



A gang member looks out of the window to check his turf in Harlem, New York, July 2007.

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On the Record

ILLICIT WEAPONS IN THE UNITED STATES

INTRODUCTION

During the crack epidemic in the United States in the 1980s and early 1990s, a steady stream of movies, television shows, and songs depicting gang life and drug violence in US cities captured the popular imagination.¹ Among the most startling of these images were drive-by shootings: teenaged gang members spraying blighted city neighbourhoods with bullets fired from automatic rifles and machine pistols. These scenes—and the assumptions that underpin them—continue to shape public perceptions of urban violence in the United States today.² But how accurate are these images? Are automatic rifles and machine pistols as widely used by drug traffickers and gang members as commonly assumed? If not, what weapons do they rely on, and are they the same as the weapons acquired by other criminals? Do the types of weapons seized from criminals vary from city to city?

This chapter seeks to answer these questions through an analysis of data on firearms and other weapons recovered by US law enforcement authorities. It is the third instalment of the Small Arms Survey's multi-year study on illicit small arms and light weapons, which seeks to improve public understanding of illicit weapons by obtaining and analysing previously unreleased or under-utilized data from official (government) sources. To this end, the Survey obtained records on more than 140,000 small arms, light weapons, and rounds of light weapons ammunition taken into custody by police in eight US cities and towns. The records shed light on weapons seized from felons, drug traffickers, gang members, and other violent criminals.

The main findings of this chapter include the following:

- The majority of the firearms seized from felons, drug traffickers, and gang members in the eight US cities and towns studied were handguns, accounting for 77 per cent of firearms recovered from these groups.
- At least 70 per cent of the seized handguns were semi-automatic pistols of various makes and models—the most common type of firearm recovered from criminals in the municipalities studied.
- Seizure rates for handguns and long guns in the United States are the inverse of those in Mexico, where approximately 72 per cent of the seized weapons studied in the second phase of this project were long guns.
- Rifles accounted for only a small fraction of seized firearms: less than 12 per cent, with only about half of them semi-automatic models, including those commonly termed 'assault rifles'. This is noteworthy given widespread civilian ownership of rifles in the United States and their frequent seizure from criminals in Mexico.
- US-designed AR-15-pattern rifles—often called 'the most popular rifle in America' (Goode, 2012)—were seized at less than half the rate of Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles.
- Despite a ban on the importation of firearms from China, a large proportion of the seized semi-automatic rifles were Chinese-made.
- The number of machine guns seized in the eight cities and towns was negligible.

Box 8.1 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this study, 'illicit small arms and light weapons' are weapons that are produced, transferred, held, or used in violation of national or international law. The chapter uses the term 'illicit' rather than 'illegal' to include cases of unclear or contested legality. The terms 'small arms' and 'firearms' are used interchangeably and refer to the following items:

- revolvers and self-loading pistols;
- rifles³ and carbines;
- shotguns;
- sub-machine guns; and
- light and heavy machine guns.

The term 'light weapons' refers to:

- mortar systems of calibres of 120 mm or less;
- hand-held, under-barrel, and automatic grenade launchers;
- hand grenades;
- recoilless guns;
- portable rocket launchers, including rockets fired from single-shot, disposable launch tubes;
- portable missiles and launchers, namely anti-tank guided weapons (ATGWs) and man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS);
- landmines;
- improvised explosive devices (IEDs); and
- ammunition for light weapons.

Unless otherwise specified, data analysed and referenced in this chapter includes only these items.⁴ 'Kalashnikov-pattern', 'SKS-pattern', and 'AR-15 pattern' rifles refer to the various automatic and semi-automatic rifles modelled on the Kalashnikov series and SKS rifles originally produced in the Soviet Union and its client states, and on the US-designed AR-15 rifle. Semi-automatic versions of these rifles are popular among civilian firearm owners in the United States.

For the purposes of this chapter, the term 'municipality' is defined as 'a city or town that has corporate status and local government' (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.). The definition of 'crime of violence' is taken from the US Sentencing Commission's federal sentencing *Guidelines Manual* (USSC, 2012, pp. 262-63). The definition for the term 'drug trafficking' is based on the same manual and refers to the 'manufacture, import, export, distribution, or dispensing of, or offer to sell a controlled substance (or a counterfeit substance) or the possession of a controlled substance [. . .] with intent to manufacture, import, export, distribute or dispense' (p. 263).



A police officer holds a handgun seized from a suspected drug dealer, Los Angeles, September 2007. © Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images

- Light weapons constitute a very small percentage of weapons taken into custody by police departments in the United States. Those that are recovered tend to be old, improvised, inert, or incomplete.

The chapter begins by providing a brief overview of the data used in the study and by defining key terms and concepts (see Box 8.1). It then offers an in-depth analysis of firearms seized from felons, drug traffickers, and gang members, along with firearms linked to certain violent crimes in Columbus, Ohio. The chapter then assesses the types and prevalence of light weapons recovered by US authorities. It concludes with additional observations about illicit small arms in the United States, including a comparison with illicit weapons in other countries.

ANALYSING THE DATA

The Small Arms Survey submitted requests for data on seized firearms, ammunition, and other weapons to police departments in 43 cities and towns,⁵ with the aim of obtaining a geographically diverse sample of data on weapons seized by police forces in municipalities of different sizes. Police departments from 19 municipalities provided data in response to the requests.⁶ Of these data sets, the records provided by the following eight municipalities were sufficiently comprehensive⁷ and detailed to use in this study:

- Albuquerque, New Mexico;
- Boise, Idaho;
- Columbus, Ohio;
- Denham Springs, Louisiana;
- Houston, Texas;
- Los Angeles, California;

- Satellite Beach, Florida; and
- Washington, DC.

Combined, these cities and towns provided records on more than 140,000 small arms, light weapons, and rounds of light weapons ammunition taken into custody.

Nearly all of the data used in this study provides the date of the seizure; the quantity of weapons seized; and the type, make, model, and calibre of each seized weapon. The data also identifies the reason why the weapons were taken into custody, including any criminal charges linked to the weapons. Some of the data also identifies the location of the seizure, the serial number, the condition of the serial number, and/or the country of manufacture of the seized weapons. With the exception of the data from Columbus, the data sets reflect weapons taken into custody from 2007 to 2012 inclusive.

The Columbus Police Department (CPD) provided the most detailed data. In addition to the above-mentioned information, the CPD records—which cover weapons taken into custody from 2010 to 2012—identify the magazine capacity and barrel length of each seized firearm, and provide a complete accounting of the ammunition found in the weapon. The records from Columbus also include the date of birth, sex, and race of the individual from whom the weapon was seized or received, and a brief description of the events that led up to the seizure or receipt of the weapon (see Box 8.2).

Table 8.1 lists the municipalities studied, the number of small arms and light weapons identified in the records provided by their police departments, and the type of data the records contain.

Table 8.1 Data on small arms and light weapons taken into custody by the eight municipalities studied

City	Number of weapons*	Years	Items		Incident number	Quantity	Type	Make or manufacturer	Model	Calibre	Serial number	Serial condition	Country of manufacture	Seizure location	Seizure location description	Offence code	Seizure or crime date
			Small arms	Light weapons													
Albuquerque, New Mexico	10,035	2007-12	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	-	X	X
Boise, Idaho	1,601	2007-12	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	-	X	X
Columbus, Ohio	7,000**	2010-12	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	-	X	X
Denham Springs, Louisiana	27	2007-12	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	X	X
Houston, Texas	83,489	2002-12 [†]	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	X	X	X	X
Los Angeles, California	30,672	2007-12	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	-	-	-	X	X
Satellite Beach, Florida	59	2007-12	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	-	X	X
Washington, DC	13,662	2007-12	X	-	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X

Notes:
 * The numbers in the weapons column reflect only seized small arms, light weapons, and rounds of light weapons ammunition.
 ** Figure rounded to minimize potential double-counting.
 † The study uses data on small arms seized from 2007 to 2012 and on light weapons seized from 2002 to 2012.

As revealed by the data, police departments take custody of small arms and light weapons for a variety of reasons. For example, nearly 25 per cent of the 13,662 firearms recovered in Washington, DC, were 'found' weapons or weapons taken into custody for 'safekeeping' or for 'destruction'. The vast majority of the remaining weapons were linked to criminal charges ranging from 'carrying a firearm without a license' and 'hit & run' traffic accidents to carjacking, kidnapping, and homicide. Crimes linked to firearms in Los Angeles are similarly broad, including not only murder, kidnapping, assault, and other common violent crimes, but also more unusual criminal activity. Since 2009, officers from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) have seized firearms from individuals suspected or accused of 'possess[ing] a game cock for fighting', 'challenging to [a] duel', and 'tamper[ing] with a railroad apparatus'.

