

Measuring Illicit Arms Flows: Honduras

With 64 violent deaths per 100,000 people in 2015, Honduras is among the most violent countries in the world (Widmer and Pavesi, 2016a; 2016b). In the last five years, 81 per cent of homicides were committed with small arms, often in the gang- and drug-related violence plaguing the country. With the costs of firearm-related deaths and injuries estimated at more than 3 per cent of the country's gross domestic product in 2013 (Flores, 2016, p. 6), addressing illicit small arms flows is critical to improving Honduras's security and development prospects.

In recent years, illicit arms flows have gained significant attention at the global level, culminating in September 2015 with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and, more specifically, SDG Target 16.4, which commits states to 'significantly reduce illicit . . . arms flows' by 2030 (UNGA, 2015). As the Survey has pointed out, the UN's proposed indicator for measuring progress towards achieving this target—Indicator 16.4.2¹—can be complemented with a range of additional indicators (De Martino and Atwood, 2015). This Research Note²—the second in a series of four on measuring illicit arms flows in selected countries—examines the challenges of monitoring illicit small arms flows in Honduras. After reviewing the main known sources of illicit arms in the country, it discusses three indicators that are relevant to illicit arms flows: firearms seizures, small arms prices on illicit markets, and firearms homicides.

Sources of illicit small arms

The Small Arms Survey defines illicit small arms as 'weapons that are produced, transferred, held, or used in violation of national or international law' (Schroeder, 2013, p. 284). This definition acknowledges the many different forms that illicit arms flows can take. In addition to cross-border trafficking, such arms flows can include firearms that are purchased from local illicit markets, diverted from the legal holdings of security agencies or private individuals, or produced locally and illicitly (unlicensed 'craft' production).

Illicit small arms in Honduras are sourced both domestically and across borders. Local

sources include firearms diverted from state institutions and civilians. Available information also identifies several countries in the region and beyond as points of origin for firearms trafficked from abroad.

Domestic diversion

Civilian holdings

Honduran law allows adults over the age of 18 to own up to five firearms each (Honduras, 2000, art. 17). As of May 2016, officials at the National Arms Registry reported that 450,000–500,000 firearms were registered to private citizens.³ La Armería (the state armoury), under the Defence Ministry, is responsible for firearms imports and has a monopoly on commercial domestic firearms sales (Díaz, 2013).

There is no precise data on firearms that are lost by or stolen from private individuals in Honduras. In fact, La Armería has faced criticism for its lack of transparency, poor record keeping, and the absence of a clear firearms-marking policy.⁴ Interviewed police officials estimate that among the firearms they seize in the context of administrative violations, minor offences, and crime scenes, up to 40 per cent were legally registered at some point (Díaz, 2013).⁵ This estimate may not be representative of all firearms seized in Honduras, however; better information is needed to assess the extent of the diversion of legally held small arms.

National stockpiles

Police and military stockpiles in Honduras are estimated to contain 115,000 small arms—about one-third of the size of the civilian stockpile (Karp, 2012). Available reports suggest that at least some of these stocks are at risk of diversion. For instance, the Comando de Operaciones Especiales Cobras (the Special Operations unit of the National Police) lost 186 weapons in 2007 (including M16 and Galil rifles), and 300 FAL rifles and 300,000 rounds of 5.56 mm ammunition in 2011 (*El Heraldó*, 2014).

Cross-border trafficking

Information on the routes used by arms traffickers in Central America is scarce and often collected by external actors.⁶ Honduras's borders with Guatemala and El Salvador are often

considered to be strategic entry points for illicit arms and other commodities.⁷ Tracing requests made by the Dirección Policial de Investigaciones (Directory of Police Investigations) through INTERPOL's iARMS system revealed cases of firearms that were lost and stolen in a diverse range of countries—including Brazil, Guatemala, the Russian Federation, and the United States—being subsequently smuggled into Honduras.⁸

Available information points to a steady 'ant trade' (*tráfico hormiga*) in illicit firearms across Honduras's borders. Small quantities of weapons are smuggled into or through the country in cars, traffickers' bags and belongings, or containers, where they are hidden among normal household items (Schroeder, 2016, p. 9).⁹ The weapons are often disassembled and the parts smuggled to make it harder for border police to detect them. Firearms and their parts are also frequently shipped by mail from abroad.¹⁰

Measuring illicit arms flows

This section discusses the relevance and limitations of data sources used to monitor illicit arms flows in Honduras. It examines three indicators in particu-

lar: firearms seizure data, small arms prices on illicit markets, and firearms homicide statistics.

