslavia.

Recent developments in Afghanistan show that **conflict legacy weapons can also have an immediate impact on criminal activities, including drug trafficking, and the use of violence.** Taliban fighters were able to acquire large amounts of weapons and military equipment in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal of the US armed forces from Afghanistan in the summer of 2022. This included various types of small arms and light weapons, such as handguns, assault rifles and machine guns, which were left behind by the US or seized from Afghan government soldiers. This immediately sparked security concerns since these newly acquired weapons could be used to undertake violent activities, but also to generate income for the Taliban. An analysis by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) indicates these weapons were not only instrumental for the Taliban in controlling territory and improving their combat capabilities, but also provided the Taliban with increased financial opportunities.¹⁷³ In the weeks after the Taliban took control over Afghanistan, Taliban fighters acquired weapons both when they overran military bases and by seizing weapons from civilians.¹⁷⁴ International media reports indicate that a large amount of these weapons have ended up in the hands of Afghan arms dealers and were sold to the local population or were smuggled to Pakistan, where demand for US weapons is strong. According to these reports, the Taliban allowed its fighters to sell some of the weapons they had acquired, while the rest of the weapons were handed over to Taliban commanders.¹⁷⁵

172 Lauren Pinson, *Addressing the linkages between illicit arms, organized crime, and armed conflict* (Geneva: UNIDIR and UNODC, 2022), p.4. Available at: <https://undir.org/publication/addressing-the-linkages-between-illicit-arms-organized-crime-and-armed-conflict/>

173 Tanya Mehra, Méryl Demuynck and Matthew Wentworth, *Weapons in Afghanistan: The Taliban's Spoils of War* (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2022), p.8. Available at: <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2022-12/The-Spoils-of-War-final-1.pdf>

174 Reuters, "Taliban in Afghan Capital Kabul Start Collecting Weapons From Civilians", 16 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.us-news.com/news/world/articles/2021-08-16/taliban-in-afghan-capital-kabul-start-collecting-weapons-from-civilians>

175 Ruhullah Khapalwak and David Zucchini, "For Sale Now: U.S.-Supplied Weapons in Afghan Gun Shops", *The New York Times*, 5 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/05/world/asia/us-weapons-afghanistan.html>

