



World Customs  
Organization

ENFORCEMENT  
AND COMPLIANCE

# Illicit Trade Report 2021





# SECURITY



As the first line of defense, Customs play a critical role in countries' ability to prevent dangerous goods, including explosive precursors as well as weapons and materials of mass destruction, from illegally entering a country and being used to cause serious bodily harm.



*Australian Border Force Marine Unit Officer boarding ship at sea.  
Courtesy: Australian Border Force.*

**Although terrorist related fatalities have decreased in many western countries in recent years, conflict zones continue to witness a large number of attacks and fatalities with 97% of terrorist related fatalities occurring in these conflict zones.<sup>1</sup>**

## INTRODUCTION

Nevertheless, a total of 44 countries recorded terrorist related fatalities in 2021 which indicates that the threat of terrorism is still a major cause for concern throughout much of the world.

To combat these threats the WCO Security Programme continues to engage in a variety of security related initiatives including:

1. Restricting the illicit trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) through several regional SALW focused security projects.
2. Countering the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) through the WCO's Strategic Trade Control Enforcement Programme.
3. Countering the threat posed by Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and precursor chemicals through the WCO's Programme Global Shield activities.
4. Supporting efficient passenger controls to help identify foreign terrorist fighters through the use of API/PNR targeting systems such as the WCO's Global Travel Assessment Systems (GTAS).
5. Countering terrorist financing through operations targeting bulk cash smuggling and money laundering by suspected terrorists (see Section 2 for more details).

<sup>1</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2022>

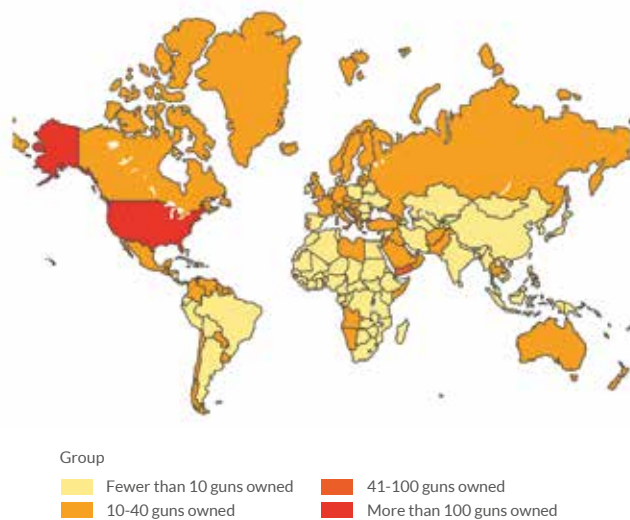
## 1. Overall trends in weapons and ammunition trafficking

Given that the vast majority of Security Programme related seizures reported by WCO Members the CEN fall into the category of SALW/ firearms, most of this Section will focus on examining recent trends in the illicit firearms trade.

Firearms have the ability to cause mass casualties as well as facilitate serious organized crime and political instability around the world. Current estimates suggest that there are around 250,000 firearms related deaths each year.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there are believed to be more than 800 million Small Arms and Light Weapons in circulation around the world.<sup>3</sup> With around 85% of weapons believed to be in the hand of civilians, the risk of their use in crimes as well as terrorist attacks poses a serious risk to the safety and security of many countries.

**Figure 1:** Overview of global civilian gun ownership

Figure 1<sup>4</sup> provides an overview of the civilian gun ownership rates around the world which can be used as an indicator for determining high risk source countries for SALW, as diversion from civilian gun owners poses a serious risk to SALW trafficking.



The United States' high gun ownership rate of 120 firearms for every 100 people as well as having the highest number of firearms in circulation amongst civilians makes them one of the primary source countries for SALW trafficked in several regions around the world.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gun-deaths-by-country>

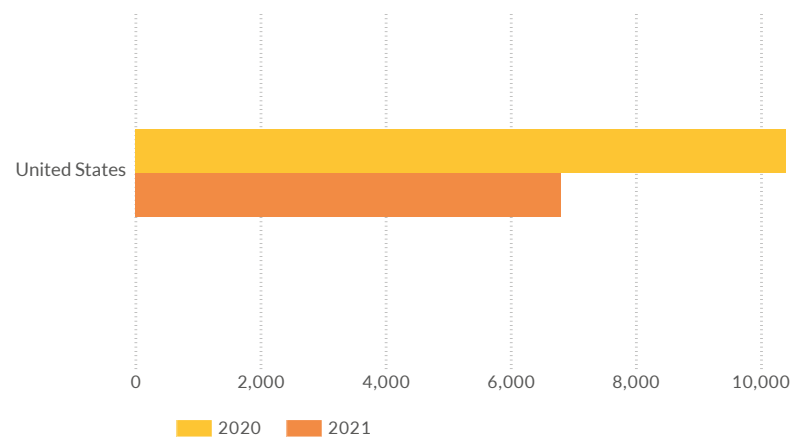
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/database/global-firearms-holdings>