While the data sets obtained for this study are notable for their size and detail, they have certain limitations. First, not all weapons taken into custody by police departments are crime guns. Although the data permits identification of some of the guns that were not used in crime or by criminals, the coding is often ambiguous. For example, a firearm categorized under the offence code 'murder' could be the weapon used to commit the murder or it could have been found on the victim or at the residence of a suspect. To minimize the effects of this ambiguity, the chapter focuses on 10,435 firearms that were linked to offence codes involving felons, drug traffickers, and gang members.⁸ This approach allowed for the exclusion of firearms linked to offence codes for which a high percentage of seized firearms were probably not possessed or used illegally, or for which



Guns seized by the police in Washington, DC, are stored in the firearms examination section at police headquarters, March 2008. © Nicholas Kamm/AFP Photo



the legal status of the possession or use is difficult to assess. It also facilitated more in-depth evaluations of specific crimes and clearly defined categories of criminals, including felons, drug traffickers, and gang members—three groups of particular concern to US authorities.⁹

Another data limitation is the lack of information on court verdicts, given that it is possible that some suspects were acquitted of the charges mentioned in the data. The weapons taken from those suspects would not normally have been held or used illegally. The data also reveals little about how weapons enter and circulate in the black market. With some exceptions, the records do not identify the proximate or ultimate source of the weapons, or how the most recent end users acquired them. Annual summaries of data on weapons traced by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) identify the source states of traced weapons, but these summaries provide little information on how they are diverted or their movement after they enter the black market.

Nor is it clear whether the seized weapons are representative of the broader population of illicit small arms in the United States. The data only reflects weapons taken into custody by police, rather than a random sample of weapons that were held by illicit end users or used illegally. Furthermore, the data only covers seizures in eight municipalities. The number of records and the geographic and demographic diversity of the municipalities studied increase the likelihood that the data represents firearms taken into custody by police nationwide, but the extent to which these firearms are representative of the broader population of illicit small arms in the United States is uncertain.

This concern particularly applies to the data on seized light weapons, which is less complete than the firearm data. Only two of the eight municipalities studied—Houston and Los Angeles—provided light weapons data, and even this data may not fully account for all light weapons taken into custody. Interviews with officials from the sample municipalities reveal that at least some police departments do not take custody of live munitions (such as grenades, mortars, rockets, and missiles). Instead, these items are collected and stored by other government entities or departments and, as a result, they are not captured in police data.

**Newly released
data sheds
important light on
illicit small arms.**

To compensate for these gaps, the research for this study included a review of media reports and other open-source accounts of seized light weapons in the states where the eight municipalities are located: California, Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, New Mexico, Ohio, and Texas, along with Washington, DC. Combined, these reports include information on nearly 400 light weapons and rounds of light weapons ammunition recovered by authorities from 2007 through 2012. When viewed alongside the records provided by the Houston Police Department (HPD) and the LAPD, the data offers some insight into the illicit acquisition, possession, and use of light weapons in the United States. The resulting data set is more robust than the limited data on the 123 light weapons and ammunition provided by the HPD and the LAPD, but the extent to which it is representative of light weapons seized in the United States as a whole is unknown.

Comparing data on the small arms and light weapons seized in the municipalities is complicated by differences in database coding and offence terminology. Some of the municipalities include very specific coding on criminal charges linked to seized weapons while coding in other data sets is more general or vague. In the data set from the HPD, for example, offences categorized as ‘assault with a deadly weapon’ are broken down by weapon type (such as ‘aggravated assault (deadly weapon)/by firearms’ or ‘by cutting instrument’), while the Metropolitan Police Department of Washington, DC, aggregates all such assaults in a single category (‘assault with a deadly weapon’).

Local gun laws also affect the comparability of different data sets. Some weapons or activities that are illegal in one municipality are not illegal in others. For example, the state of California bans a sub-set of semi-automatic rifles defined as ‘assault rifles’ that are legally owned and sold in other states. Thus, a comparison of aggregated data on weapons seized by authorities in Los Angeles may include more ‘assault rifles’ than in Houston simply because there are more restrictions on the possession and sale of such rifles in Los Angeles than in Houston. These differences also highlight the difficulty of distinguishing ‘illicit weapons’ from ‘legal weapons’ in countries such as the United States, where laws on firearms vary from municipality to municipality and often change over time.

Despite these limitations, the newly released data sheds important light on illicit small arms and light weapons in the United States, including the type, make, model, and calibre of these weapons, and the crimes to which they are linked. Few publicly available data sets on illicit firearms are as large or detailed, and the release of this information underscores the immense, largely untapped analytic potential of the millions of unclassified records on seized weapons compiled and stored by local, state, and federal government agencies.

ARMED VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

Few countries have a larger or more diverse civilian market for firearms than the United States. The Small Arms Survey estimates that, as of 2007, there were 270 million firearms owned by US civilians (Karp, 2011), which range from palm-sized .22 calibre derringers to five-foot-long .50 calibre sniper rifles. In so large a civilian market even a very low rate of illegal acquisition and usage translates into substantial numbers of illicit weapons.

Firearms factor prominently in violent crime in the United States. In 2011, nearly 70 per cent of homicides were committed with firearms, according to the US Department of Justice. Firearms were also involved in roughly 26 per cent of robberies and 31 per cent of aggravated assaults (Planty and Truman, 2013; see Table 8.2).

The types of firearms used in violent crimes vary, but recent data suggests that most were committed with handguns. Data published by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) indicates that at least 72 per cent of firearm murders in 2012 involved handguns. Shotguns and rifles accounted for just 3 per cent and 4 per cent of firearm murders, respectively. Handguns were also used in most of the gang- and drug-related murders identified in the FBI's data. At least 77 per cent of firearm murders that were linked to drug charges involved handguns, as were 75 and 83 per cent of 'gangland killings' and 'juvenile gang killings,' respectively (FBI, 2013, table 11). Data from 2011 on the use of firearms

Table 8.2 Percentage of violence involving a firearm in the United States, by type of crime, 1993-2011

Year	Homicide	Non-fatal violence ^a	Robbery	Aggravated assault
1993	71.2	9.1	22.3	30.7
1994	71.4	9.2	27.1	31.9
1995	69.0	7.8	27.3	28.0
1996	68.0	7.8	24.6	25.7
1997	68.0	7.6	19.9	27.0
1998	65.9	7.0	20.1	26.5
1999	64.1	6.0	19.2	22.4
2000	64.4	7.2	21.1	26.6
2001 ^b	55.9	7.5	29.5	26.0
2002	67.1	7.3	23.4	28.7
2003	67.2	6.1	22.4	22.2
2004	67.0	6.8	19.7	23.6
2005	68.2	7.2	21.8	25.7
2006	68.9	7.3	16.6	24.3
2007	68.8	8.1	20.0	32.6
2008	68.3	5.8	19.6	24.6
2009	68.4	7.2	27.0	23.2
2010	68.1	8.4	24.7	25.4
2011 ^c	69.6	8.0	25.7	30.6

Notes:

For standard errors, see Planty and Truman (2013, appendix table 4).

^a Non-fatal violence includes rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated and simple assault. A small percentage of rape and sexual assaults involved firearms but is not shown in the table due to small sample sizes.

^b The estimated number of homicides that occurred as a result of the events of 11 September 2001 is included in the total number of homicides.

^c Figures for 2011 are based on preliminary homicide estimates.

Source: Planty and Truman (2013, p. 3)

in non-fatal criminal firearm violence¹⁰ indicates that handguns were used in more than 88 per cent of these offences (Planty and Truman, 2013, p. 3).

While still high compared to other industrialized countries (UNODC, 2013), firearm violence in the United States has decreased significantly over the past 20 years. The number of firearm homicides fell by nearly 40 per cent from 1993 to 2011, and non-fatal firearm-related violent victimizations¹¹ fell by 70 per cent from 1993 to 2004 (Planty and Truman, 2013, p. 1). The percentage of violent crimes involving firearms has remained fairly consistent, however. Even as crime rates have fallen in the United States, criminal activity involving firearms has remained relatively common and continues to be a major concern for policy-makers and the public.

The Survey received records on more than 140,000 small arms and light weapons.

In 2013, after several high-profile incidents of firearms violence, US lawmakers put forward proposals to strengthen federal laws and regulations on the manufacture, ownership, and transfer of firearms. These included legislative proposals to establish a nationwide ban on the manufacture and import of ‘assault weapons’¹² and detachable large-capacity ammunition magazines, expand the current system of background checks and record-keeping requirements,¹³ and increase penalties for firearms trafficking. There was insufficient support to enact these proposals into law, however.¹⁴

ILLICIT SMALL ARMS IN THE UNITED STATES

As noted above, the Survey received records on more than 140,000 small arms, light weapons, and rounds of light weapons ammunition taken into custody by police departments in the eight municipalities studied. The vast majority of these weapons were firearms. The records shed light on the type, calibre, make, and model of firearms recovered by authorities in the United States, including weapons seized from groups of particular concern for US policy-makers. This section assesses data on seizures from three of these groups: felons, drug traffickers, and gang members.

