

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 18, 2025

Acting Director Marvin G. Richardson,
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives
99 New York Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20226

Acting Director Caleb Vitello
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
500 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20536-5009

Dear Director Dettelbach and Deputy Director Lechleitner,

We are writing to express our concerns regarding the smuggling of guns across the southern U.S. border into Mexico. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) published a report in 2021 on U.S. efforts to disrupt gun smuggling across our southern border into Mexico.¹ The trafficking of firearms is a threat to the safety and security of both the U.S. and Mexico. At the time of the report, the Mexican government estimated that 200,000 firearms are smuggled from the United States each year. These guns are being used by cartels to further along illegal gun trade and have links to organized crime. The GAO has outlined the data and given recommendations on how to combat this threat to U.S. national security, but unfortunately some of these recommendations have still yet to be implemented.

The Department of Justice's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) found that 70 percent of firearms recovered in Mexico from 2014 to 2018 were U.S. sourced. In addition to this, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has identified smuggling trends by analyzing 1,012 firearms that were seized in the U.S. by Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agencies. Yet, in 2021, ICE had not analyzed ATF data on roughly 56,000 U.S. firearms recovered in Mexico. More recently, a 2024 data leak of Mexican military intelligence obtained by USA TODAY traced 78,000 firearms recovered in Mexico to the United States over a period from 2018 to 2022.² A 2024 report from the nonprofit Stop US Arms to Mexico, similarly found that of the guns recovered from criminals in Mexico in 2022, more than 15,000 could be traced to the United States.³

Some U.S. agencies have taken efforts to combat the trafficking of American firearms to Mexico. In April of 2020, the ATF established "Operation Southbound" to coordinate with other agencies to stop the smuggling of firearms. According to the White House, that program continues to make gains, seizing 2,000 firearms in the first of FY23 – 65.8% increase over the same period of FY22. More than 80,000 rounds of ammunition were also seized in the first two

¹ [Firearms Trafficking: U.S. Efforts to Disrupt Gun Smuggling into Mexico Would Benefit from Additional Data and Analysis | U.S. GAO](#)

² [Hacked data reveals how guns from US landed in hands of Mexican cartel \(usatoday.com\)](#)

³ [Iron river report \(stopusarmstomexico.org\)](#)

quarters of FY23.⁴ The Department of State has also made attempts to coordinate with the Mexican government to address this issue. For example, they provided \$54 million to assist Mexico in building its capacity to disrupt trafficking with forensics trainings, canines trained for weapon detection, and inspection equipment. While these agencies are working to do more to combat this weapons trafficking, they must do more to share information on their investigations and to track their performance.

When the GAO published its report in 2021, it made eight recommendations to ATF and ICE to tackle this challenge. Years later, three of these recommendations have still yet to be implemented. First, the GAO recommends that the Director of ATF, working with ICE, should identify a mechanism for sharing aggregated information with Homeland Security Investigations about firearms recovered in Mexico and traced to the United States. Second, they recommend that the Director of ICE should ensure that Homeland Security Investigations analyzes additional information – for example, data that ATF shares about U.S.-sourced firearms recovered in Mexico – to supplement its existing analysis identifying smuggling trends and patterns. Third, the Director of ICE should ensure that Homeland Security Investigations, in consultation with relevant agencies, develops performance measures to assess the results of its efforts to investigate firearms smuggling into Mexico.

Implementing these recommendations in your respective agencies will strengthen the national security of both the United States and Mexico. These weapons are fueling the illegal operations of transnational criminals in Mexico and elsewhere in the region, including enabling their trafficking of deadly drugs. As you continue your work targeting these criminals, we ask that you prioritize implementing these recommendations within your agencies as part of this effort.

Sincerely,



Chrissy Houlahan
Member of Congress



Juan Ciscomani
Member of Congress

⁴ [FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration's Ongoing Efforts to Stem Firearms Trafficking to Mexico | The White House](#)