Almost 13,000 Firearms Went Missing from Mexican Law-Enforcement Agencies between 2006 and 2016

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According to statistics compiled by the Defense Ministry (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, SEDENA), law-enforcement agencies in Mexico misplaced or suffered the theft of almost 13,000 weapons over the past decade, contributing to the increase of firearms that are circulating around the country.

The SEDENA data, which the daily newspaper Milenio obtained through a freedom-of-information request via the Instituto Nacional de Transparencia, Acceso a la Información y Protección de Datos Personales (INAI), indicated that 12,878 handguns, rifles, and other weapons have gone missing since 2006 from federal, state, and municipal agencies.

Among federal agencies, the attorney general’s office (Procuraduría General de la República, PGR) reported the disappearance of 1,171 weapons during the 10-year period, and the federal police (Policía Federal) suffered the theft of 1,054 firearms. The national security agency (Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional, CISEN) had 102 weapons stolen between 2006 and 2016, while the Servicio de Protección Federal (SPF), which is the equivalent of the US Secret Service, reported the theft of 15 weapons.

Most weapons taken from local, state police

The remaining 12,878 missing guns, handguns, and rifles were lost or stolen from law-enforcement agencies in all 31 states and Mexico City. The majority of the thefts occurred in Mexico City, México state, Chihuahua, Guerrero, and Jalisco. The latter three states are strongholds of several criminal organizations and splinter groups, said Milenio.

According to the SEDENA data, the highest number of thefts during the decade occurred in 2009, when 2,081 firearms were stolen. The second-highest number occurred in 2012, when more than 1,800 weapons disappeared. The Milenio report said the thieves sold the weapons via the black market to criminal organizations and possibly self-defense groups fighting the drug traffickers in various states, including Guerrero and Michoacán (SourceMex, Jan. 22, 2014, and Feb. 19, 2014).

“Significantly, these figures go some way to countering the idea that all illegal arms in Mexico come from the United States,” InSight Crime, a foundation that studies organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean, said in an analysis on its online news site.

“The fact that so many guns have gone missing within Mexico, and reports that some cartels might even be manufacturing their own weapons, points to a diversification on the part of criminal gangs in how they source their weapons,” the InSight Crime website noted.

There is a strong likelihood that the SEDENA statics might have underestimated the extent of the problem. In August 2015, the daily newspaper La Jornada, citing figures from the non-governmental organization [Des]Arma México, reported that police in almost 2,500 municipalities in every Mexican state and Mexico City had lost more than 17,000 weapons of all calibers.
“The more weapons in circulation, the more homicides we have,” Paulina Arriaga Carrasco, executive director of [Des] Arma México, told La Jornada.

Mexico reported the seizure of 115,533 firearms to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) between 2010 and 2013. This figure was triple the number of weapons that Germany seized during the same period, Arriaga said.

UNODC compared statistics for 42 nations, and Mexico ranked second in confiscations in 2013, surpassed only by Colombia, Arriaga noted. In 2011, Mexico ranked first, with nearly 41,000 firearms confiscated.

**US continues to supply majority of illegal imports**

Despite the large-scale thefts, the lion’s share of arms circulating in Mexico still comes from the US. “Arms trafficked from Mexico’s northern neighbor have been found to be the biggest source of illegal weapons for Mexican criminal gangs. A 2012 government study found that more than 70% of firearms recovered in Mexico in the five years prior could be traced to the US,” InSight Crime acknowledged.

Criminal organizations acquire weapons, primarily high-caliber firearms, via so-called straw purchases in the US, whereby US citizens who have passed background checks make the purchases on behalf of the drug dealers, usually at gun shows in states with lax laws (SourceMex, April 1, 2009, March 20, 2013, and June 18, 2014). There is also evidence that some of the weapons entering Mexico originate in Germany (SourceMex, Jan. 28, 2015).

According to a 2010 study conducted by Colby Goodman and Michel Marizco for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the Mexico Institute at the University of San Diego, the most common firearms purchased in the US and recovered in Mexico are AK-47 type semi-automatic rifles and AR-15 semi-automatic rifle clones.

Arriaga noted that homicides in Mexico spiked significantly after 2004, which is when a 10-year ban on the sale of high-caliber weapons expired in the US. “By 2012, the rise in homicides increased by 178%,” Arriaga said. “In other words, the deaths in Mexico due to homicide tripled between 2004 and 2012.”

Mexican legal imports of firearms are also on the increase. According to a report published by the Stockholm International Research Peace Institute (SIPRI) in February 2016, Mexico’s imports of firearms in the five-year period between 2011 and 2015 increased by 331% compared with imports between 2006 and 2010.

**A right protected by the Constitution**

While there is a misconception that ordinary Mexican citizens are prohibited from owning firearms, gun ownership is protected by the Constitution. However, a reform to Article 10 in 1971 further defined this right. According to the changes approved by Congress that year, Mexicans have the right to keep arms in their homes (derecho de poseer armas en su domicilio). However, the right to bear arms outside the home is limited to law-enforcement agencies explicitly authorized by law, including police, military, and security officers. “Federal law will determine the cases, conditions, requirements, and locations where inhabitants will be authorized to bear arms,” reads the text of Article 10.
Still, despite the prohibitions in the Constitution to bear arms in public, the widespread homicides are evidence that the constitutional provision is widely ignored in Mexico. Prosecutors from Mexico’s 31 states and Mexico City reported 17,013 murders in 2015, the fifth-highest rate in nearly two decades, according to statistics from the Interior Ministry (Secretaría de Gobernación, SEGOB). In contrast, 15,653 murders were reported in 2014.

México state and Guerrero had the highest rate of homicides in 2015, the statistics indicated. According to the online news site Animal Político, which studied statistics from the Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP), the situation is worsening. In February 2016, an average of 55 people were killed daily in Mexico, the highest number of any month since federal authorities started to collect this type of data in January 2014. The SNSP data showed that 3,158 individuals were assassinated in January-February 2016, up 11% from the same period in 2015 and 6% from the first two months of 2014.

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