<sup>4</sup> Data used in figure x primarily gathered from: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gun-ownership-by-country>

<sup>5</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gun-ownership-by-country>

Figure 2A provides an overview of the seizures reported by the United States which account for 92% (10,421) of all reported weapons seizures in 2020 and 88% (6,828) in 2021.

**Figure 2A:** Number of weapons and ammunition seizures in the United States, 2020-2021



The number of weapons seizures reported to CEN decreased by 32% from 11,337 seizures in 2020 to 7,730 seizures in 2021. This decrease in reported seizures is largely related to the fact that the 2021 data set did not include seizures reported by US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) from the fourth quarter of 2021 (October-December 2021).

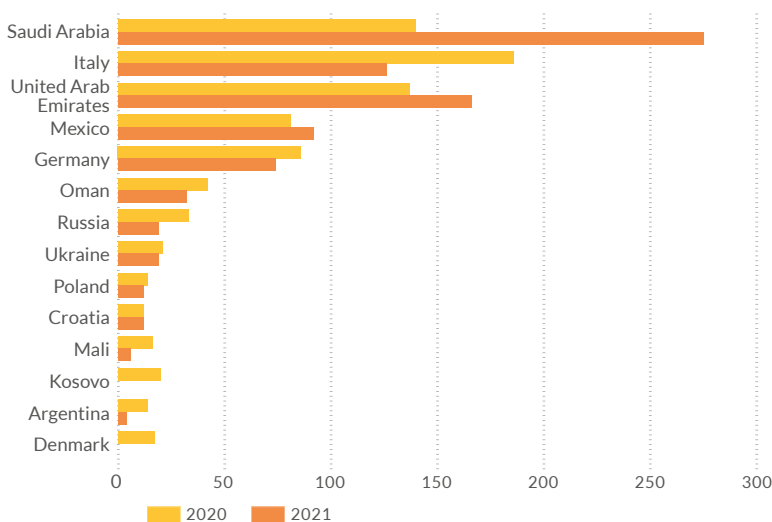
In fact, seizures reported by the United States account for 92% (10,421 see figure 2a) of all reported weapons seizures in 2020 and 88% (6,828) of all reported weapon seizures in 2021. This is in line with previous years which also show a high proportion of U.S. reported seizures.

There are a number of reasons for the high presence of U.S. reported seizures. Firstly, the US CBP provides a large quantity of total seizures to CEN which closely resembles their total yearly seizures whereas other WCO Members may be more selective in choosing which seizures to share in the CEN database. Secondly, as previously mentioned the United States has a very high overall gun ownership rate amongst their civilian population with 42% of US households owning one or more firearms.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, in some countries weapons trafficking does not fall within the remit of Customs and as a result, seizures made by Customs officers within those countries are often transferred to the Police or military who are in charge of compiling and reporting the number of yearly weapons seizures.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/249740/percentage-of-households-in-the-united-states-owning-a-firearm/#:-:text=The%20share%20of%20American%20households,one%20gun%20in%20their%20possession.>

Figure 2B shows the countries which reported the highest number of weapons and ammunition seizures other than the United States. In 2021, 37 countries reported weapons seizures to CEN compared to 48 countries in 2020 which is a 30% decrease in the number of reporting countries.

**Figure 2B:** Number of weapons and ammunition seizures by country, 2020-2021



In addition to the large volume of seizures reported by the United States, significant seizures were reported by Saudi Arabia (275), United Arab Emirates (166), Italy (126), Mexico (92), Germany (74), Oman (32), Russian Federation (19), and Ukraine (19) in 2021. Overall, the top reporting countries remained largely the same for both 2020 and 2021.

The 7,730 weapons seizures reported to CEN in 2021, resulted in the recovery of 265,663 rounds of ammunition (down 72% compared to 2020), 3,724 firearms (down 54% compared to 2020), 20,204 firearms components and firearms accessories (down 7.5% compared to 2020) as reflected in figure 3.