Firearms seizures

Seizure data is a key source of the information needed to understand illicit arms flows. For it to help determine new trends and identify patterns, however, the information needs to be disaggregated by weapon type, model, and the circumstances of the seizure (De Martino and Atwood, 2015, p. 2).

In the case of Honduras, seizure data obtained from the National Police includes the type, calibre, make, and serial number of the weapon, as well as the date of seizure. This makes the identification of general trends possible. Figure 1 reveals that pistols and revolvers represent more than three-quarters of all firearms seized by the National Police between 2006 and 2012, contradicting the popular image of gangs using military rifles.

Yet this data is difficult to access, lacks precision, and is not comprehensive. National Police statistics refer to firearms seized because of administrative violations, minor offences, and at crime scenes; it is not possible to identify the reason for a specific seizure. Furthermore, other state institutions

that conduct firearms seizures did not provide data, and there is no single, integrated reporting system for all firearm seizures in the country.

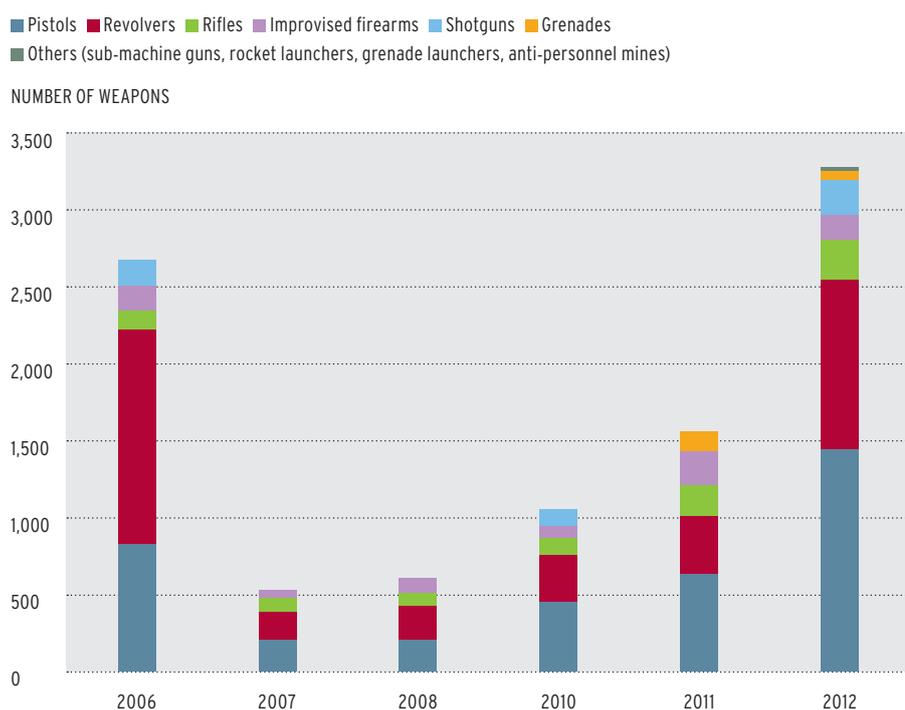
It is important to note that the number of seizures per year does not necessarily reflect changes in illicit arms flows. The increasing number of arms seized by the National Police between 2007 and 2012 (Figure 1) may instead be the result of increases in the number of law enforcement personnel or the availability of resources, or changes in enforcement policy. Variations in the proportion of the various types of weapons seized over this period are more instructive, however. As Figure 1 illustrates, the National Police only started seizing greater numbers of shotguns and grenades from 2010; this could suggest new flows in this type of materiel that warrant further investigation.

It was not possible to obtain comprehensive information related to the proposed SDG Indicator 16.4.2—the proportion of seized firearms that are recorded and traced—for this Research Note. Interviewed officials spoke of the general results of tracing requests, but could not provide comprehensive and detailed data. The US Bureau for Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), which receives requests for the tracing of US-origin firearms, nevertheless reveals that the Honduran National Police submitted 1,645 tracing requests to ATF in 2014 and 2015. ATF confirmed that 44 per cent of these firearms came from the United States (ATF, 2015; 2016). While this data provides some indication of the scale of firearms trafficking from the United States, data on both tracing requests submitted to other countries and firearms seized in Honduras is required to effectively monitor Indicator 16.4.2.