Possession of small arms by felons

US federal law prohibits the possession of firearms by several categories of individuals, including:

- convicted felons;¹⁵
- fugitives from justice;
- unlawful users of controlled substances;
- illegal aliens;
- individuals who have renounced their US citizenship;
- individuals ‘adjudicated as mentally defective’ or committed to a mental institution;
- individuals dishonourably discharged from the military; and
- individuals convicted of domestic violence-related offences, or subject to a court order restraining them for ‘harassing, stalking, or threatening’ intimate partners or their children (US, 2011, para. g).

With some exceptions,¹⁶ it is illegal for anyone falling within one or more of these categories to receive, possess, ship, or transport firearms. It is also illegal to transfer firearms to them.¹⁷ Firearms seized from these individuals are therefore considered illicit for the purposes of this study.

Of the eight cities and towns studied, law enforcement agencies in Albuquerque, Columbus, Denham Springs, Houston, Los Angeles, and Satellite Beach provided data that explicitly identifies firearms seized from felons or otherwise linked to charges associated with possession of a firearm by a felon.

The data reveals notable similarities across the municipalities studied in terms of the types of small arms recovered from felons and the ratios of the various types of small arms seized. In four of the major metropolitan areas,¹⁸ most of the seized firearms were handguns, most of which were semi-automatic pistols.¹⁹ Shotguns accounted for 8–9 per cent of firearms seized from felons in three of these cities, with the figure for Columbus slightly higher, at 16 per cent.

Seized rifles constituted 6–16 per cent of firearms recovered from felons in the four major metropolitan areas studied. Semi-automatic rifles, including rifles commonly categorized as ‘assault weapons’, accounted for just 3–8 per cent of seized firearms. A large proportion of seized semi-automatic rifles were identified as Chinese-made—this despite a US ban on the importation of most Chinese firearms since 1994. With some exceptions, the ban applies to all firearms and components, along with ‘any unfinished forgings, castings, extrusions, and machined bodies for the component parts used in the assembly/manufacture of these firearms [that] may have originated in the People’s Republic of China’ (ATF, 2011). Exempt from the ban are sporting shotguns, along with older firearm models that qualify as ‘curios or relics’²⁰ and ‘have been stored for a five year period immediately prior to importation in a non-proscribed country or area’ (US, 2012a).²¹

Of the 106 semi-automatic rifles²² seized from felons in Houston, 23 were Chinese-made Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles. The data does not identify the date of manufacture of the seized firearms and thus it is unclear whether the rifles were imported before or after the import ban took effect in 1994. Given the large numbers of Chinese-made rifles imported prior to the ban (Nalder, 1993), it appears likely that many of the seized rifles were imported before 1994. Some of the rifles may also be ‘curios or relics’. Any rifles of recent vintage and bearing markings indicating that they were manufactured or imported after 1994 would normally have arrived in the United States in violation of the import ban. Determining how many, if any, of the rifles fit this description would require more data than is currently (publicly) available.

The seized semi-automatic rifles also reflect the popularity of Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles in the United States. In Houston, nearly half of the rifles identified by make or model were identified as Kalashnikov- or SKS-pattern rifles, as were approximately one-quarter of such rifles seized in Albuquerque and Columbus. In Los Angeles, other types of semi-automatic rifles were more common. While the LAPD recovered Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles, the majority of the rifles seized from felons in Los Angeles were other makes and models.

Few large-calibre rifles and machine guns were recovered. Only four .50 calibre rifles were seized from felons in the cities and towns studied, and the only firearm identified as a ‘machine gun’ is a .45 calibre weapon made by a US-based manufacturer that sells semi-automatic military-style pistols and rifles. The data also lists several ‘machine pistols’, most of which appear to be semi-automatic variants of fully automatic firearms. This is not surprising given the limited number of machine guns in the US civilian inventory and the comparatively strict controls to which such guns are subject. Starting in 1934, the US government began to require that machine guns be registered and imposed a tax of USD 200—the inflation-adjusted equivalent of approximately USD 3,400—on each transfer.²³ In 1986, the US Congress passed a law banning the private possession of machine guns except for those already legally owned and registered with the US government as of May 1986 (Krouse, 2013, pp. 6–7).

Decades of heavy taxation and strict controls on ownership have limited the quantity of machine guns available in the United States, among both criminals and the law-abiding population. Data published by the ATF indicates that, as of April 2013, it had records of 505,861 registered ‘machine guns’ and parts for machine guns (ATF, 2013a, p. 14). Since the data includes parts, the number of assembled, fully functional machine guns is significantly lower—approximately 182,000 units according to one estimate (E. Johnson, 2013). The combination of strict controls on the possession

Taxation and ownership controls limit the quantity of machine guns in the United States.

and transfer of machine guns and the small national civilian inventories helps explain the extremely low rate of illegal use and possession of these weapons in the United States. 'To the extent it can be known', observes analyst William Krouse, 'legally registered [National Firearms Act] machine guns are rarely, if ever, used in crime' (Krouse, 2013, p. 7). The data on firearms seized from felons in the six municipalities is consistent with this claim.

Small arms linked to drug trafficking offences

As noted above, the widespread depiction of machine-gun-toting gangs battling for control over street corners has shaped public perceptions of drugs and guns. These perceptions were reinforced by initial research on assault weapons (AWs), as Christopher Koper explains:

Early studies of AWs, though sometimes based on limited and potentially unrepresentative data, [. . .] suggested that AWs recovered by police were often associated with drug trafficking and organized crime [. . .], fueling a perception that AWs were guns of choice among drug dealers and other particularly violent groups (Koper, 2004, p. 14).

Data on weapons seized from drug traffickers in the eight municipalities studied challenges these perceptions and provides new information on the firearms most frequently carried by drug traffickers.²⁴

Media portrayals of drugs and guns are correct in that firearms are an integral part of the drug trade and the violence that accompanies it. Since 2008, the FBI has identified



A detective with the Los Angeles Police Department gang unit searches the apartment of an arrested drug dealer, April 2010. © Robert Nickelsberg/Getty



Table 8.3 Firearms recovered in drug trafficking cases, 2007-12

Weapon type*	Albuquerque		Boise		Columbus		Denham Springs		Houston		Los Angeles		Satellite Beach		Washington, DC	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Handguns	Derringers	11	1	<1	4	4	-	-	15	<1	30	1	-	-	2	<1
	Pistols, semi-automatic	506	55	37	30	61	54	-	984	52	1,082	45	-	-	238	62
	Pistols, other	-	-	-	-	2	2	-	6	<1	17	<1	-	-	1	<1
	Pistols, unclear or unspecified	-	-	13	11	-	-	1	50	12	<1	-	-	-	-	-
	Revolvers	115	13	12	10	15	13	-	341	18	536	22	1	50	76	20
	Handguns, unclear or unspecified	-	-	5	4	1	<1	-	-	2	<1	-	-	1	50	-
Total	632	69	68	55	83	74	1	50	1,360	72	1,665	69	2	100	317	83
Rifles	Bolt-action	25	3	10	8	-	-	-	35	2	107	4	-	-	3	<1
	Carbine	†	†	†	†	†	†	†	42	2	9	<1	†	†	-	-
	Semi-automatic	81	9	17	14	12	11	-	108	6	229	10	-	-	12	3
	Automatic	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	<1	4	<1	-	-	1	<1
	Other	18	2	2	2	1	<1	-	29	2	60	2	-	-	-	-
	Unclear or unspecified	66	7	11	9	-	-	-	7	<1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	190	21	40	33	13	12	-	-	229	12	409	17	-	16	4	
Shotguns	Semi-automatic	4	<1	1	<1	-	-	-	21	1	34	1	-	-	4	1
	Other	58	6	10	8	9	8	1	197	11	291	12	-	-	12	3
	Unclear or unspecified	30	3	3	2	5	4	-	12	<1	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Total	92	10	14	11	14	13	1	50	12	325	13	-	-	16	4

Weapon type*	Albuquerque		Boise		Columbus		Denham Springs		Houston		Los Angeles		Satellite Beach		Washington, DC	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Machine guns	-	-	-	-	1	<1	-	-	1	<1	8	<1	-	-	-	-
'Machine pistols' and 'submachine guns'	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	17	<1	2	<1	-	-	1	<1
Total	-	-	-	-	1	<1	1	<1	18	<1	10	<1	-	-	1	<1
Other firearms	-	-	1	<1	-	-	-	-	8	<1	-	-	-	-	29	8
Air guns, starter guns, stun guns	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other, unclear, or unspecified firearms	2	<1	-	-	1	<1	-	-	31	2	2	<1	-	-	3	<1
Total	2	<1	1	<1	1	<1	1	<1	39	2	2	<1	-	-	32	8
Total firearms linked to drug trafficking cases	916		123		112		2		1,876		2,411		2		382	

Notes:

Percentage totals may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding of sub-totals.
 * As identified by the HPD, the LAPD, and the Metropolitan Police Department of Washington, DC. The Small Arms Survey categorized some of the data on firearms provided by the police departments of Albuquerque, Boise, Columbus, Denham Springs, and Satellite Beach based on the model of the relevant firearms.

