

US guns fuel Canada and Mexico crimes, UK gun crime remains rare

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Guns smuggled from the US arm criminals in Canada and Mexico, contributing to a higher murder rate in Canada and more intense drug crime conflict near the Mexican border, according to a study published today in a special issue of *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, published by SAGE.

However, authors Philip J. Cook, of Duke University Durham, NC, US, Wendy Cukier Ryerson of the University of Toronto, Canada and Keith Krause from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies Geneva, Switzerland highlight a dearth of empirical evidence on gun crime available to criminologists. Gun violence in North America remains the subject of considerable speculation and debate. In their paper *The Illicit Firearms Trade in North America*, the authors draw upon economics concepts, examining gun crime in the context of each country's regulatory framework.

The US is undoubtedly a major supplier of illegal guns (particularly handguns) to both Canada and Mexico. But limited data hamper efforts to predict the effect of a successful crackdown on illegal firearms by US authorities, the authors suggest. Both policy makers and law enforcement would benefit from research to fill these information gaps.

The data that are available show that the majority of traced handguns recovered from Canadian crime scenes originate in US. Another major source of illegal guns in Canada, and in many other countries is "leakage" from state stockpiles (police and military) through theft,

corruption or other means. For instance, 'insiders' illegally sold over 3000 firearms recovered in crime or surrendered in amnesties to the Metropolitan Toronto Police Service.

Investigators have traced 90 to 95 percent of weapons in Mexico to the US, but how did they get there? The guns sampled may not represent the bigger picture: the figure reflects firearms submitted for tracing by Mexican authorities. Authorities recover only a fraction of firearms from crimes and gun battles, and traces are only requested on some recovered weapons.

Central America, a region awash with weapons imported by both governments and rebel groups during the civil wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala, is a further potential weapon source to Mexico, as are Chinese, Russian, Eastern European, or other sources. To date evidence is mainly anecdotal. Still less is known about the third source of weapons, the Mexican security forces themselves. The Small Arms Survey 2008 showed that weapons diverted from police and armed forces are a major and sometimes the main source of illicit weapons in many countries.

Some weapons used in Mexican crimes such as grenades, RPGs and fully automatic weapons are less easy to acquire in the US, and have probably arrived from elsewhere. This contrasts with Canada, where very few cases detail handguns from anywhere but the US, other than arms illegally diverted from legal Canadian supplies.

According to Cook, the specific impact and effects of illicitly trafficked firearms are unknowns. "Although we know that armed violence can have a variety of deleterious effects on perceived and real insecurity, public health, economic development, and political stability, we do not know how much of this can be associated specifically with changes in the availability of firearms," he says.

Some values can be quantified: Previous research has shown that life expectancy is lowered by 0.6 years for all Mexicans as a result of armed violence, with the US and Canada figures at 0.31 and 0.08, respectively. But firearms' negative effects are highly context dependent, with factors such as demand strength, types of weapons circulating, social groups with weapons access and reasons they possess them all contributing to the mix.

"The use of guns by criminal groups increases their relative power, and in the dramatic circumstances we see in Mexico, contributes to subverting legitimate authority and creating such fear as to have a substantial economic and political impact," says Cook.

The rate of gun homicide in Canada is statistically low and falling, yet public perception is that gun crime is rising. When Toronto, a city with 2.8 million people hit 52 gun homicides in 2005, it became "the year of the gun" in spite of the fact that the city had one of the lowest murder rates on the continent for a city of its size. Rates of homicide with guns are 6.7 times higher in the US than in Canada, and the US has 5.1 times Canada's rate per 100,000 of gun robberies.

The authors speculate US authorities would not only have to stem the supply of smuggled weapons from the US, but also other potential sources to successfully block the flow of deadly arms to criminals and criminal organizations.

Statements made by public officials are usually intended to influence public opinion by offering conclusions, rather than to inform researchers' analyses, the authors believe. They call for more data from criminal investigations and gun tracing to be made available to researchers.

"A broader inquiry is warranted," says Cook. "The stakes are very high

for developing effective strategies for limiting the illicit movements of guns."

Another paper in the same issue on firearms discusses the UK and the Netherlands, which have among the lowest occurrence of gun-homicide in advanced industrial democracies. In *Third Wave Criminology, guns, crime and social order*, Adam Edwards of Cardiff University, UK and James Sheptycki, of York University, Canada use these examples to illustrate the evolution of criminology in the context of evolving paradigms from the sociology of science in the wake of postmodernism, and towards a basis for action in the face of scientific uncertainty.

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