Prices of firearms on illicit markets

The price of firearms and ammunition sold illicitly, combined with a careful analysis of local demand factors, can shed light on the evolution of illicit firearms markets (Florquin, 2013). Illicit handguns appear to be particularly cheap to acquire in Honduras. In 2013, depending on the model, 9 mm pistols were priced between USD 45 and 350 on

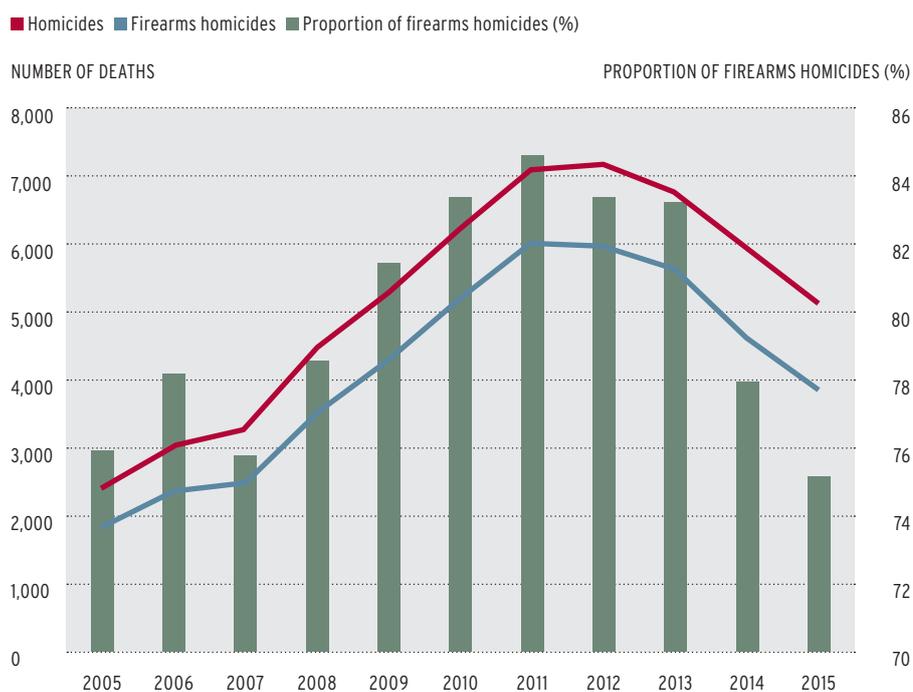
Figure 1 Small arms and light weapons seized by the Honduran National Police, 2006–08, 2010–12*



* Based on 9,702 weapons seized by the National Police during 2006–08 and 2010–12. Data was not available for 2009.

Source: Díaz (2013, p. 59)

Figure 2 Homicides, firearms homicides, and proportion of homicides committed with a firearm, 2005-15



Source: Small Arms Survey (n.d.)

the illicit market, while priced between USD 900 and 2,000 at La Armería (Díaz, 2013, p. 50).¹¹ More recently, a Glock pistol reportedly cost as little as USD 200–400 on the illicit market, and an AK-pattern rifle USD 200 (Nuñez, 2014; Rivera, 2016). Given the high levels of armed violence in the country, demand for illicit firearms is presumably high in Honduras. These low prices suggest that illicit firearms are easily accessible.

Time-series data on prices in Honduras has the potential to reveal trends in the accessibility of illicit firearms and ammunition. To be meaningful, the data would need to be collected regularly with sufficient detail on the weapons and ammunition being sold, including the make, model, and the circumstances of the sales.

Firearms-related homicides

The ultimate measure of the impact of policies to address illicit arms flows lies in a significant reduction in related violence (Alvazzi del Frate and De Martino, 2016). In Honduras, both homicide and firearms homicide rates peaked in 2011, but have declined steadily since then. The proportion of homicides committed with firearms also dropped, from 84 per cent in 2011 to 74 per cent in 2015 (see Figure 2).¹²

While these downward trends are important, their causes are difficult to determine. The firearms homicide data does not indicate whether the weapons used were sourced legally or illicitly. Without this information, it is not possible to attribute the decrease in armed violence to a reduction in illicit arms flows.

