

US steadies its aim at gun trafficking into Mexico

Extra manpower is slated to be deployed to the border to pursue smuggling cases, but the huge scale of the problem dwarfs the government's response.

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PHOENIX - A young man is shopping at the Crossroads of the West Gun Show here, and there's plenty to choose from. The cavernous hall is packed with tables loaded with long guns and pistols, some barrels etched with names like El Capitán (The Captain) and El Supremo (The Best).

Eventually he makes a cellphone call, and a young woman soon joins him. At a table he'd visited earlier, he points to several semiautomatic rifles and walks away. She approaches the vendor, handing him \$1,125, cash, for three AK-47s, and fills out the requisite paperwork.

Outside, with the rifles slung over her slight frame, she meets up with the same man. Both are unaware that federal agents are watching, having reason to suspect that he is using her as a "straw man" to buy some big-time firepower for drug cartels or gangs in Mexico.

When the feds swoop in, intercepting the weapons and the woman before she drives from the parking lot, they've ensured that a third individual waiting to receive the guns at a rendezvous point will never get them. But the agents from the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) acknowledge that, despite their best efforts, thousands of such gun-show purchases eventually turn up south of the border, where drug cartels are locked in a violent, escalating battle with the forces of the new Calderón government.

"[President Felipe] Calderón has tightened the lid and turned up the heat," says William Newell, special agent in charge of the ATF's Phoenix division. "It is a war, and the guns and ammo [Mexico's drug lords] are using a lot of times are coming from the US."

To support Mr. Calderón's war against drug traffickers, the United States is starting to ramp up government-to-government assistance. Few figures are available about the scale of the effort, but US officials say it includes moves such as training for Mexican authorities on how to properly trace guns (including those with filed-off serial numbers) and greater cooperation on gun-smuggling investigations.

The ATF is also slated to get manpower reinforcements later this year. Of 100 new hires, 30 will be sent to states on the southern border to work on gun-smuggling investigations – a move that will more than double the number of agents currently dedicated to such cases, say bureau officials.

Still, the scale of the problem would seem to dwarf the new resources being devoted to combating it. Guns sneaked across the border each month number in the thousands, officials say, noting that it's as hard to give a precise figure for guns headed south as it is for drug shipments going north. There's evidence, too, that the weaponry flowing southward is becoming increasingly sophisticated – and lethal. Drug lords' new weapons of choice, says ATF's Mr. Newell, are AK-47s and AR-15s, a variant of the US military's M-16. "On the handgun side, [the drug lords] prefer 9-mm handguns [and] .38 super-caliber and .40 caliber pistols."

In the two years since the ATF launched Operation Gunrunner – a multiagency assault against gun smuggling – the bureau's four border divisions (in Houston, Dallas, Phoenix, and Los Angeles) have boosted the number of gun-trafficking investigations.

"All our field divisions under Gunrunner have shown an increase in trafficking cases to Mexico," says Dewey Webb, special agent in charge of the Houston division. "Obviously we have to do our everyday stuff ..., but most of our groups are focusing on interdicting weapons going to Mexico."

Just last week, Mr. Webb's office and its Mexican counterpart confiscated five AK-47s from a suspect who they say had crossed into Mexico. The Houston area, Webb says, is one of the largest origination points for weapons flowing to the south.

But in a sign that border enforcement there is squeezing the illegal gun trade, traffickers are shifting their routes to Arizona and California.

That means the ATF in Phoenix is also zeroing in on gun stores and gun shows close to the border, to crack down on suspicious transactions like the one on July 7 at the Crossroads of the West Gun Show, says Newell, the division head.

In part, the ATF's presence at gun shows is educational. The bureau often sets up booths at shows to inform buyers and sellers how illicit purchases are made – and to remind the public that buying a gun for someone else is a felony punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

"The gun shows are a crossroads where you have legitimate people exercising their legal rights, but also where there's a criminal element purchasing guns for prohibited confederates," says Thomas Mangan, senior special agent with the ATF in Phoenix. Gun shows are "where firearms trafficking and the drug trade intersect."

More Mexican nationals and known gang members from southern California are frequenting Arizona gun shows, officials report. At the shows, they especially seek out unlicensed merchants holding "private sales," because they know those sellers do not have to fill out ATF Form 4473, which provides trace data that US law requires licensed gun dealers to supply upon a gun sale.

Drug cartels, say officials, have weapons procurers – networks that arrange for straw purchases like the one the ATF intercepted earlier this month in Phoenix. In that case, the young woman "flipped" and is now working with officials to identify others in the network. She was one of the "girls" tapped by the young man – whom authorities say they suspect of being a middleman for a cartel – to buy weapons at the gun show. A single mother of three young children, she was paid \$100 for each of the three weapons she bought, officials say.

"These middlemen will often call several people they know, have them each buy three or four guns until they have 30 or 40," says the ATF's Mr. Mangan. "Then they will send them south across the border."

According to an internal ATF report summarizing just 10 investigations in the Phoenix office since 2006, the gunrunning probes yielded almost 1,000 firearms probably "bound for Mexico, southern Arizona, and southern California."

In one of those cases, ATF officials documented an unlicensed merchant who spent at least 100 days selling firearms at gun shows over the course of a year, violating a law that permits such individuals to divest themselves of their gun collections only once in their lifetimes. Agents reported seizing 129 firearms from this dealer, but "due to the fact that most of the firearms sold by the defendant were obtained from secondary sources and then resold, little documentation exists that would link [guns used in crimes] to the defendant," the report said.

Another ongoing case involves a straw-purchase scheme among a foursome suspected of trafficking 130 firearms to Mexico, southern California, and Arizona. The document states: "To date, 21 [of those 130] firearms have been recovered in crimes, including 16 of them in Mexico. A firearm recovered in Mexico was used in the shooting of a Mexican police officer."

"Our priority is curbing gunrunning in the Southwest," says Newell, who currently manages 24 ATF agents working cases here in Phoenix.

A case for stricter gun-show rules?

In a state that has enacted stricter laws governing gun-show sales than the federal standard, does it make any difference?

Researcher Garen Wintemute says it does. His year-long survey of gun shows in five states found that California's "uniquely restrictive regulatory environment for gun shows" put a damper on the kinds of purchases that the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives is targeting.

California, in effect, doesn't allow unlicensed merchants to sell firearms at gun shows. Critics say that restriction just sends sellers to other venues.

Between April 2005 and March 2006, Dr. Wintemute "eavesdropped" on transactions at eight gun shows each in California and Nevada, six in Arizona, four in Texas, and two in Florida – all leading sources of California's crime guns, his study states.

In California, he found no "private party gun sales between attendees" of gun shows. In the other states, "private party sales appeared about equal in number to sales involving licensed retailers," says his study, released in June.

Wintemute, a professor at the School of Medicine at the University of California at Davis, reported that he observed one vendor at a Phoenix gun show whose sign read "PRIVATE PARTY SALE" in both English and Spanish and who "displayed AK-47-type and AR-15-type assault rifles and AR-15-type pistols."

Wintemute reported witnessing one "straw purchase" in California, compared with 24 definite and three possible straw purchases at the gun shows in the other states.