† Sub-category not used by the data source.

more than 2,200 murders linked to 'narcotics drug laws.' Firearms play a role in the vast majority of these murders. Of the 362 homicides in 2012 identified by the FBI, for example, more than 85 per cent involved firearms (FBI, 2013, table 11). Yet most of these murders were committed with handguns, not machine guns; indeed, at least 240 of the 311 homicides identified involved handguns. This affinity for handguns extends beyond the small number of drug traffickers who commit murder. Of the 5,824 seized firearms linked to drug trafficking offences in the eight municipalities studied, more than 70 per cent were handguns, most of which were conventional semi-automatic pistols (see Table 8.3).²⁵

Machine guns accounted for only a small fraction of seizures from drug traffickers. Less than one per cent of the seized firearms linked to drug trafficking offences were identified as 'automatic rifles', 'machine guns', 'machine pistols', or 'submachine guns'. Furthermore, many of the firearms categorized as 'machine pistols' or 'submachine guns' appear to be semi-automatic models.²⁶ Semi-automatic rifles were seized at higher rates but still constituted only a small percentage of all seized firearms. Table 8.3 provides a detailed summary of the types of firearms seized in drug trafficking cases.

Another (often implicit) assumption about firearms wielded by drug traffickers is that they are equipped with high-capacity magazines. Only a small percentage of the records from the eight municipalities identify the magazine capacity of the seized weapons and therefore a definitive assessment of this assumption is not possible. Nevertheless, data provided by the CPD provides a snapshot of

Table 8.4 Magazine capacity of firearms taken into custody by the Columbus Police Department, 2010–12

Magazine capacity	All weapons taken into custody		Violent crimes [†]		Drug trafficking cases	
	Quantity	%	Quantity	%	Quantity	%
≤10 rounds	1,277	70	160	71	72	72
11–29 rounds	489	27	61	27	21	21
≥30 rounds	70	4	5	2	7	7
Total firearms identified by magazine capacity	1,836		226		100	

Notes:

The figures in this table only include firearms for which magazine capacity is identified. Percentage totals may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding of sub-totals.

[†] These figures only include violent crimes in which it is clear from the record that the seized firearm was used in the crime or seized from the suspect.

magazine capacity in that city. For the purposes of this study, a large-capacity magazine is one that holds more than ten rounds of ammunition. Of the 100 firearms the CPD seized in drug trafficking cases and in which magazine capacity is identified, only 28 reportedly held more than ten rounds. This figure is roughly comparable to the percentage of large-capacity magazines in all weapons recovered by the CPD during the time period studied. The percentage of magazines holding 30 or more rounds was higher in cases of drug trafficking, but the difference is not great—7 per cent in drug trafficking cases vs. 4 per cent for all weapons taken into custody (see Table 8.4).

The data also reveals several important differences between the small arms linked to drug traffickers in the United States and those seized from their counterparts in neighbouring Mexico. These differences illustrate the diverse nature of illicit small arms worldwide, which vary not only by region, but also from country to country. Whereas pistols are the most frequently seized firearm in the United States, including from drug traffickers, data compiled by the Small Arms Survey suggests that rifles are the most common illicit firearms seized in Mexico, including from drug cartels. In fact, the seizure rates for handguns and long guns (machine guns, rifles, shotguns, and sub-machine guns) in the United States are the inverse of those in Mexico, where approximately 72 per cent of the roughly 4,200 seized weapons studied were long guns (Schroeder, 2013b, p. 290).

There are other differences between the types of firearms seized in the United States and in Mexico, although these differences are less significant than depictions of caches seized in Mexico might suggest.²⁷ As noted in the *Small Arms Survey 2013*, Mexican authorities have recovered .50 calibre anti-materiel rifles and machine guns, which are often prominently displayed in photos of weapons seized from drug traffickers. Yet, of the 4,200 weapons seized in Mexico that were analysed by the Survey, only 11 were identified as .50 calibre rifles or machine guns, suggesting that they constitute a very small percentage of cartel inventories. The same is true of 5.7 × 28 mm ‘cop killer’ pistols, often described as a ‘weapon of choice’ of the drug cartels.²⁸ Pistols of this calibre account for less than two per cent of the 996 handguns identified by model or calibre in Mexico (Schroeder, 2013b, pp. 291–93).

Even fewer large-calibre firearms and 5.7 mm pistols are identified in the data on weapons seized from drug traffickers in the United States. There are no records of seized .50 calibre machine guns in any of the eight cities and towns studied, and authorities only recovered five .50 calibre rifles, two of which were identified as muzzle-loading models. The only other .50 calibre firearms were handguns: four semi-automatic pistols and a revolver. Similarly, very few 5.7 × 28 mm pistols were seized. Of the more than 4,100 handguns recovered in drug trafficking cases, only 11 were identified as having or presumed to have a calibre of 5.7 mm, and nine of these were seized in Houston. No pistols of

this calibre were identified in the drug trafficking cases studied in Albuquerque, Boise, Columbus, Denham Springs, Satellite Beach, or Washington, DC.²⁹

Small arms linked to gangs and gang activities

Another subcategory of criminal activity that is of great concern to US policy-makers and the public is the illegal possession and use of firearms by street gangs.³⁰ FBI homicide data reveals that ‘juvenile gang killings’³¹ accounted for at least 720 homicides in 2012. Ninety-five per cent of these homicides involved firearms (FBI, 2013, table 11). These figures suggest the continuation of a trend in which firearms have played an increasingly important role in gang violence. As documented by the US Department of Justice, the percentage of gang-related homicides involving firearms jumped from 73 per cent in 1980 to 92 per cent in 2008 (Cooper and Smith, 2011, p. 26).

Data published by the FBI indicates that most gang-related killings are committed with handguns, but it reveals little about the type, make, model, or calibre of the handguns or other firearms used, or whether they factor as prominently in other gang-related crimes. The data obtained by the Survey sheds some light on these questions—at least in regard to gang activity in Houston and Los Angeles, as only the data provided by police in these cities consistently allows for identification of seized firearms linked to gang activity.

The data on firearms linked to gangs indicates that the vast majority are handguns, accounting for 79 per cent of weapons seized in Houston, and 92 per cent of the weapons taken into custody by the LAPD (see Table 8.5). Most of the seized handguns

Table 8.5 Firearms seized from gang members or during gang activities, 2007–12

Weapon type		Houston		Los Angeles	
		Quantity	%	Quantity	%
Handguns	Derringers	8	1	3	<1
	Pistols, semi-automatic	464	59	262	57
	Pistols, other	3	<1	4	<1
	Pistols, unclear and unspecified	4	<1	-	-
	Revolvers	142	18	152	33
	Unspecified	-	-	-	-
	Total	621	79	421	92
Rifles	Bolt-action	16	2	2	<1
	Carbine	9	1	-	-
	Semi-automatic	43	6	10	2
	Automatic	5	<1	-	-
	Other	11	1	1	<1
	Unclear and unspecified	1	<1	-	-
	Total	85	11	13	3
Shotguns	Semi-automatic	5	<1	-	-
	Other	62	8	23	5
	Unclear and unspecified	2	<1	-	-
	Total	69	9	23	5
Machine guns	‘Machine guns’	-	-	-	-
	‘Machine pistols’ and ‘submachine guns’	2	<1	-	-
	Total	2	<1	-	-
Other firearms	Air guns, starter guns, stun guns	4	<1	-	-
	Other and unspecified firearms	1	<1	-	-
	Total	5	<1	-	-
Total firearms linked to gang members or gang-related activities		782		457	

Note: Percentage totals may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding of sub-totals.

were conventional semi-automatic pistols. No single make (or manufacturer, in the case of Los Angeles) accounted for more than 12 per cent of seized pistols linked to gangs in these cities.