Moreover, a broad array of interventions potentially contributed to the decreasing homicide rates. They include increased efforts to arrest and extradite organized-crime leaders, the deployment of additional security forces, and the establishment of municipal violence observatories and ‘safer municipalities’ programmes.¹³ Rigorous impact evaluations of the relevant interventions would help to establish the reasons for the reduction of armed violence in Honduras.

Conclusion

This Research Note has illustrated the challenges of monitoring illicit small arms flows in Honduras, focusing on three possible indicators: firearms seizure data, prices of illicitly sold firearms, and firearms homicide statistics. In all three cases, data is scarce and partial in scope. This underscores the

need to put in place systematic data collection mechanisms that meaningfully monitor illicit arms flows. Given the significant decrease in violent deaths observed in Honduras since 2011, the resources needed for such an effort would be well invested. An evidence-based approach to armed violence monitoring would generate important information on the effectiveness of efforts to reduce illicit arms flows and levels of armed violence—benefitting not only Honduras, but other countries as well. ■

Notes

- ¹ ‘Proportion of seized small arms and light weapons that are recorded and traced, in accordance with international standards and legal instruments’ (UN Statistical Commission, 2016a, para. (d); IAEG-SDGs, 2016, p. 58). However, in September 2016 this indicator was included in a short list for possible refinements (UN Statistical Commission, 2016b, p. 6).
- ² The Research Note is based on interviews undertaken in Tegucigalpa in May 2016 and previous Survey research in the country (Díaz, 2013).
- ³ Author interview with director of the National Arms Registry, Tegucigalpa, 20 May 2016. A precise figure was not available, because efforts to register firearms that were previously not recorded were still ongoing at the time of the research.
- ⁴ Correspondence with Ana Yancy Espinoza, Arias Foundation, Costa Rica, July 2016.
- ⁵ The figure for Honduras is somewhat higher than that of Peru, where one-third of crime-related firearms seized by the National Police in 2014 had a legal origin (SUCAMEC, 2015, p. 24).
- ⁶ See, for example, UNODC (2012); ICG (2014).
- ⁷ The Trifinio area, Fonseca Bay, the Bay Islands, and the 120 unguarded border crossings along the land border area are among the other known trafficking routes and points of entry (Díaz, 2013, p. 43; ICG, 2014).
- ⁸ Author interviews with anonymous informants II and III, Tegucigalpa, May 2016.
- ⁹ Author interviews with anonymous informants I and II, Tegucigalpa, May 2016.
- ¹⁰ Author interviews with anonymous informants I and II, Tegucigalpa, May 2016.
- ¹¹ Author interview with anonymous informant III, Tegucigalpa, May 2016.
- ¹² For a fuller discussion of this trend, please see Widmer and Pavesi (2016b).
- ¹³ See Amador (2015); *El Proceso* (2014); *La Tribuna* (2014); Berg and Carranza (2015); Nazario (2016).

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For more information on illicit arms trafficking, please visit the Global Partnership on Small Arms website at <<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/salw.html>>. The website hosts a library of resources on illicit small arms and light weapons flows and control measures.

About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a global centre of excellence whose mandate is to generate impartial, evidence-based, and policy-relevant knowledge on all aspects of small arms and armed violence. It is the principal international source of expertise, information, and analysis on small arms and armed violence issues, and acts as a resource for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and civil society. It is located in Geneva, Switzerland, at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

The Survey has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, and criminology, and collaborates with a network of researchers, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

For more information, please visit:

www.smallarmssurvey.org.

Publication date: November 2016

Credits

Author: Matthias Nowak

Contributors: Nicolas Florquin, Irene Pavesi, and Luigi De Martino

Copy-editing: Alex Potter (alex.potter@mweb.co.za)

Design and layout: Rick Jones (rick@studioexile.com)

Contact details

Small Arms Survey
Maison de la Paix
Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E
1202 Geneva
Switzerland

t +41 22 908 5777

f +41 22 732 2738

e info@smallarmssurvey.org

This Research Note has been made possible through the support of the German Federal Foreign Office.

