

On the Record

ILLICIT WEAPONS IN THE UNITED STATES

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. Among the most startling of these images were drive-by shootings: teenaged gang members spraying blighted city neighbourhoods with bullets fired from automatic weapons. These scenes—and the assumptions that underpin them—continue to shape public perceptions of urban violence in the United States today. 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?

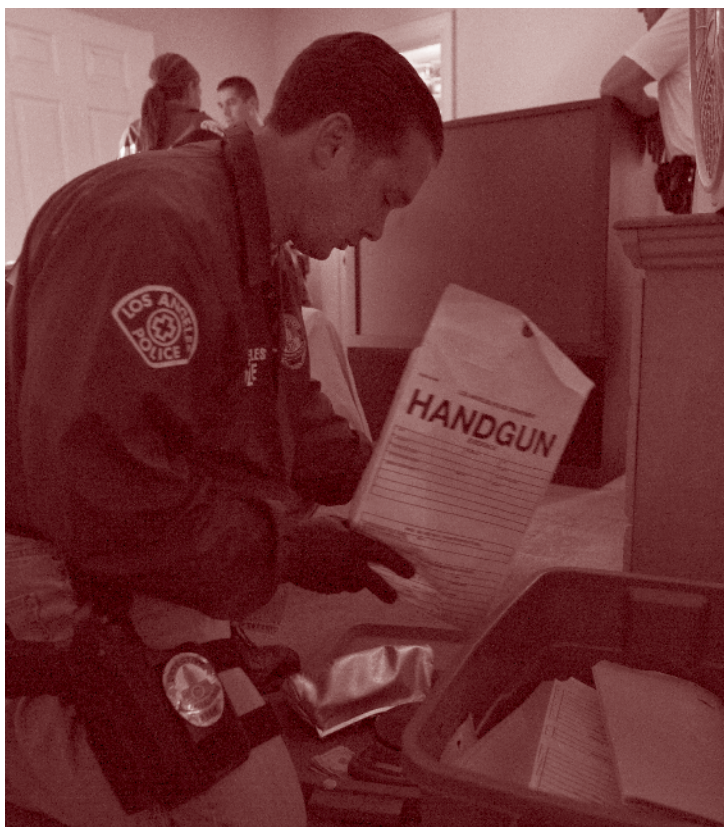
Semi-automatic pistols are the actual 'weapons of choice' of US criminals.

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 data from official (government) sources.

To this end, the Small Arms Survey obtained records on more than 140,000 small arms and light weapons taken into custody by police in eight US cities and towns. The records shed light on weapons seized from groups of concern, including felons, drug traffickers, and gang members.

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 (see Table 8.5).
- At least 70 per cent of the seized handguns were semi-automatic pistols of various makes, models, and calibres—the most common type of firearm recovered from criminals in the municipalities studied.



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

- 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 in the US sample accounted for less than 12 per cent of the firearms studied, and only about half of the rifles were semi-automatic models, including those commonly termed 'assault rifles'.
- US-designed AR-15-pattern rifles—often referred to as the most popular rifles in the United States—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 seized machine guns was negligible.
- 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 US data also contrasts sharply with records on weapons seized in some 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, 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 consumers of illicit weapons in the different regions studied.

Rifles accounted for less than 12 per cent of the firearms studied.

There are also several similarities between the criminals and armed groups in Afghanistan, Iraq, Mexico, the Philippines, Somalia, and the United States, including their affinity for Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles. In the United States, 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 Mexico, Kalashnikov-pattern rifles were seized even more frequently, accounting for nearly one-third of all seized rifles (not just semi-automatic models). Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles accounted for 70 per cent of rifles seized in Afghanistan and more than 90 per cent in Iraq and Somalia. The prevalence of Kalashnikov- and SKS-pattern rifles is not surprising given that they are inexpensive, plentiful, and reliable.

Also significant is the extremely small number of large-calibre rifles and machine guns recovered by police in the United States. Only nine .50 calibre rifles were seized from felons, drug traffickers, or gang members, and some of them were antique-style muzzle-loading rifles. 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.

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. 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 some exceptions, the data reveals little about the individuals from whom the weapons were seized. Access to more of this information would improve public understanding of illicit weapons, how they enter the black market, and the illegal end users that seek them out, with potentially significant implications for current and future efforts to reduce the illicit acquisition and use of small arms and light weapons in the United States. ❏

Table 8.5 Firearms seized from gang members or linked to 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.