**Figure 3:** Number of weapons and ammunition seizures and quantity seized by category, 2020-2021

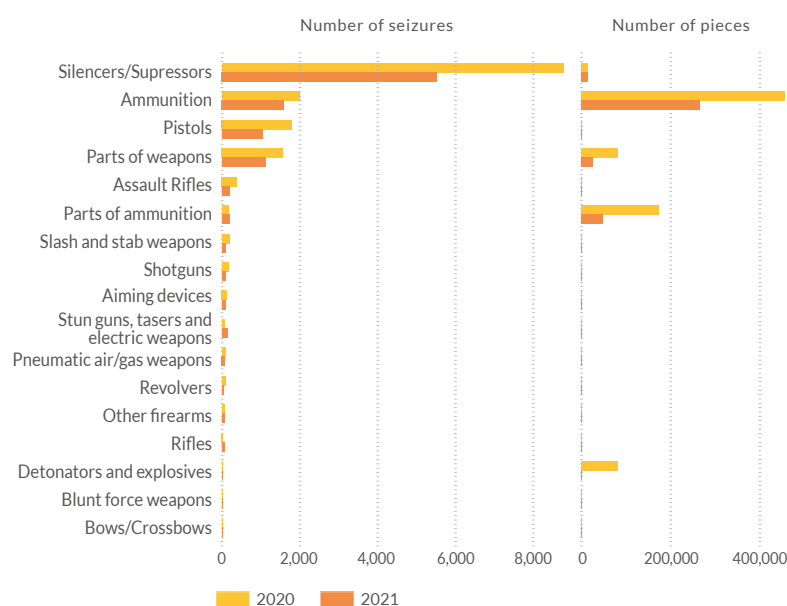


Figure 4 provides a complete overview of the routings identified in 2021.

**Figure 4:** Weapons and ammunition trafficking routes, 2021

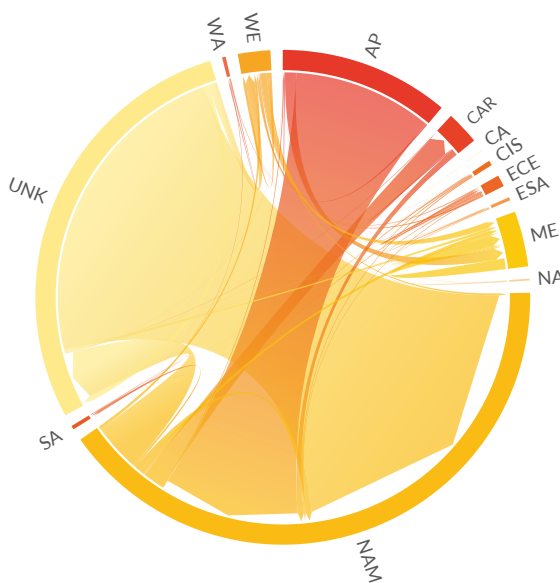


In total, 338 weapons trafficking routes were identified in 2021 which is 13 less (352) than were identified in 2020. Despite identifying 338 routings in 2021 around half (176) were only observed on a single occasion with 85% of identified routes occurring less than five times. The most frequently occurring weapons trafficking routing was from an unknown source country to the United States, making up 50% of all seizures. This was followed by Canada to the United States with 21% of all seizures and United States to Mexico accounting for 18% of all seizures.

Outside of the Americas frequent occurring routes include Hong Kong (SAR) to the United States (56), Singapore to Saudi Arabia (54), Netherlands to Saudi Arabia (48), China to Saudi Arabia (30), United States to the United Arab Emirates (27), Oman to the United Arab Emirates (24) and Jordan to Saudi Arabia (21). The large volume of seizures involving Saudi Arabia is largely related to the increased reporting by Saudi Arabia as the country also serves as the WCO region's Regional Intelligence Liaison Office (RILO).

Figure 5 provides a complete overview of the regional flow of weapons being seized in 2021.

**Figure 5:** Weapons and ammunition trafficking flows by region, 2021





## 2. Firearm component trafficking

The trafficking of firearms components which can be purchased through e-commerce sites as well as the dark net and are then assembled into fully functioning weapons within a country after import, poses an increased security risk.

As shown in image B, once a firearm has been disassembled and broken down into a number of component parts, it becomes much harder to identify the parts as belonging to a firearm when examining a package using nondestructive technologies like x-ray scanners. Moreover, as consumers become more used to purchasing both legal and illegal goods through traditional e-commerce sites as well as crypto markets on the dark net, the online market for weapons and their component parts continues to increase.

B: Revolver seizure.  
Courtesy:  
Cuban Customs.

