

Maddie Topliff  
The Americanization of Mexico  
Crowe & Swilky  
26 January 2020

The True Americanization of Mexico:  
U.S.'s facilitation of domestic and international gun violence

**Introduction**

Before students from Drake University could board their flights for their three-week January travel seminar in Guadalajara, they were required to visit a local notary in order to bypass the U.S. State Department's Level 3 "Reconsider Travel" advisory for the state of Jalisco due to crime. In addition to Jalisco, 10 other Mexican states are also currently under a Level 3 advisory while the states of Colima, Guerrero, Michoacán, Sinaloa and Tamaulipas are under a Level 4 advisory: "Do Not Travel." Criminal groups and cartel activity has led to record rates of homicides by gunfire in Mexico in recent years — over 20,000 deaths were recorded in 2018 alone (Linthicum).

But here in the United States, those with stakes in the gun industry continue to count their money, as the majority of homicides in Mexico are carried out by American guns and ammunition (Linthicum). Arms dealing is a huge market in the United States but consequently fuels consistent gun violence in both countries as a result — the assault rifles that cartels use to gun down Mexican civilians are the same weapons being used to gun down students in Connecticut or Wal-Mart shoppers in Texas. Thus, passing comprehensive gun control in the U.S. that targets assault rifles is the only solution that will substantially curb gun violence in both countries. Until then, the United States is complicit to gun homicides on both sides of the border.

I will explore this thesis by presenting a combination of research and a critical analysis, which will help me ultimately present conclusions and potential future implications of continuous inaction on behalf of the United States in regards to neglecting gun control reform.

## **Economics of U.S. gun industry**

In 2018, gun stores raked in around \$11 billion USD in 2018 while manufacturers earned another \$17 billion USD for a total revenue of a \$28 billion USD (MacBride). The majority of gun owners nationwide own an average of five guns each, with 60% of gun owners citing safety as the reason for ownership in 2013 (Swift). Yet, since 2013, there have been nearly 2,000 mass shootings in the United States — roughly equaling one shooting per day (Kates).

So who really feels safe? Apparently, it's not the majority of Americans, whether they own a gun or not ("The State of Safety..."). But the culture of feeling unsafe is still great business for a select few. What is referred to as "gun violence business," composed of the security alarm business, the security guard business, ALICE active shooter training, public school security and a combination of other preventative measures, is much more profitable than the gun industry. For example, security alarm companies alone bring in \$25 billion USD annually (MacBride). But conversely, the aftermath of gun violence is costly. It's estimated that companies collectively lose \$49 billion USD annually in victims' lost wages and productivity (Lee and Lurie). It's a tradeoff that depends on where your interests lie. Organizations like the Firearms Industry Trade Association are proud of their impact on the U.S. economy and put together specific, statewide reports to demonstrate their economic influence and impact from the year prior. Idaho, Alaska, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Arkansas's economies rely the heaviest on the firearms industry (McCann). Gun control reform could understandably be seen as an infringement on the household incomes and daily lives of many Americans, but the absence of gun control reform is an infringement on the lives and safety of many others, including our neighbors to the south.

## **Gun lobby**

Since the late 18th century, all proposed gun legislation in the United States has been vetted by the constitution's second amendment: "the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." While states have the power to propose further restrictions, they run the risk of their policies being deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Because of those varying gun laws across the country, obtaining a firearm is virtually a seamless process. The majority of states allow an 18 year-old to purchase an assault weapon — that's three whole years before they're able to purchase alcohol (Beckett). In response to recent school shootings, multiple members of Congress have tried to pass stricter federal firearm regulations, but over 25 pieces of legislation have failed or died in committee since the Sandy Hook shooting of 2013, including the bipartisan Maachin-Toomey amendment, which would have required background checks for commercial gun sales. That amendment failed by six votes (Busch).

The lack of progress can be — and should be — attributed to the National Rifle Association's or the NRA's influence on law making. The NRA spent over \$5.1 million USD on lobbying in 2017 (Weiss). In these instances, money talks louder than people — the NRA represents less than a fifth of all American gun owners, yet is still one of the country's most powerful gun lobbies (Weiss). And those on the opposite side of the aisle are stuck between a rock — school shootings — and a hard place — blocked policy.