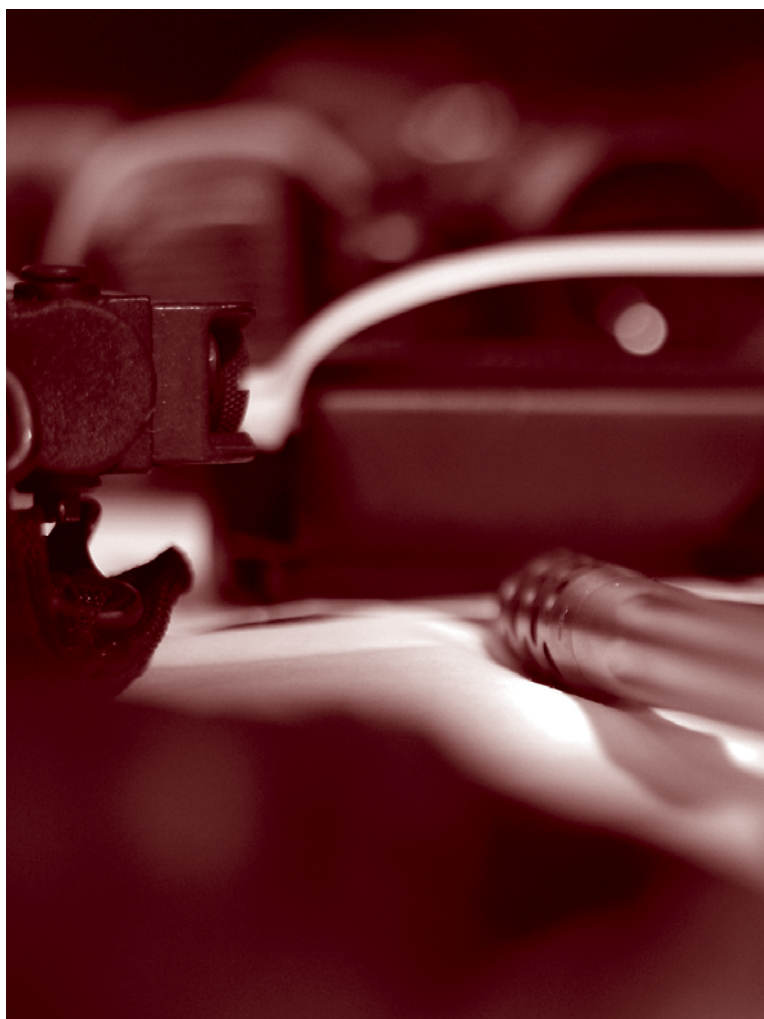
Rifles constituted a small percentage of seized weapons. Combined, less than 8 per cent of firearms recovered in gang-related seizures in Houston and Los Angeles were rifles. Of the 98 rifles that were seized, roughly 60 per cent were semi-automatic models.³² Among the most frequently encountered types of semi-automatic rifle were 7.62 mm SKS- and Kalashnikov-pattern models, accounting for approximately half of the rifles identified by make and model in the two cities (combined).

Notably, no machine guns are identified in the data, and only two firearms categorized as ‘machine pistols’ and ‘submachine guns’ are listed. One is a semi-automatic model and the other is a model that is produced in both semi-automatic and fully automatic versions. Even if both of these weapons are indeed fully automatic firearms, the overwhelming majority of firearms seized from gang members in Houston and Los Angeles are still semi-automatic weapons—not the machine pistols and automatic Kalashnikov-pattern rifles wielded by gang members in the movies (see Table 8.5).

Combining the data

As demonstrated above, the data obtained for this study reveals much about illicit firearms in the United States. This includes records on 10,435 firearms seized from felons, drug traffickers, and gang members—groups of particular concern to US policy-makers and the public. These records reveal that the majority of the firearms recovered from these groups were handguns: 77 per cent of the firearms in the sample. At least 70 per cent of seized handguns were semi-automatic pistols, the actual ‘weapon of choice’ of US criminals. These figures are consistent with ATF reports on traced weapons, which provide aggregated data on the type and calibre of these weapons but reveal little about their make and models, or about the criminals who acquire them (ATF, 2013b). The records obtained by the Survey help to fill in some of these data gaps. They reveal a diverse assortment of makes and models. Dozens of makes are identified, none of which account for more than 11 per cent of the seized pistols.³³

Rifles account for a small fraction of seized firearms: less than 12 per cent. Moreover, only



Firearms seized during Armed and Prohibited Persons System sweeps, a programme in California in which firearms are confiscated from ‘prohibited persons’, Los Angeles, May 2013.

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about half of the seized rifles were semi-automatic models, including those commonly categorized as ‘assault rifles’.³⁴ This is noteworthy given widespread civilian ownership of rifles in the United States and the frequent seizure of rifles from criminals in neighbouring Mexico (Schroeder, 2013b, pp. 289–92). The data also highlights the popularity of Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles in the United States, including among felons, drug traffickers, and gang members. Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles accounted for approximately 32 per cent of all semi-automatic rifles that were identified by make or model. US-designed AR-15 pattern rifles—often called ‘the most popular rifle[s] in America’ (Goode, 2012)—were seized at less than half the rate of Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles.

An area requiring further research is the relatively large proportion of Chinese-made semi-automatic rifles recovered from felons, drug traffickers, and gang members in the eight municipalities studied—nearly 15 per cent of seized semi-automatic rifles. It is unclear what proportion of these rifles, if any, arrived in the United States after the introduction of a 1994 ban on imports since very few of the records list the date of manufacture or import of the seized weapons. More information about the rifles, including their date of manufacture and of last known retail sale, would allow for a better understanding of these rifles and their origins.



Box 8.2 Firearms recovered in Columbus, Ohio

Of the 19 municipalities from which data was received, Columbus provided the most detailed records. They include the type, make, model, magazine capacity, and serial number of the seized weapon, along with a brief summary of the circumstances surrounding the seizure (or receipt) of each weapon. These details allow for an analysis of the weapons seized in Columbus that is not possible with the data provided by the other municipalities, including an assessment of some weapons used in violent crime.³⁵

Through a careful review of each record, the Survey was able to compile a sub-set of data on violent crimes committed in Columbus that includes only those records in which the identified firearm was used in—or seized from the perpetrators of—the crime to which it is linked. This allowed for a more precise analysis of crime guns. Of the weapons taken into custody by the CPD from 2010 to 2012, 290 explicitly indicate that the gun was used in a violent crime or seized from the suspected perpetrator of the crime.³⁶

The type, model, and make of the 290 weapons are quite similar to those of firearms seized in other municipalities. The vast majority were handguns, with semi-automatic pistols alone accounting for at least 58 per cent of all seized weapons. Only 6 per cent of the seized weapons were rifles, most of which were semi-automatic. This is consistent with the other data sets assessed above, as is the prevalence of 7.62 mm Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles, which accounted for four of the 11 semi-automatic rifles. Three of the four rifles were Chinese-made. No machine guns or sub-machine guns were identified.

Narrative descriptions of the seizures highlight the diversity of violent criminal activity that occurs in cities such as Columbus—an aspect that statistics on crime guns cannot convey. The cases range from acts commonly associated with firearms violence, such as carjackings and robberies of gas stations, to random and irrational acts of violence. In June 2010, for example, Columbus police officers seized a .22 calibre rifle, a .380 calibre pistol, and a .223 calibre AR-15-pattern rifle after receiving reports that the owner, who was being evicted from his home, was pointing an empty gun at people walking past his residence.

The data also challenges many common notions about gun crime in the United States. Rather than the stranger-on-stranger violence commonly highlighted in the media, the case descriptions suggest that many violent firearms offences are unplanned, motivated by fear or anger, and directed at neighbours, family members, or other individuals with whom the perpetrator had a personal relationship. These cases include 'crimes of passion', such

as a 2011 incident during which a 21-year-old man used a 9 mm pistol with a 30-round magazine to shoot up the car of his ex-girlfriend's boyfriend. Police officers also seized firearms after disputes between neighbours turned (or threatened to turn) violent. In at least two cases, the disputes were over matters as mundane as access to parking spaces.

The data set also reveals more fully the diverse set of circumstances in which firearms are taken into custody. Many were voluntarily surrendered by legal owners, or by individuals who found the weapons and reported them to authorities. Firearms were found in every conceivable location, including mailboxes, gutter pipes, bushes, trash cans, and towed vehicles. In October 2010, a Columbus resident whose apartment had recently been burgled found a 9 mm semi-automatic pistol in her dryer. As underscored by the summaries, found (unsecured) firearms can be just as dangerous as crime guns. In August 2012, police received a call about a loaded .32 calibre pistol found on the ground by two 6-year-olds. The children were playing with the weapon when an adult noticed the gun and took it from them.

A surprisingly large number of guns were found in hotel rooms, apparently forgotten by guests and discovered by hotel staff in night stands, dresser drawers, and between mattresses. In at least one case, the guest was an off-duty police officer. While many firearms were found in plain view, some were well hidden, such as two pistols recovered by CPD officers during a homicide investigation in June 2010. One had been hidden in a laundry room ceiling and the other was found in a box of crackers inside a refrigerator.

The reports from Columbus also highlight the importance of routine, daily law enforcement activities involving firearms—activities that are rarely reported by the media but undoubtedly save lives. During the three years studied, police officers took custody of dozens of firearms for safekeeping, often during or immediately after a domestic dispute in which one or more of the disputants feared the firearm would be used by the other. Police officers in Columbus also seized firearms from individuals who were intoxicated, mentally ill, suicidal, or suffering from dementia. Descriptions of the events leading up to the seizures strongly suggest that many of the weapons were extremely vulnerable to misuse. In February 2011, police took possession of a 9 mm pistol for 'safekeeping' after the owner—a 25-year-old man who had recently been hospitalized for mental illness—tried to kick in his neighbour's door while naked and wielding a six-inch military-style knife.

Finally, the number of machine guns seized in the eight municipalities studied was negligible. Authorities recovered only 42 items categorized as ‘submachine guns’, ‘machine guns’, or ‘machine pistols’ from felons, drug traffickers, and gang members, and nearly half of these weapons were semi-automatic models. The remaining firearms were either not identified by model or were models that are made in both fully automatic and semi-automatic versions, making it difficult to determine which were indeed fully automatic weapons. Regardless, it is clear that machine guns are rarely seized by police in the eight municipalities studied, suggesting that few criminals or criminal organizations have incorporated them into their arsenals. The data offers no clue as to why so few machine guns were seized but it is probably due to a combination of supply-side factors—strict laws on imports, ownership, and domestic sales—and limited illicit demand for such weapons, most of which are expensive, tend to be more difficult to conceal than pistols, and offer few, if any, advantages over other firearms for most criminals.