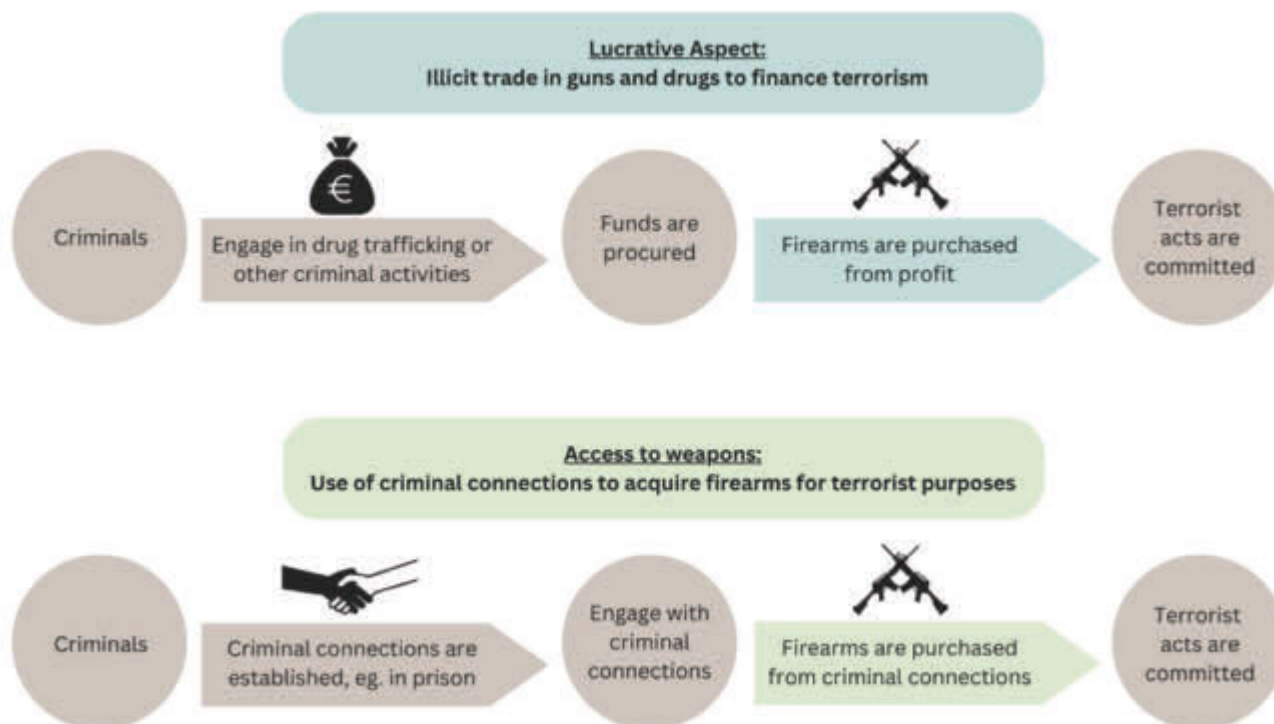


Figure 11 – Illicit trade in guns and drugs to finance terrorism¹⁷⁶

The ICCT warns that the smuggling of these weapons across the porous borders of Afghanistan will fuel arms proliferation in the region. In addition, the access to these weapons will increase the Taliban’s opportunities to generate profit, for example, by using weapons to control and impose a system of taxation on the local trade of opium in the country.¹⁷⁷

The availability of conflict legacy weapons may not only increase opportunities for undertaking lucrative criminal activities, but also intensify violence between competing criminal groups and even fuel political and intercommunal armed violence. This is the case in northern Mali, where traffickers have to protect their cargoes from interception. To this end, they rely on heavily armed private security firms who use pickup trucks equipped with machine guns. They further rely on the military expertise of rebel fighters and make use of the weapons that continue to circulate in the aftermath of previous rebellions. The Malian State’s weakness in the north, the circulation of weapons from previous rebellions, and the high competition marking the illicit drug market have led to an unprecedented militarization of drug trafficking. Drug trafficking also influences the local power balance and many drug traffickers have acquired local and even national influence, as they heavily invest in their communities to build a clientèle. However, this has intensified the process of tribal splitting and led to rivalries between traffickers who organize their networks partly along the lines of family and tribes. In Tilemsi valley, in particular, this had led to open tribal conflicts.¹⁷⁸

176 UNODC, *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* (Vienna: UNODC, 2020), p.35. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

177 Tanya Mehra, Méryl Demuyneck and Matthew Wentworth, *Weapons in Afghanistan: The Taliban’s Spoils of War* (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2022), pp.9-10. Available at: <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2022-12/The-Spoils-of-War-final-1.pdf>

178 International Crisis Group, *Drug Trafficking, Violence and Politics in Northern Mali* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2018). Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/267-narcotrafic-violence-et-politique-au-nord-du-mali>

3.3 The connections between drug trafficking, firearm trafficking and terrorism

The crime-terror nexus regarding drugs and firearms can manifest itself in two ways: (1) the illicit trafficking in guns and drugs to finance terrorism and (2) the use of drug crime connections to acquire firearms for terrorist purposes.¹⁷⁹

3.3.1 Profits from drug and firearms trafficking to finance acts of terrorism

There is ample evidence from across the globe to support the claim that terrorist groups sometimes turn to drug and firearms trafficking to finance their activities. Taking part in lucrative drug trafficking also enables them to procure enough funds to buy firearms. In March 2023, for example, the United Nations expressed concerns about the gains terrorist groups are making in the Sahel, amongst other means by engaging in criminal activities such as the trafficking of arms and drugs.¹⁸⁰ In Mali, a transit country for drug trafficking, local terrorist groups are heavily involved in such activities. The competition within the drug market often leads to violent conflicts between armed groups, which get a part of their weapons and munitions trafficked from Libya.¹⁸¹

In Southeast Asia, similar developments have also been observed. In the Philippines, for example, the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf started from an ideological base but quickly turned to criminal activities to sustain itself. The group is reported to be involved in several types of crime which include weapons and drug trafficking. Most of the group's earnings are used for purchases of weapons.¹⁸²