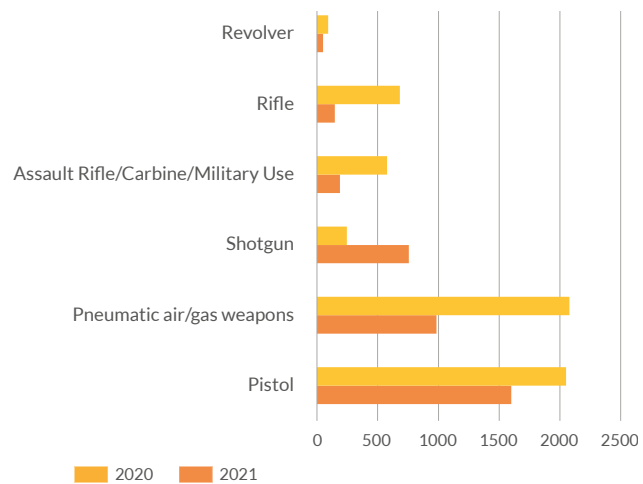


Recent studies of the weapons trade on the dark net indicate that the majority (75%) of online vendors who sell weapons on the dark net provide their customers with worldwide shipping. This same study also indicated that around half (55%) of these online weapons vendors are based in the United States with around 25% being based in Europe. The listings even provide customers with assurances that the firearms being purchased will be sent to them disassembled and in different packages, using several mail carriers in order to avoid detection; as well as providing customers with instructions to assemble the firearms once all the packages have been received.

6 [https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/202103/ti622\\_illicit\\_firearms\\_and\\_other\\_weapons\\_on\\_darknet\\_markets.pdf](https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/202103/ti622_illicit_firearms_and_other_weapons_on_darknet_markets.pdf)

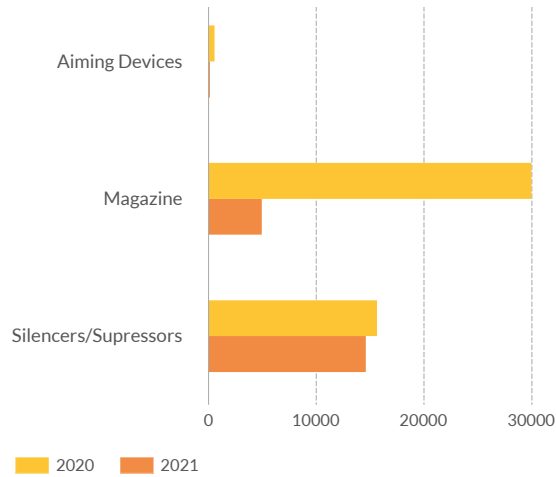
With the average price of a handgun sold on these platforms being around \$700 (USD) and assault rifles selling for upwards of \$3,000 (USD) per gun, it becomes clear how lucrative this illicit online business can be for tech savvy traffickers. WCO Members confirmed these findings in their responses where they noted that broken down weapons concealed within mail and express courier packages presented the greatest risk for weapons trafficking within their country. Survey respondents also repeatedly noted the United States as the primary source country for these broken down weapons with weapons components typically being concealed amongst small electronic appliances and other metallic household goods in order to thwart the efforts of non-intrusive inspections.

**Figure 6: Quantity of firearms components seized, 2020-2021**



In 2021, firearms components including accessories like aiming devices and silencers, accounted for 6,399 seizure cases, which is a decrease of 52% compared to 2020. As you can see in figures 6 and 7, firearms accessories like rifle scopes, silencers/suppressors and magazine clips were seized with much more frequency than core weapons components like barrels, cylinders, frame/receivers, slides and bolts. The large number of magazine seizures in 2020 were mainly the result of a very large seizure in Mali which resulted in the seizure of 25,000 magazines. Although this type of large scale weapons trafficking appears to be rare, the large consignment of weapons components which were headed to an ongoing conflict zone, would have provided insurgent groups in the region significant arms reinforcements that could lead to further destabilization within the region.