ILLICIT LIGHT WEAPONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Data obtained from military and law enforcement agencies and compiled from media reports indicate that authorities recovered relatively few light weapons in the states studied, and that they seized even fewer from violent criminals. Furthermore, most of the recovered light weapons and ammunition were expended, improvised, inert, or less-lethal, and many of the items identified as operational were decades-old munitions reported by individuals with no apparent criminal intent. These seizures suggest that access to functioning, factory-built light weapons by criminals in the United States is minimal, even among drug traffickers and other criminal groups that have comparatively easy access to light weapons in other countries.

As noted above, data provided by the HPD and the LAPD included references to 123 light weapons and rounds of light weapons ammunition, the vast majority of which were grenades or grenade launchers. Many of the grenades were described as inert, practice, or less-lethal rounds. More than half of the 44 grenades recovered by the HPD were described as dummy, flash bang, hollow, inert, practice, or smoke grenades. Similarly, the two grenade launchers recovered by Houston police appear to be models designed primarily for less-lethal ammunition. The first, which was taken into custody in July 2007, is identified as a 40 mm ‘multi-launcher’ produced by a US-based manufacturer of less-lethal ammunition and launchers. The second grenade launcher, which was linked to the burglary of an apartment in June 2012, is identified as a 37 mm launcher. The make and model are not identified but accounts of 37 mm launchers seized elsewhere suggest that many are flare launchers, some of which are converted to fire lethal 40 mm rounds. As noted in the *Small Arms Survey 2013*, Mexican authorities have seized several dozen converted 37 mm flare launchers from drug traffickers (Schroeder, 2013b, p. 302). The Houston record does not indicate the type of ammunition fired by the launcher or whether the owner was affiliated with any organized criminal group.

The data indicates that the LAPD recovered 56 grenades in seven incidents from 2007 to 2009. It provides little specific information about the grenades or the events leading up to their acquisition by the police. Only two of the 56 grenades listed are identified by calibre, and none are identified by make or model. Among the largest seizures was a cache of weapons recovered in May 2009. While the data does not identify the location of the seizure, the cache appears to be the same one identified in a press release from the LA County District Attorney’s Office. Police discovered the cache in the home of a Los Angeles resident after an explosion ignited a fire in his backyard. They found 14 grenades, 32 pistols, 19 shotguns, and a landmine, among other items. None of the light weapons are identified by

Authorities recovered only 42 items categorized as ‘submachine guns’, ‘machine guns’, or ‘machine pistols’.

their make or model. At the time of the explosion, two children aged nine and 17 were living at the house with the owner of the weapons, who was charged with, among other crimes, possession of a destructive device and child endangerment (LADA, 2009). It is not clear why the cache was assembled or what the owner intended to do with it, but the incident does highlight the danger of stockpiling light weapons in residential areas.

Media accounts of other seizures—those not reflected in the police data—include additional references to seized grenades taken into custody by authorities. These range from a fragmentation grenade seized during a drug raid in Midlothian, Texas, to memorabilia from the Second World War found among the belongings of deceased veterans in California, Florida, and elsewhere (USAO Texas, 2012).³⁷ Many of the roughly 300 grenades documented in these accounts were decades-old relics found in backyards, attics, and parks. While unlikely to be used in violent crimes, some of the weapons still posed a threat to the communities in which they were found. A surprisingly large number of these munitions were reportedly operational, including a Second World War-era grenade found in a patch of grass by children playing with a metal detector, and three grenades found in a Florida park during a birthday party (UPI, 2008b; Grimes, 2008).³⁸

Many of the grenades were decades-old relics found in backyards, attics, and parks.

At least 61 of the grenades and grenade launchers studied were linked to violent crime, drug trafficking, or gun-running. Many were seized from drug traffickers, including some with apparent ties to the Mexican cartels. Other grenades were seized from a motorcycle gang, a survivalist, a right-wing militia group, a Houston bank robber, and a former FBI agent accused of plotting to kill his wife and the head of the Dallas FBI office (Trahan, 2011; *Dallas Morning News*, 2010). One of the most significant seizures occurred near Laredo, Texas. While executing a search warrant, US authorities found a large cache of components for constructing IEDs—in this case, craft-produced grenades. Among the items recovered were 5 grenade shells, 26 grenade triggers, 31 grenade spoons, and 40 grenade pins, along with 9 pipe bombs (Forman, 2006, p. 7). While summaries of the seizure do not explicitly identify Mexico as the intended destination of the grenades, it appears likely given the proximity of the assembly line to the US–Mexican border and the widespread use of these weapons in Mexico (Schroeder, 2013b, pp. 301–02). Despite the many and varied connections between criminal groups in the United States and Mexico, the number and severity of light weapons attacks are still low in the United States compared to Mexico.³⁹

The data provided by the HPD and the LAPD includes references to just 21 light weapons other than grenades and grenade launchers. These items include 1 mortar tube and 3 rocket launchers seized in Houston, as well as 8 unidentified mortars, 3 ‘bombs’, 1 mine, and 5 rockets⁴⁰ recovered in Los Angeles. The most intriguing of these items are the rockets, at least two of which are identified as AT-4 anti-armour systems (or components)—one in Houston and one in Los Angeles. The AT-4 is a modern single-shot rocket system that is widely deployed by the US military. Modern variants of the AT-4 can penetrate 500 mm of vehicle armour and can be fired from within confined spaces (SAAB, n.d.).

The seizure of one of the launchers by the HPD in 2009 attracted the attention of a local television station, which aired a brief segment on the incident. The station reported that the launcher was found with ‘jihadist writings’ and that, ‘in the wrong hands, the launchers can be dangerous’. The station did, however, note that the launcher was ‘unarmed’ and that the HPD ‘did not find any ties to terrorists or a terrorist network’ (KPRC Local 2, 2009). The caveats were ignored or dismissed by bloggers eager to view the case as yet another example of ‘the asymmetric war being waged against us by Islamic terrorists from within’ (Hagmann, 2010). Additional documentation obtained by the Survey casts the seizure in a very different light. Not only do the documents confirm that the rocket launcher was ‘inert’ and that ‘no other bomb squad related items were found at the scene’ (HPD, 2010b), but they also reveal that media descriptions of the written material found with the launcher were incomplete and potentially misleading.

In addition to any 'jihadist writings', police found 'biblical scriptures', 'papers on the Houses of God for Christ', 'lyrics depicting homage to the Sun God', and 'notes on ingredients to developing any living faith' (HPD, 2009). The documents also cast doubt on implied links between the owner and any active terrorist networks. A year after the launcher was seized, HPD officers located the owner, who was homeless and living in a park (HPD, 2010a).

Little information was provided about the AT-4 recovered by authorities in Los Angeles, including whether it was operational. However, similar seizures of AT-4s by the Los Angeles authorities, documented elsewhere, were of expended AT-4 launch tubes or otherwise inoperable systems, not of complete, operational systems.⁴¹

Media reports document the recovery or destruction of an additional 97 light weapons other than grenades and grenade launchers in the eight states studied. Half of these weapons were IEDs, including 44 pipe bombs. The rest were landmines, mortar rounds, and rocket launchers, most of which reportedly date back to the First or Second World War. Some still contained explosives and therefore posed a threat to the neighbourhoods in which they were found, but few were complete, operational weapon systems.

Notably, no MANPADS or ATGWs were recovered. The absence of seized portable missiles is likely to be of particular interest to US policy-makers, many of whom have voiced concern about the terrorist threat from MANPADS. Publicly available reports on illicit MANPADS suggest that there are few, if any, complete systems outside of government control in the United States. There are no confirmed cases of MANPADS attacks against aircraft in the United States, and the only MANPADS-related items recovered by US authorities in recent years are empty launch tubes,⁴² training aides, and inert systems used in undercover operations (Schroeder, 2013a, p. 9).

The data also reveals striking differences in the quantities and types of light weapons seized in the United States and those seized in the five other countries studied as part of this project (Afghanistan, Iraq, Mexico, the Philippines, and Somalia). Even in Mexico, which shares a long border with the United States and a common struggle against the same regional trafficking networks, illicit light weapons are seized more frequently and in larger quantities. Indeed, grenades, grenade launchers, and rockets are routinely seized from criminal groups in Mexico whereas such weapons are infrequently encountered by law enforcement in the United States, where many recovered weapons have no apparent link to violent criminal activity.