In South America, terrorist groups and organized crime groups have been known to cooperate closely to control the illicit drugs business and engage in firearms trafficking in Colombia. In October 2018, Ecuadorian authorities arrested several soldiers and civilians for their alleged role in selling diverted weapons and ammunition from a military stockpile in Quito to the Oliver Sinisterra Front (Frente Oliver Sinisterra), an ex-FARC mafia group led by Ecuadorean national and former FARC combatant Walter Patricio Arizala Vernaza, alias 'El Guacho', who is known to have close ties to the Mexican Sinaloa drug cartel, controlling strategic drug trafficking routes between north Ecuador and southwest Colombia, where he operates at the service of the cartel.¹⁸³

The levels of crime-enabled terrorism financing are relatively modest in Europe. The findings from a recent study on terrorism financing suggest that the terrorist groups which are most heavily involved in such activities mostly use their gains from crime on European turf to fund their activities outside the continent.¹⁸⁴ There are, however, cases that illustrate the presence of this dynamic in Europe. The 2023 *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trends Report* notes that dissident republican groups in Northern Ireland are often closely linked to criminal

179 Rajan Basra, *Terrorism and drugs in Europe*, Background paper commissioned by the EMCDDA for the EU Drug Markets Report 2019. (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019). Available at: <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ICSR-Report-Drugs-and-Terrorism-The-Overlaps-in-Europe.pdf>

180 United Nations, "Deeply concerned by Terrorists' Gains in Sahel, Elsewhere, Secretary-General Tells Security Council Human-Rights Based Approach Crucial to End Scourge", Press Release, 28 March 2023. Available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sgsm21746.doc.htm>

181 Data for Mali 2021 drawn from the Africa Organised Crime Index. Available at: <https://africa.ocindex.net/country/mali>

182 Jamela Alindogan, "Inside Abu Sayyaf: Blood, drugs and conspiracies", *Al Jazeera*, 24 July 2016. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/7/24/inside-abu-sayyaf-blood-drugs-and-conspiracies>

183 Parker Asmann, "Ecuador soldiers allegedly trafficked weapons to ex-FARC mafia", *Insightcrime*, 18 October 2018. Available at: <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/ecuador-soldiers-trafficked-weapons-ex-farc-mafia/>

184 Gonzalo Saiz and Stephen Reimer, *Missing connections. Crime-Enabled Terrorism Financing in Europe*, Occasional Paper (Brussels: RUSI Europe, 2023). Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e399e8c6e9872149fc4a041/t/64706a64d830b35a11efa48a/1685088876314/rusi-op-crime-enabled-terrorism-financing.pdf>

organizations, are regularly involved in criminal activities such as drug trafficking and use these profits to fund their cause.¹⁸⁵ In June 2022, several Turonen neo-Nazi biker gang members were arrested for their involvement in drugs and firearms trafficking. The police also seized assets amounting to EUR 3.3 million.¹⁸⁶

3.3.2 The use of drug crime connections to access firearms

Terrorists' involvement in crime does not only have a lucrative aspect, but it also enables access to weapons.¹⁸⁷ As the actors in the criminal firearms market may be increasingly reluctant to sell to terrorists¹⁸⁸, it is important for terrorists to make use of the convergence of social networks and environments to acquire their firearms on the illicit firearms market.

This specific aspect of the crime-terror nexus, where terrorists acquire firearms through criminal connections, is especially observed in Europe. Exemplifying this nexus, in December 2018, a terrorist killed five people and seriously injured eleven others in a shooting near the Christmas market in the city centre of Strasbourg (France). The 29-year-old perpetrator of the mass shooting had been known to the police since he was ten years old and had an extensive criminal background amounting to 27 convictions in France, Germany and Switzerland. He was involved in petty crimes, drug dealings and robberies. He later radicalized in prison and acquired his gun through a criminal connection from the so-called 'travellers community'.¹⁸⁹

Another example are the 2012 terrorist attacks in Toulouse and Montauban. The perpetrator of these attacks was a so-called 'go-fast' driver for an OCG which operated between France and Spain, smuggling cocaine. The Uzi submachine gun the perpetrator used during the attack was acquired via a childhood friend, a small criminal who dealt in drugs, cars and other commodities. The pistol used by the perpetrator was part of two crates of firearms and ammunition that were stolen from a professional sports shooter in 2011. During the arrest of other Toulouse-based drug traffickers several other weapons belonging to the same loot of 2011 were retrieved.¹⁹⁰

Finally, the perpetrator of the Jewish Museum attack in Brussels in 2014 acquired his firearms from a criminal connection. In this case, a Kalashnikov type rifle and a revolver were acquired from a criminal from the Marseille area, whom the perpetrator had met in prison.¹⁹¹ The supplier

185 Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trends Report* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023).