**Figure 7:** Quantity of firearms accessory seized, 2020-2021



**Figure 8:** Percentage of all weapons seizures by detection method, 2021

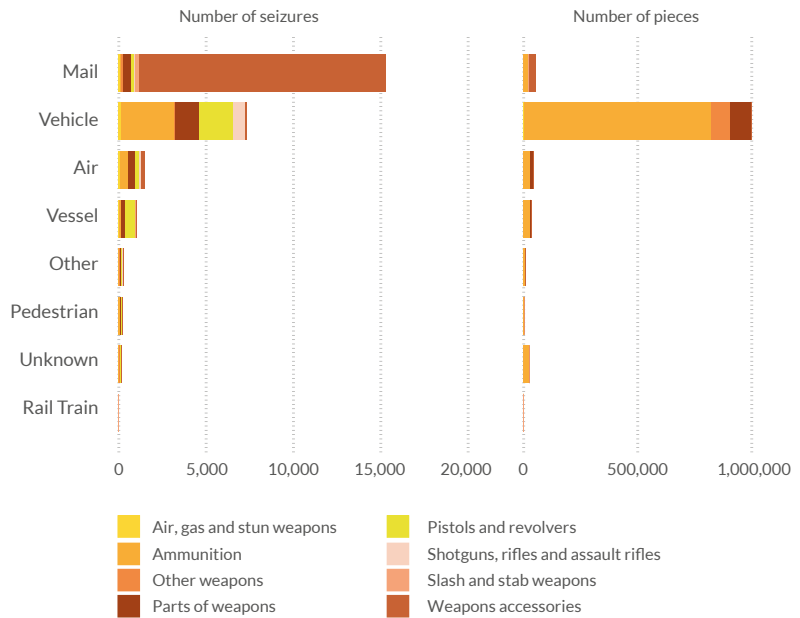
Figure 8 shows that risk profiling was by far the most frequently used detection method for weapons seizures with risk profiling being used in 96% of weapons components cases and resulting in the recovery of 78% of the total weapons components seized.



The second most common detection method was routine control which was used in 3% of weapons components occurrences and resulted in the recovery of 17% of total weapons components seized.

Even though risk profiling was the most common detection method used by Customs to detect weapons components, this method resulted in a lower average seizure size than other methods, with 2.9 weapons components being seized on average using this detection methods. This is considerably smaller than seizures which were detected using random selection which had an average seizure size of 27.6 and intelligence (including tip-off) which resulted in the average seizure of 19.4 weapons components.

**Figure 9:** Number of weapons and ammunition seizures and quantity seized by category and conveyance method 2020-2021



In terms of concealment around 75% of seizures were concealed in the mail resulting in 60% of the total weapons components seized in 2021. However, the average seizure size of weapons components trafficked through the mail was small at 2.8 weapons components per seizure. Only weapons concealed on persons (1.9) and in premises (2.7) had a smaller average seizure size. Weapons components concealed in freight resulted in the largest average seizure size in 36.8 components seized per seizure followed by transport (7.9) and in baggage (7.1). This was partly due to two large freight concealed seizures which contained 420 weapons components and 147 weapons components which increased the average freight seizure size to 36.8 compared to 14.4 without these two outlier cases.



### 3. Firearms trafficking

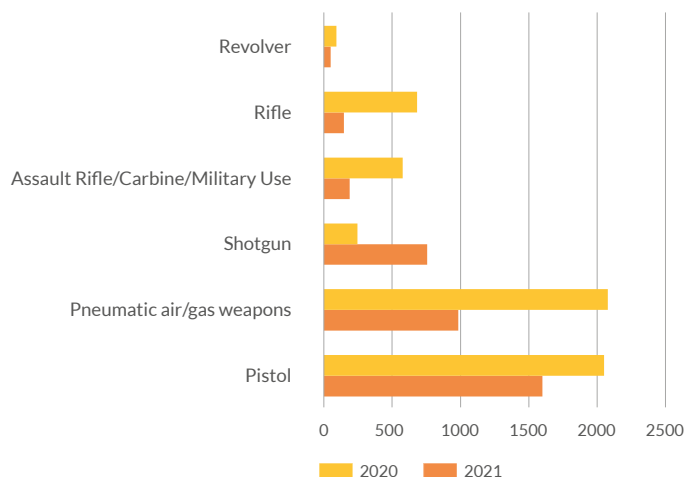
The large number of weapons which are in circulation amongst the civilian population in countries like the United States poses an increased risk of weapons trafficking as it provides more opportunities for diversion from legal weapons possession to illicit gun ownership. Firearm diversion from legitimate civilian, military and law enforcement stockpiles to the hands of weapons traffickers can take place in a number of forms including:

- Diversion from military deployments for example through military service, theft, “military/conflict souvenirs”, enemy capture etc.
- Theft from government/civilian stockpiles
- Diversion/theft from private security companies and weapons manufacturers
- Reactivation of decommissioned or antique firearms
- Diversion from weapons “recycling” or the disposal surplus weapons and;
- The conversion of non-lethal firearms to lethal firearms