Gun control has also been a hot button issue during recent presidential cycles. The NRA donated almost \$20 million in opposition to Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election cycle (Weiss), and a few months after his inauguration, President Trump told gun owners they would "have a true friend and champion in the White House" during his administration ("Trump Tells NRA.."). In the 2020 election cycle, gun control reform was a much larger policy issue in the early months after two mass shootings took place less than 24 hours apart. But since Beto

O'Rourke dropped out of the race in November, it's taken a backseat. That's a mistake: the current pool of candidates could learn a lot from O'Rourke.

Initially, former Congressman Beto O'Rourke didn't boast any large differences on gun control policy that separated him from any other Democratic candidate. But he had no choice but to stir the pot after a mass shooting affected his hometown of El Paso, Texas, last August. In the September 2019 Democratic debate, O'Rourke proposed his most progressive policy yet: a mandatory gun buyback for assault weapons, a policy his right-leaning home state would have ridiculed him for just six weeks prior. For a few weeks, El Paso and O'Rourke's response kept gun control reform at the top of people's minds and put O'Rourke in the minds of voters. But after O'Rourke dropped out of the race on November 4, gun control hasn't been mentioned in a single debate. The whole Beto situation perfectly illustrates the U.S.'s waning attention span and ignorance toward how even domestic gun violence affects Mexico. The mass shooter in El Paso intentionally drove over 11 hours in order to gun down Hispanics due to Texas' proximity to the border (Romo). Even inside our country, Latinos continue to find themselves at the wrong end of American assault weapons, and O'Rourke had a unique understanding that as long as assault weapons are still able to be bought and sold in the United States, no one is truly safe from gun violence.

### **Guns in Mexico**

Gun ownership in Mexico is not nearly as flexible as it is in the United States. For instance, carrying a firearm in public is virtually impermissible — a license to carry is usually only reserved for police and military as well as “specialized sporting participants,” who have to belong to a registered club or association. And attempting to legally purchase an assault rifle is not even an option (Guerrero). So how do American assault rifles fall into the hands of Mexican

cartels? Just 4% of guns manufactured in the United States are exported worldwide — legally. Straw purchasing, which occurs when guns are legally purchased in the United States and then illegally cross the border, led to the trafficking of approximately 750,000 guns into Mexico from 2010 to 2012 (Fry). And if the United States manufactured roughly 20 million guns between 2010 and 2012, that means another 4% of guns manufactured domestically were trafficked to Mexico (Horsley).

In July 2019, news of a “major new joint operation” between Mexico and the United States surfaced, seemingly with the purpose to stifle trafficking. But in the days following the announcement from Mexico’s foreign minister Marcelo Ebrard, there came no confirmation from the U.S. Department of State, showcasing that the U.S. perhaps has no intentions to combat trafficking at all (Yablon).

“It is really short on specifics,” Maureen Meyer of the Washington Office on Latin America. “I’m not sure if this is going to be a real commitment from the U.S. to do more on smuggling or not.” Then, in early August 2019, Rolling Stone published a feature article, “Arming the Cartels: The Inside Story of a Texas Gun-Smuggling Ring,” which gave some newfound insight on how the guns even get to Mexico. Turns out, it’s pretty simple: smugglers drive across the border and are largely protected from prosecution because there is no comprehensive law in the United States that specifically prohibits cross-border gun trafficking. The article also highlighted a key new takeaway: if it weren’t for trafficking, half of the gun stores in the United States would be forced to close (Harp).

Gathering any data on arms trafficking has been an uphill battle due to the loopholes in U.S. policy. But the amount of explicit, tangible data really dropped off after President Trump came into office. Not coincidentally, border states like Arizona and Texas where the largest

amount of trafficking has been alleged to take place vote Republican. Gun control is partisan politics when it shouldn't be, but framing it as a partisan issue sure makes it a lot easier for politicians to dismiss statistics. But the fact is that students killed in a 2018 school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas, weren't even of voting age (Romo). And the Mexican civilians and law enforcement officers slain by cartels who wield the same exact assault weapons used in U.S. school shootings don't elect American policymakers.