186 Gonzalo Saiz and Stephen Reimer, *Missing connections. Crime-Enabled Terrorism Financing in Europe*, Occasional Paper (Brussels: RUSI Europe, 2023). Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e399e8c6e9872149fc4a041/t/64706a64d830b35a11efa48a/1685088876314/rusi-op-crime-enabled-terrorism-financing.pdf>

187 Gonzalo Saiz and Stephen Reimer, *Missing connections. Crime-Enabled Terrorism Financing in Europe*, Occasional Paper (Brussels: RUSI Europe, 2023). Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e399e8c6e9872149fc4a041/t/64706a64d830b35a11efa48a/1685088876314/rusi-op-crime-enabled-terrorism-financing.pdf>

188 Nicolas Florquin and André Desmarais, "Lethal legacies: Illicit firearms and terrorism in France", in Nils Duquet (ed.) *Triggering Terror: Illicit guns markets and firearms acquisition of Terrorist Networks in Europe*, Project SAFTE (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2017). Available at: https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/boek_safte_bw_lowres.pdf

189 Nils Duquet et al., *Armed to kill: A comprehensive analysis of the guns used in public mass shootings in Europe between 2009 and 2018* (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2019). Available at: https://vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Report_Armed_to_kill_web.pdf; Kim Willsher, "Chérif Chekatt: Who is the Strasbourg shooting suspect?", *The Guardian*, 12 December 2018. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/12/cherif-chekkat-who-is-the-strasbourg-shooting-suspect>

190 Nicolas Florquin and André Desmarais, "Lethal legacies: Illicit firearms and terrorism in France", in Nils Duquet (ed.) *Triggering Terror: Illicit guns markets and firearms acquisition of Terrorist Networks in Europe*, Project SAFTE (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2017); "Procès Merah : Mohamed Merah possédait sept armes", *SudOuest and AFP*, 6 October 2017. Available at: <https://www.sudouest.fr/jus-tice/proces-merah-mohamed-merah-possedait-sept-armes-3317134.php>; Chloé Pilorget-Rezzouk, "Procès Merah : Fettah Malki, le «commercial du quartier»", *Liberation*, 16 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.liberation.fr/france/2019/04/16/proces-merah-fettah-malki-le-commercial-du-quartier-1721791/>

191 Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, "The illicit fun market in Belgium: A lethal cocktail of criminal supply and terrorist demand", *Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe: Research findings and policy recommendations of Project SAFTE* (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2018). Available at: https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/safte/files/project_safte_belgium.pdf

of these firearms was arrested eight months after the attack. During the house search, the police seized a Kalashnikov-type rifle, two pistols and a hunting rifle. Interestingly, the supplier claimed that he was only guarding the firearms for another person who was in prison for drugs trafficking at that time.¹⁹²

192 Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, "The illicit fun market in Belgium: A lethal cocktail of criminal supply and terrorist demand", *Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe: Research findings and policy recommendations of Project SAFTE* (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2018). Available at: https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/safte/files/project_safte_belgium.pdf; J.Cl. and AFP, "Musée juif de Bruxelles : trois ans de prison supplémentaires pour Bendrer", *Le Parisien*, 4 November 2019. Available at: <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/musee-juif-de-bruxelles-trois-ans-de-prison-supplementaires-pour-bendrer-04-11-2019-8185992.php>

4. Criminal justice responses and policy implications

4.1 Criminal justice responses

Firearms and drugs are inherently different commodities, leading to distinct responses within the criminal justice system. The illicit possession and trafficking of drugs are in general easier crimes to investigate, prosecute and adjudicate in courts, than the illicit possession and trafficking of firearms.