In 2021, WCO Members submitted 1,082 firearms seizure cases to CEN which is a 17% decrease compared to the number of seizure cases reported in 2020. This drop in seizures is largely the result of the missing Q4 data from the United States which was previously mentioned in the Section. These 1,082 seizures resulted in the recovery of 3,724 firearms which is again a decrease from 2020 which led to the recovery of 5,727 firearms. Survey responses from WCO Members indicate that the majority of Members did not witness a significant increase or decrease in weapons seizures with the exception of several countries in the Latin America region who noted a significant increase in weapons seizures in 2021 compared to 2020.

As indicated in figure 10, pistols were the second most seized type of firearm with over 1,500 pieces being seized in 2021 and more than 2,000 pieces being seized in 2020.

**Figure 10:** Number of firearms seizures by category and quantity, 2020-2021



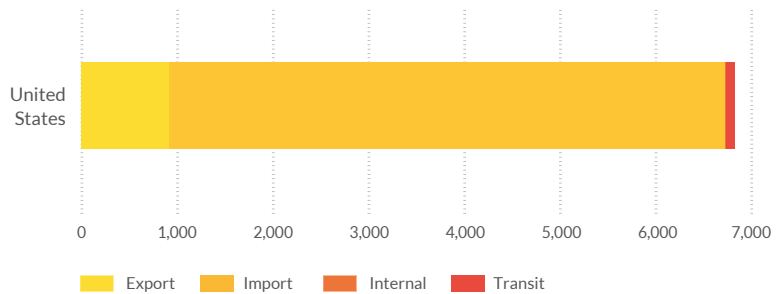
As shown in figure 10, pistols and pneumatic air/gas weapons are the most frequently seized type of firearm. In general the majority of firearms seizures were small in scale with an average of 2.5 weapons recovered per seizure. In fact, in 94% of cases, the seizure led to the recovery of a single firearm. Reported incidents of large scale weapons trafficking (i.e. seizures leading to the recovery of ten or more weapons) were extremely rare and only accounted for around 1% of cases involving firearms seizures.

While the large volume of pneumatic air/gas weapons may appear to be less of a security risk than traditional firearms, the ability to convert such weapons into more lethal firearms as highlighted in Case study 2, poses a serious security risk. Several WCO Members highlighted a new trend involving, “the smuggling of Turkish-made alarm guns which have been converted into more lethal firearms. In some cases, the manufacturer’s markings are [being falsified], giving the impression that they are original firearms from a reputable manufacturer.”

*Firearms seizure.  
Courtesy: Trinidad and  
Tobago Customs.*

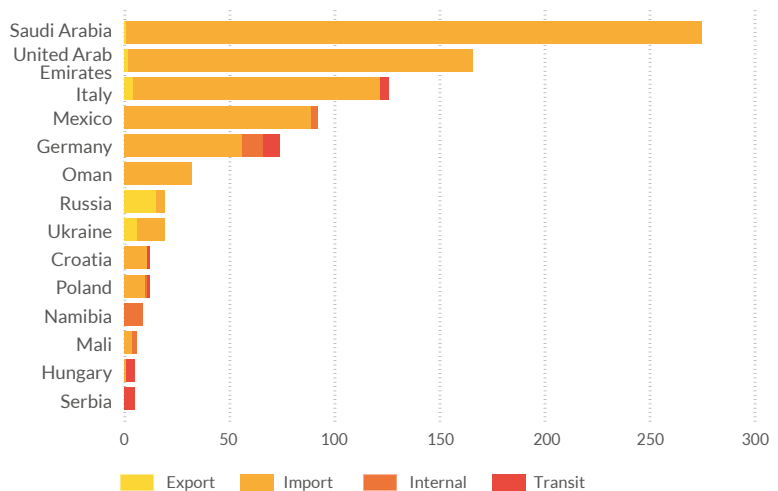


**Figure 11A:** Number of weapons and ammunition seizures in the United States by Customs procedure, 2021



The majority of weapons seizures (67%) in 2021 were recovered upon import, followed by export at 26% with only 5% of weapons seizures taking place upon transit and 2% taking place internally. Moreover, around 44% of all firearm seizures were recovered from land boundaries particularly on the US-Mexico border and to a lesser extent the US-Canada border. For a more detailed overview of the exact location of weapons seizures please see figure 11. It is worth noting that while many of the weapons being seized on the United States' southern border with Mexico are the results of other attempts to traffic goods like drugs or people, weapons seized on the United States northern border with Canada are often not the result of trafficking attempts but the failure of American travelers to properly declare their firearms when entering Canada.