Why are so few light weapons seized from violent criminals in the United States? There are several likely explanations. First, the US government has strong statutory and regulatory controls on private ownership and transfers of light weapons, comparatively robust border control and domestic law enforcement capacities, and intelligence and counter-trafficking agencies with significant resources and global reach. As evidenced by the arrest, extradition, and conviction of seemingly untouchable arms traffickers such as Monzer al-Kassar and Viktor Bout, the US government has the resources and juridical latitude necessary to thwart at least some of the transnational criminals who illicitly supply light weapons to groups that target US citizens, even when these criminals are located outside of the United States.

Yet these are, at best, partial explanations. Even the best-financed and most robust law enforcement and border control agencies cannot prevent every smuggling attempt, let alone every attempt along the border of a country the size of the United States. Thus, there are other factors that explain the differences in the type and quantities of illicit weapons in the United States as compared to other countries. These factors are apparent in the illicit acquisition and use of MANPADS. One key factor is political stability. Among the most significant contemporary sources of illicit light weapons, and particularly MANPADS, are arms stockpiles rendered insecure as a result of regime collapse. Thousands of MANPADS were looted from government depots in Iraq and Libya after the overthrow of their ruling

There are no confirmed cases of MANPADS attacks in the United States.

regimes in 2003 and 2011, respectively (Schroeder, 2013a, pp. 13–14). Many of these missiles ended up on local black markets. Regime collapse is often followed by prolonged periods of intrastate conflict, which fuels demand for—and trafficking in—light weapons to one or more of the parties to the conflict. The net result is a significant increase in the supply of and demand for light weapons on local and regional black markets that can last for years.

The absence of extreme political instability in the Western Hemisphere helps to explain why there are far fewer illicit MANPADS in this region than in regions where heavily armed regimes have imploded. Credible reports of illicit MANPADS in North and South America are limited to three countries, and in one of these countries the reported diversion is disputed by the military. Of the handful of illicit MANPADS that have been documented, most were first-generation systems that are militarily obsolete. Publicly available information suggests that even the well-financed and globally connected Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia have only succeeded in acquiring a limited number of SA-7-pattern MANPADS—a system that was first fielded more than 40 years ago. Publicly available information suggests that the drug cartels in Mexico have had even less luck acquiring portable missiles (Schroeder, 2013b, p. 301). Given the difficulty in acquiring MANPADS experienced by these groups—which are among the largest and best-financed armed non-state actors in the hemisphere—it is doubtful that any of the small US-based groups that might use MANPADS against targets in the United States have the capacity to acquire them from abroad.

Diverting MANPADS from domestic sources would be equally difficult. The US military’s stockpile security requirements for MANPADS are among the most robust in the world. These requirements include rigorous physical security measures;⁴³ regular audits of accountability and inventory procedures; and monthly, semi-annual, and annual

Table 8.6 Light weapons destroyed, lost, missing, recovered, or stolen from the US Marine Corps, 2009–12

Weapon type	Model	Status				
		Destroyed	Recovered	Lost	Missing	Stolen
Grenade launchers	M203	-	48	6	3	-
	M32A1	-	-	-	1	-
	M79	-	2	-	-	-
	MK19 MOD 3	-	10	-	1	-
Mortar systems	M224 (60 mm)	-	4	1	-	-
	M252 (81 mm)	-	1	-	1	-
Portable rocket launchers	M72 (LAW) sub-calibre trainer	-	73	-	-	-
	SMAW MK 153 MOD0 launcher	-	9	-	1	-
	Tube assembly (unspecified model)	-	-	-	1	-
Portable missile systems	Javelin M98A2 command launch unit	-	2	-	-	-
Total		-	149	7	8	0

Source: USMC (2012)

physical inventories (or counts) of Stinger missiles in the US national inventory (USDOD, 2012, pp. 16, 47). Auditors have documented violations of these requirements at some facilities,⁴⁴ yet such violations appear to be isolated and there are no known, publicly reported cases of diversion of MANPADS from depots in the United States.

While less rigorously controlled than MANPADS, the US military's other light weapons are also subject to robust stockpile security requirements (USDOD, 2012). Data obtained by the Survey suggests that these controls are generally effective. Under the Freedom of Information Act, the Survey obtained data on small arms and light weapons reported by the US Marine Corps as destroyed, lost, missing, recovered, or stolen from 2009 to 2012. The data reveals that, of the thousands of light weapons in the Marine Corps inventory, only 164 were identified as lost, stolen, or missing in that three-year period. Of those weapons, only 15 were still unaccounted for as of mid-2012, and at least some of these weapons were listed as missing or lost due to 'incorrect demilitarization procedures, loss at sea, destruction due to an improvised explosive device (IED) detonation, or loss during Marine combat operations in Iraq or Afghanistan' (USMC, 2012). Thus, the number of light weapons actually diverted from the Marine Corps to unauthorized end users, if any, is even smaller. Table 8.6 summarizes the data obtained from the Marine Corps.

The Survey was unable to obtain comparable data from the Army, Navy, or Air Force, but, given that similar rules and regulations apply to their depots, it is likely that the other services have comparably low rates of diversion. Better data on lost and stolen weapons from the rest of the US military would permit a more definitive assessment of the effectiveness of its stockpile security procedures and of the role of these procedures in limiting the availability of illicit light weapons in the United States.

CONCLUSION

As summarized above, the thousands of records obtained for this study reveal much about illicit small arms and light weapons in the United States. The data indicates that the majority of firearms seized from felons, drug traffickers, and gang members in the eight cities studied were handguns, which accounted for 77 per cent of seized firearms. At least 70 per cent of seized handguns were semi-automatic pistols of various calibres, makes, and models—the actual 'weapons of choice' of US criminals.

These figures are consistent with ATF data on traced firearms and other government and non-governmental accounts of crime guns in the United States. Semi-automatic rifles account for just under 7 per cent of seizures, which is notable given their popularity among firearms collectors, hunters, and sports shooters. The data also contrasts sharply with records on weapons seized in other parts of the world, where rifles are the predominant type of firearms recovered by authorities. These differences highlight the heterogeneity of regional and national markets for illicit weapons, the contents of which are shaped by many different factors, including regional stability; the security of government arsenals; the civilian market; and the objectives, resources, and sophistication of armed groups and other consumers of illicit weapons in the different regions.

There are also several similarities between the criminals and armed groups in the countries studied—Afghanistan, Iraq, Mexico, the Philippines, Somalia, and the United States—including their affinity for Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles. These rifles account for approximately 32 per cent of semi-automatic rifles identified by make or model that were seized from felons, drug traffickers, and gang members in the United States. In Mexico, Kalashnikov-pattern rifles were seized even more frequently, accounting for at least one-third of all seized rifles (not just semi-automatic models)

(Schroeder, 2013b, pp. 291–92). In Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia, Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles accounted for the overwhelming majority of the seized rifles studied—from 70 per cent in Afghanistan to more than 90 per cent in Iraq and Somalia (Schroeder and King, 2012, pp. 320–21, 338). The prevalence of Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles is not surprising given that these rifles are inexpensive, plentiful, and reliable.

Another similarity is the prevalence of Chinese weapons. Nearly 15 per cent of semi-automatic rifles recovered in the US sample cities and towns were Chinese-made. The significant presence of Chinese weapons on the illicit US market is mirrored elsewhere in the world. Of the roughly 2,700 weapons seized in Iraq that were identified by country of origin, 13 per cent reportedly came from China, making it the third largest country of origin after Iran⁴⁵ and the Russian Federation (Schroeder and King, 2012, p. 317). Chinese weapons were even more prevalent in the caches seized in Afghanistan, accounting for nearly 70 per cent of the weapons studied that were identified by country of origin (Schroeder and King, 2012, p. 330; AMMUNITION PROFILING; WEAPONS TRACING).

Also significant is the extremely small number of large-calibre rifles, machine guns, and light weapons recovered by police in the United States. As noted above, only nine .50 calibre rifles were seized from felons, drug traffickers, or gang members, and some of them were antique-style muzzle-loading rifles. Given the destructive power of anti-materiel rifles and the ready availability in the United States of civilian variants, this is noteworthy. Few fully automatic pistols and rifles are identified in the data, and many of the firearms included in this category appear to be semi-automatic variants of automatic weapons. Few, if any, light machine guns, general-purpose machine guns, or heavy machine guns are identified in the data. The apparent absence of these weapons is attributable, at least in part, to rigorous stockpile security at US military depots, the effect of which is evident in data on lost, missing, and stolen weapons provided by the US Marine Corps.