1. **The illicit possession of firearms can be difficult to prove since firearms, , are regulated goods, and their possession, transfer, and movement are legally possible.** Illicit possession of firearms refers to cases where an individual has a firearm without proper authorization. This category encompasses a wide range of situations, from simple possession to carrying, and can extend to possession connected with illegal transfers and trafficking, depending on national laws.
2. Unlike firearm use offences, possession offences centre on the mere possession of the firearm as the primary element of the offence. **There is no universal understanding of legal ownership or illicit possession due to the diversity of national firearms control regulations.** Different countries have varying definitions and requirements for obtaining authorization, especially regarding civilian ownership.¹⁹³ In addition, there are still shortcomings and gaps in the legislative and institutional framework related to firearms offences, which are not always clearly defined and, at times, not adequately addressed in legislation. In contrast, drug offenses are more often explicitly defined and thus perceived as particularly serious crimes by both practitioners and prosecutors.
3. **The observation that firearms are often legally regulated goods not only makes it necessary to prove illicit possession but represents an increased challenge when attempting to establish illicit trafficking.** In practice, there can be a presumption of legality at the time of transfer for firearms, whereas there is a strong presumption of illegality in transactions involving drugs.
4. **Firearms offences are often treated as secondary offences** since they are frequently viewed as tools used to commit violence and coercion and, therefore, as facilitators of other criminal activities, such as drug trafficking. As a result, the significance of firearms in the investigation and prosecution of transnational organized crime is frequently underestimated. Instead, there is a tendency to prioritize the prosecution of either more serious or 'lesser' offences, which are easier to prove, overlooking the potential international dimension. Frequently, the focus is solely on the illegal use or possession of weapons, without considering them as potential evidence of a larger trafficking network. This inaccurate perception translates into different penalties and sentencing, as well as investigative and prosecutorial powers associated with drugs and organized crime offences, that do not necessary apply to firearms related offences, such as seizure and confiscation powers, statute of limitations duration, competences and existence of specialized units with financial resources, applicability of special investigative techniques, and evidentiary rules, among others.

193 UNODC, "Firearms related offences", E4J University Module Series: Firearms (April 2020). Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/firearms/module-8/key-issues/firearms-related-offences.html>

5. Conducting parallel investigations on firearms and drug trafficking (or other possible criminal offences) is essential to investigate complex crimes that involve multiple criminal actors or jurisdictions, being particularly useful to investigate cases that are difficult to solve using traditional investigative techniques. In fact, **the information gathered from seized firearms and ammunition can serve as critical evidence for investigating a wide range of additional crimes**, including firearms and drug trafficking, illicit manufacture, terrorism, organized crime, and money laundering.
6. While there are differences in criminal justice responses between drugs and firearms cases due to the different nature of the commodities and the perception of firearms offences as secondary offences, **it is relevant to look at drug cases that can provide valuable insights applicable to firearm cases**. The accumulated experience from drug investigations and prosecutions can be especially enlightening for firearm-related matters. The focus on drug offences is not recent, and many measures and investigative techniques appear to have originated from drug investigations. Nowadays, in many drug cases, authorities routinely employ measures such as asset forfeiture (including non-conviction-based confiscation), undercover operations, controlled deliveries, electronic monitoring, and video and audio surveillance, which could also be used to investigate firearms cases.

4.2 Policy implications

1. First, there is a need for a **structural, comprehensive and proactive approach** to tackle both firearms and illicit drug trafficking. States and their institutions require a long-term strategy to combat these phenomena. Policy development in these areas should strive to be less reactive and triggered by specific events, but rather proactive, prioritizing early responses to new and emerging threats and developments.
2. This should be accompanied by a **reduction in the silo approach**, where both phenomena are investigated separately from each other, which often hampers collaboration between institutions. Our findings demonstrate linkages between not only drug and firearms trafficking, but also terrorism and the trafficking of other commodities. Therefore, it is important that these transnational criminal acts are also addressed in a more **integrated** manner, and the importance of collaboration between departments and/or institutions not only emphasized but deepened.
3. The **long life cycle of firearms, increasing the opportunities for their diversion** to the illegal sphere, remains an on-going issue for law enforcement agencies in stopping the flow of firearms into drug trafficking activities. If the risks that create the grounds for diversion of firearms to the drug sphere are limited, the access to firearms that drug traffickers currently enjoy will be decreased. In turn, drug trafficking will entail less gun violence.
4. An important measure in combatting the diversion of firearms is the **identification and limitation of endemic corruption** that creates increased opportunity for legal arms to transfer into the illicit sphere.
5. It is clear that **operational capacities, information exchange and judicial cooperation** should be thoroughly supported and rigorously implemented. To do so, investment in specialized units equipped with sufficient staff, expertise and equipment is necessary.
6. As both forms of trafficking are regional phenomena, the **capacity of regional organizations** such as, for example, CARICOM, ECOWAS or the European Union, should be employed for **improving data collection and sharing information and best practices** between

countries within the same region. This would assist participating States to operate effectively at an international level and improve overall collaboration between States and their institutions.