**Figure 11B:** Number of weapons and ammunition seizures by Customs procedure, 2021



Other popular land routes for weapons seizures are from Eastern Europe and the Balkans to countries in Western/Southern Europe. This type of small scale cross border trafficking in Europe is often referred to as “ant trade” trafficking since these activities are usually being carried out by a larger group of individual traffickers rather than large scale smuggling attempts.

Firearms were concealed in a number of different areas most notably in transport and within freight with two large seizures of over 600 and 800 pieces of firearms accounting for the bulk of seizures concealed in these two areas. One Member notably reported seeing several instances where weapons were concealed amongst large illicit drug shipments; with another Member reporting weapons being concealed in used car imports.

Broadly speaking, the data collected through CEN, the Member surveys, and open sources, points towards two distinct types of weapons trafficking. The first being the aforementioned “ant trade” where individuals traffic a small quantity of firearms across a land border often within passenger vehicles. The most popular routes for this type of trafficking are seen at either US or EU external borders, with US seizures generally taking place on the US Mexico border, while seizures in Europe tend to take place on the EU’s external border in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Similar regional style small scale weapons trafficking has also been observed on land borders of other regions including Asia-Pacific, Africa, and the Middle East, although this appears to be occurring at a smaller scale than what we are seeing in North America and Europe.

The second most common form of weapons trafficking identified during this analysis is the small scale trafficking of firearms through mail and parcel services. These are often broken down into components and concealed amongst electronics and other household goods in order to avoid detection. This form of trafficking is more commonly seen in a larger variety of countries and regions with most of the weapons being sourced from North America, Europe, and countries in Asia.

**Figure 12:** Location of firearm seizures, 2021





## Case study 1.

### LARGE CONSIGNMENT OF WEAPONS, AMMUNITION AND POLICE EQUIPMENT SEIZED IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

On 23 April 2021, Customs and Police in Trinidad and Tobago seized a large consignment of weapons and ammunition which included 30 firearms and 763 rounds of assorted ammunition. The seizure was made after law enforcement authorities had received information from their international partners two weeks earlier that a large shipment of weapons was in route to Trinidad and Tobago. Weapons seized included:

- 15 high powered weapons
- 13 pistols
- 1 revolver
- 1 shotgun
- 293 rounds of 5.56 ammunition
- 321 rounds of 9mm ammunition
- 32 rounds of 12 gauge shotgun cartridges
- 25 rounds of .380 ammunition
- 91 rounds of 10mm ammunition
- 4 police sirens
- 4 police blue lights
- 1 bullet proof vest
- 28 rifle magazines
- 7 extended 9mm magazines
- 21 regular 9mm magazines
- 1 - 5.56 drum magazine
- 3 - 9mm drum magazine
- 2 shotgun barrel chokes
- 1 tactical bag
- 6 balaclavas
- 4 - 5.56 magazine holders

This seizure highlights a number of concerns that weapons trafficking poses. Firstly the large quantity of weapons and high caliber weapons seized could pose serious security risks in the hands of organized crime and terrorist groups. It was later reported that the seizure was believed to be linked to a plot to attack a local prison in order to help prisoners escape.

The inclusion of dangerous accessories like drum magazines and extended magazines have the potential to make regular firearms even more lethal since these types of magazines enable the carrier of the firearms to shoot a larger number of bullets before needing to



Courtesy: Trinidad and Tobago  
Police Service.

reload. Moreover the weapons were trafficked into Trinidad and Tobago from the United States where the majority of these items are much easier to obtain.

This further confirms the findings of the CEN data which show that the majority of weapons seized in the America's and the Caribbean originated from the United States. Lastly, this Case study highlights the importance of good cooperation between countries as the seizure was made following the sharing of intelligence between U.S. and Trinidadian law enforcement authorities.

*Sources:*

<https://www.guardian.co.tt/news/raid-uncovers-major-gun-ammunition-cache-in-piarco-6.2.1319008.2a75e4f410>

<https://newsday.co.tt/2021/04/23/major-illegal-arms-cache-seized-at-piarco-bond-2/>

<https://newsday.co.tt/2021/04/25/police-probe-jailbreak-plot-linked-to-arms-cache/>

## Case study 2.

### FINNISH CUSTOMS SEIZES 100 GAS GUNS



Courtesy:  
Finnish Customs.