While the data compiled for this study sheds important light on illicit weapons in the United States, significant gaps remain. Much of the data on firearms linked to violent crime is too vague or ambiguous to distinguish the firearm used by the perpetrators from other weapons taken into custody, precluding meaningful analysis of the data. The records also include little information on the proximate source of the weapons or the chain of custody leading up to their seizure by police. With the exception of the records provided by the Columbus Police Department, the data reveals little about the individuals from whom the weapons were seized. Access to more of this data, which is often included in police reports and other documentation compiled and archived by local authorities, would improve public understanding of illicit weapons, how they are diverted to the black market, and which end users are most likely to seek them out, with potentially significant implications for current and future efforts to combat arms trafficking and reduce the illicit use of small arms and light weapons in the United States. ■

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATF	Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
ATGW	Anti-tank guided weapon
AW	Assault weapon
CPD	Columbus Police Department
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
HPD	Houston Police Department

IED	Improvised explosive device
LAPD	Los Angeles Police Department
MANPADS	Man-portable air defence system

ENDNOTES

- 1 See, for example, *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *Falling Down* (1993), and *Friday* (1995). Another notable example is the influential 1987 song 'Public Enemy No. 1' by the rap group Public Enemy. This song—and particularly the lyrics, 'I'll show you my gun—my Uzi weighs a ton'—has inspired songs, art exhibitions, and poetry (Public Enemy, 1987; SBG'z, 2007; NFG, 2010; Common, 2007). More recently, a US-based company introduced a cigar named 'My Uzi Weighs a Ton' (Drew Estate, n.d.).
- 2 See, for example, *End of Watch* (2012).
- 3 This category includes all military and civilian rifles.
- 4 Some of the data sets obtained for this study also include parts, accessories, and ammunition for small arms, along with casings, jackets, and wadding for ammunition, and bullet fragments and expended bullets. Accessories identified in the data include holsters, pistol grips, silencers, and weapon sights, among other items. All of these items were excluded from the data set compiled for this study.
- 5 These municipalities are Albuquerque, NM; Anchorage, AK; Atlanta, GA; Baltimore, MD; Baton Rouge, LA; Boise, ID; Bonham, TX; Boston, MA; Carroll, IA; Charlotte, NC; Chicago, IL; Cleveland, OH; Columbus, OH; Denham Springs, LA; Denver, CO; Emeryville, CA; Groton, CT; Honolulu, HI; Hope, AR; Houston, TX; Jacksonville, FL; Kansas City, MO; Las Vegas, NV; Los Angeles, CA; Louisville, KY; Memphis, TN; Merrill, WI; Milwaukee, WI; New York, NY; Oakland, CA; Philadelphia, PA; Phoenix, AZ; Pleasant Grove, AL; Portland, OR; Rutland, VT; San Antonio, TX; San Jose, CA; Satellite Beach, FL; Seattle, WA; Smyrna, DE; Tulsa, OK; Washington, DC; and Wichita, KS. These municipalities were selected based on their population size and their location. Seven of the municipalities had a population of more than 1 million, 15 had populations of between 500,000 and 1 million, 10 had populations of between 100,000 and 500,000, and 11 had populations of less than 100,000. Of these municipalities, eight are located in the Midwest, five in the north-east, 17 in the south, and 13 in the west (USCB, n.d.).
- 6 These municipalities are Albuquerque, Baltimore, Boise, Boston, Cleveland, Columbus, Denham Springs, Denver, Groton, Hope, Houston, Los Angeles, Merrill, Milwaukee, Phoenix, San Jose, Satellite Beach, Seattle, and Washington, DC.
- 7 Only data sets with three or more years of data were used in this study.
- 8 The term 'offence code' is used here to refer to the code assigned to individual weapons by police departments based on the circumstances surrounding the recovery of the weapons. It is possible that some of the weapons linked to the offence codes studied were recovered from individuals who were not known felons, drug traffickers, or gang members. Data limitations did not allow for a full assessment of every seized weapon.
- 9 See Krouse (2012, pp. 19–20).
- 10 These offences include aggravated and simple assault, rape, robbery, and sexual assault.
- 11 The data covers victimization of persons aged 12 and older (Planty and Truman, 2013, p. 1).
- 12 Definitions of 'assault weapons' vary, but in the United States the term is frequently used to refer to a sub-set of semi-automatic pistols, rifles, and shotguns that share certain features that are viewed as military in nature. These features include folding stocks, threaded barrels that allow for the attachment of silencers, bayonet mounts, and the ability to accept large-capacity magazines (Koper, 2004, p. 4; Krouse, 2013, pp. 36–37). For more information on the 1994–2004 federal assault weapons ban and the proposals presented in 2013 to reinstate such a ban, see Krouse (2013, pp. 35–37).
- 13 For more information on background checks and proposals to expand them, see Krouse (2013, pp. 12–23).
- 14 See Krouse (2013).
- 15 In this context, a felon is anyone convicted of a crime punishable by a prison term of one year or more (US, 2011, para. g).
- 16 See Braga et al. (2002, p. 322).
- 17 See US (2011, para. d).
- 18 These cities are Albuquerque, Columbus, Houston, and Los Angeles.
- 19 Handguns accounted for 79 per cent of firearms seized from felons in Albuquerque, 85 per cent of firearms seized in Houston, and 79 per cent of firearms seized in Los Angeles. While fewer firearms recovered in Columbus were handguns (67 per cent), they still accounted for a majority of the seized firearms.

- 20 For a definition of the term 'curios and relics' as it applies to firearms, see (US, 2012b) and ATF (2007).
- 21 The firearms must also have been 'manufactured in a proscribed country or area prior to the date, as established by the Department of State, the country or area became proscribed [or] manufactured in a non-proscribed country or area' (US, 2012a, para. e(1)).
- 22 This figure includes rifles categorized as 'carbines', most of which are semi-automatic.
- 23 Calculated with the US Bureau of Labor Statistics' consumer price index inflation calculator; see BLS (n.d.).
- 24 It is possible that not all of the weapons studied were seized from manufacturers or distributors of narcotics. The HPD indicated that narcotics distribution charges are sometimes filed against individuals found in possession of large quantities of drugs (quantities that exceed certain statutory thresholds), even if they had no intention of selling them (author phone interview with an HPD official, September 2013). The same may be true of other municipalities.
- 25 As reflected in Table 8.3, seizures in Houston and Los Angeles account for the bulk of the sample (74 per cent). As a result, the overall ratio of handguns to other firearms seized from drug traffickers is largely determined by the data from these two cities. That said, the percentage of seized weapons that are handguns is roughly the same in all of the municipalities under review (69–83 per cent), except for Boise, where handguns constituted 55 per cent of firearms linked to drug trafficking cases.
- 26 Based on the make and model of the seized firearms.
- 27 Photos of caches seized in Mexico often feature .50 calibre sniper rifles and machine guns. See, for example, *Telegraph* (2009) and T. Johnson (2013).
- 28 See, for example, Harris (2009) and Tucker (2011).
- 29 These figures are roughly consistent with data on traced guns published by the ATF. In 2012, 0.1 per cent of traced firearms had a calibre of 5.7 mm (ATF, 2013b).
- 30 With regard to firearms seized in Houston, there is significant overlap between the data in this section and the data on firearms seized from felons and from drug traffickers.
- 31 The FBI defines a 'juvenile gang' as 'a group of persons who go about together or act in concert, especially for antisocial or criminal purposes; typically adolescent members have common identifying signs and symbols, such as hand signals and distinctive colors; they are also known as street gangs' (author correspondence with an FBI official, December 2013).
- 32 These figures include carbines, most of which appear to be semi-automatic models (RCMP, 2013).
- 33 Six of the eight municipalities studied identify seized weapons by make, although some of the records do not provide this information. Data from the two remaining municipalities—Columbus and Los Angeles—identifies seized weapons by manufacturer rather than by make and therefore was not used in these calculations.
- 34 An additional 77 rifles were identified as 'carbines' in the data sources. Most of these rifles appear to be semi-automatic models.
- 35 The term 'violent crime' is used in this section to refer to the definition of 'crime of violence' referenced in Box 8.1.
- 36 Note that the 290 firearms are a small percentage of all the firearms linked to violent crimes. The remaining firearms were excluded because their relationship to the offences identified in the corresponding record is unclear. In other words, the weapon might have been used in the offence, taken from the victim, or perhaps found at the residence of the perpetrator but owned by a family member.
- 37 See UPI (2008a) and AP (2007; 2011; 2012).
- 38 See also AP (2011).
- 39 One notable exception is an attack in 2009 in which a member of a South Texas gang lobbed a fragmentation grenade into a bar in Pharr, Texas. The South Korean grenade used in the attack reportedly came from the same batch as grenades thrown at a US consulate building and a television station in Mexico. Fortunately for the bar's patrons, the assailant failed to arm the grenade and it bounced harmlessly onto a pool table (Bunker, 2013).
- 40 The data does not specify whether the seized items were rockets, rocket launchers, or complete systems (rockets and launchers).
- 41 A recent example is the June 2012 seizure of an 'inoperable' AT-4 launcher from gang members (LASD, 2012). See also CNN (2007) and Winton (2012).
- 42 The launch tube is for the FIM-43 Redeye system, which was fielded in the 1960s. It is not clear when the missile was fired (or removed), but the Redeye has been out of service long enough that—if the launch tube was diverted from US arsenals—it was not diverted recently.
- 43 Examples include intruder detection systems, back-up communications systems, perimeter fencing, and the use of high-security padlocks. See USDOD (2012).
- 44 See, for example, GAO (1994).
- 45 Iranian weapons were probably over-represented in the sample. See Schroeder and King (2012, p. 318).

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Principal author

Matt Schroeder