7. These regional organizations should be **supported by specialized international organizations** with mandates in both areas, such as UNODC and INTERPOL. This would **enable dialogue** at both bilateral and multilateral levels, should foster the **increase of operational capacity of national police forces and criminal justice responses**, and bridge the gap between national procedures when dealing with transnational illicit flows.
8. It is important to **improve the understanding of the dimension and dynamics of the drug and firearms trafficking threat at policy and operational level**. The capacity to effectively monitor illicit flows is a crucial facet of countering multifaceted phenomena such as drug and firearms trafficking. The fluid and innovative nature of trafficking facilitators and collaborators requires a deep understanding of the current and possible routes, actors and *modi operandi*, which are constantly evolving and/or being refined by traffickers. **Research and analysis** should, thus, be prioritized to develop a strategic intelligence picture to accompany operational intelligence for legislators, governments, and law enforcement agencies.
9. International organizations working to address and counter these threats, such as UNODC, should consider the development of **joint projects** that allow to build synergies and combined responses. These should support the implementation of preventive and criminal justice responses, including providing training on combating illicit firearms trafficking for law enforcement responsible for investigating drug trafficking.
10. Furthermore, future projects should address the **cross-cutting role of firearms as an enabler** to other crimes like terrorism, drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime, gang-related violence and domestic violence, assisting countries to respond to the illicit use and trafficking of firearms as a path to reducing the prevalence of these crimes.

5. Conclusion

This issue paper demonstrates the convergence between firearms and drug trafficking on multiple levels. On a global scale, drugs are the most common commodity showing up during firearms seizures. Both forms of transnational crime interconnect with each other in numerous ways and for various reasons. The illicit drug market fuels the demand for firearms because of the instrumental and reputational use of firearms, as well as the considerable profits that are available through drug trafficking activities that can subsequently be reinvested into the acquisition of firearms. To satisfy this demand, drug traffickers use criminal connections to acquire trafficked firearms and/or directly profit from the diversion of firearms from the legal into the illegal domain. Sometimes they are also able to trade drugs directly for firearms.

The interlinkages that draw the two trafficking phenomena together, such as routes, actors, and *modi operandi*, all play a role in conjoining these aspects of trafficking. Pre-established trafficking routes can play a direct and indirect role in establishing firearm trafficking routes, with firearms being trafficked alongside the drugs or used as a means of protection for traffickers. In conjunction with this, firearms and drugs may also travel along similar routes, but in opposite directions, to satisfy demand on either side of the trafficking route.

Despite the drug trade's predominantly non-violent dimension, the criminal demand for firearms connected to drug trafficking and distribution has been linked with firearms (e.g. exchanges of drugs for guns), as well as drug-related gun violence. The levels of violence vary across regions and throughout the different points of the drug market supply chain, with local consumer drug markets accounting for most of the visible violence on a global scale. In some regions, however, very high and lethal levels of gun violence related to the production and wholesale of drugs can be observed.

Drug-related gun violence can have a significant direct and indirect impact on society at large. In some countries, drug and firearms trafficking have also fuelled armed conflict by not only making these tools of violence accessible to non-State armed groups, but also by enabling them to use drug trafficking profits to acquire these weapons and, therefore, increase their opportunities to engage in and/or intensify conflicts. Similarly, terrorists can also use the profits from drug trafficking to finance their violent activities and use their criminal connections from the drugs context to enter illicit gun markets to acquire firearms.

This paper aimed to explore and bring to light the diverse and multifaceted links between these two criminal activities in support of a reflection on how best to address them from a preventive and criminal response perspective. Preventing and combating links between drug and firearms trafficking contributes to undermining the capabilities of drug traffickers, while identifying and building synergies will strengthen the overall response capacity against both illicit flows.



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