Over a one year period, Finnish Customs officers have seized a total of around 100 firearms which were primarily being trafficked into Finland via the mail. The seized firearms largely consisted of gas guns/starter pistols which in their existing state are non-lethal. However, investigations into several of these seizures did uncover worrisome trends. For example, in one case, Customs officers were able to seize 12 unauthorized gas weapons from an individual's home. During the investigation it was revealed that this individual had successfully imported and redistributed a further 27 gas weapons which he had sold to other individuals on the dark net.

In a separate case, Finnish Customs' investigation into an imported gas weapon revealed that the importer had set up a workshop within their home to covert these types of gas weapons to be able to fire standard bullets which would make them lethal. Further investigation revealed that the individual was in the possession of more than 10 gas weapons as well as a thousand cartridges and weapons components.

Thanks to ongoing international cooperation efforts with authorities from Czechia, Finnish Customs were able to successfully uncover more than a dozen cases of authorized firearms imports which had initially successfully reached Finland.

This case study highlights the danger that blank firing/gas weapons can pose after they have successfully entered a country and undergone the necessary conversions to make them lethal. It also shows that criminals are using technologies such as crypto markets and the dark net to distribute weapons clandestinely through the mail. Lastly, the case study further shows how effective international cooperation can help uncover cases of trafficking which may otherwise have gone unnoticed.

#### Sources:

<https://tulli.fi/-/tulli-paljasti-100-ampuma-aseen-luvattomat-mahantuonnit-rikoksesta-epailtyina-kymmenia-henkiloita-ympari-suomea>

<https://www.helsinkitimes.fi/finland/news-in-brief/19555-in-pictures-finnish-customs-reveal-seizures-of-100-illegal-firearms.html>

## 4. Programmes, projects and operations

### Strategic trade control

The Strategic Trade Control Enforcement (STCE) Programme at the WCO was initially formed after the United Nations passed United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540 (UNSCR 1540) with the remit to support Customs Administrations to develop the capacity to implement effective enforcement measures. UNSCR 1540 seeks to prevent non-state actors from attempting to acquire, develop, manufacture, possess, transport, transfer or use any nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. In order to help achieve this objective the STCE Programme delivers trainings to Customs administrations on how to properly identify, detect and prevent the trade in these goods as well as organizing several global/regional strategic trade focused operations.

### Small arms and light weapons

The WCO Security Programme is currently running two separate regional SALW focused security projects. The first regional project is a joint project together with the Small Arms Survey and INTERPOL which provides training to Customs officers in the Middle East and North Africa Regions. Following the successful completion of the first iteration of this project a second phase of the project was launched in 2021 which would build upon the knowledge and training provided during the first phase of the Project.

In early 2022 the WCO launched a second regional SALW project, Project HAMMER, which focuses on firearms and narcotics trafficking in the Caribbean region. This regional project will deliver SALW as well as anti-narcotics trafficking training and mentoring to Customs officers working in the Caribbean region.

### Passenger controls

As part of its efforts to help countries more effectively target high risk passengers including Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs), the WCO provides Members with a free of charge targeting system known as the Global Travel Assessment System (GTAS). GTAS uses Advance Passenger Information (API) and Passenger Name Record (PNR) data to more effectively target the most high risk passengers who travel by air.

In addition WCO has been active in developing effective passenger controls in the maritime space where it is currently developing standards for API and PNR like data which can be used in the maritime cruise sector together with the International Maritime Organization through its work in the Passenger Facilitation Control Working Group.

### PGS global

Programme Global Shield (PGS) is a longstanding international effort to monitor the licit movement of chemical precursors and counter the illicit diversion of explosive precursors and other materials which are used by terrorist groups and insurgents to manufacture Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's).

In late 2021 the WCO Security Programme launched a new global focused PGS project, PGS GLOBAL, which was made possible through donor funding from the United States Department of State and the European Commission. This project will look to establish a more comprehensive PGS analysis by combining open source data with CEN and CENcomm data to provide WCO Members and other stakeholders with the information they need for their national risk assessments.

### WEST AFRICA SECURITY PROJECT

In March 2021 the WCO launched a regional security project which targeted several beneficiary countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Ghana) in the West and Central Africa region. This security project sought to build upon the capacity building activities which had been undertaken under the recently completed Security Project for West and Central Africa. During the project the WCO conducted a series of diagnostic activities at major ports, airports and land borders in the Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Ghana region. The diagnostic activities helped provide guidance on how the beneficiary countries could enhance revenue and security related Customs procedures within those facilities.