Not only are these victims not represented by policymakers, but they are also victims of a system that prioritizes sales whether they're dead or alive and regardless of where they live. Firearms trafficking and the resulting gun violence has both increased the number of gun homicides in Mexico and has also contributed to an uptick in the number of Mexicans with posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD. The municipality of Ciudad Juárez — originally home to roughly half of all cartel violence — estimated that up to 30% of their population suffers from PTSD (Lohmuller). And more recently, PTSD has leaked into the surrounding rural communities. Meanwhile, straw purchasers support the U.S. economy and make a quick buck and cartels receive the weapons they need to commit the acts of violence they're known for. And both parties are in some way protected the lax gun laws in the U.S. and the aggressiveness of its adjoining gun lobby.

### **Three failed initiatives**

The U.S. has tried to intervene in cartel activity without touching American gun laws before, but it hasn't worked. Operation Wide Receiver and Operation Fast and Furious were two of the biggest scandals for the George W. Bush administration and Obama administration respectively. Operation Wide Receiver commenced in 2006. The idea was to trace trafficked guns by using pre-installed microchips and aerial video surveillance as they made their way

across the border. The goal was to track down cartel hot zones by pinpointing where the weapons ended up. But the smugglers caught on and would wear down the surveillance equipment batteries before taking the guns to their final location. Hundreds of weapons were lost and unaccounted for by the time the operation came to a close.

Operation Fast and Furious — 2009 — had a similar motive but was overseen by the Phoenix Field Division of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives or ATF and was arguably a larger scandal. This was another gunwalking operation, but it took a deadly turn. Multiple weapons connected to the murder of a Border Patrol agent were linked to Fast and Furious. At the end of the investigation led by Congress, it was revealed that over 1,400 weapons were lost by ATF, who was then sued by the agent's family. The lawsuit was later dismissed, and instead, a settlement was reached as of May 2019, ten years after the original operation (Frieden).

A year before Fast and Furious began, President Bush tried something different. In 2008, the U.S. and Mexico signed the Mérida Initiative, which was the first real time that the United States publicly admitted partial responsibility for drug-fueled violence in Mexico. The Initiative consists of four primary pillars.

#### Pillar One - Disrupt Capacity of Organized Crime to Operate

Pillar One's first goal was to reduce crime by capturing cartel leaders, which would trigger a trickle-down effect by reducing the flow of revenue via the disruption of personnel, which would lead to the second goal of Pillar One: better investigations from more captures and arrests. While this is the most practical of all of the pillars, it doesn't explicitly rule out gunwalking as a tactic, which failed twice for the U.S. in a matter of less than three years.

#### Pillar Two - Institutionalize Capacity to Sustain Rule of Law

Pillar Two focused primarily on government institutions that uphold the law. Basically, the United States was to be used as the model for Mexico to use in order to professionalize their military and police forces. Although criminal justice reform is important, cartels' purpose is to evade the law, and noticeable changes to the justice system can't run their course until after cartels are infiltrated and dismantled.

#### Pillar Three - Create a 21st Century Border Structure

Pillar Three is the first of the four pillars to mention arms by name, but goes about curbing arms trafficking in the wrong way. The phrase "Non-intrusive technologies will assist in the detection of criminal activities" hints at the surveillance tactics used in Operation Wide Receiver but doesn't acknowledge the drawbacks of the technology used in the operation nor the guns lost because of the defective tech.

#### Pillar Four - Build Strong and Resilient Communities

Pillar Four has three distinctive parts. Drug Demand Reduction (DDR) programs were introduced in order to "reduce illegal drug consumption" by implementing and expanding drug treatment courts (DTC), but is more reactive than proactive, a common theme throughout Pillar Four. The Culture of Lawfulness (COL) initiative is an educational program that strives to "instill a sense of individual responsibility to uphold the rule of law in Mexico" and is a part of required curricula in Mexico. COL also facilitates citizens' watch booths, which boosts accountability and accessibility for citizens when it comes to reporting crime.

There are two large problems with the Mérida Initiative. The first is that in recent years, the Mérida Initiative has fallen to the wayside as administrations have changed hands, which can happen with any foreign policy. The second, however, is a lot more critical: the U.S. neglects to acknowledge proactive solutions, and President Lopez Obrador agrees. In May of 2019, he called



for the end of the Mérida Initiative, saying “it hasn’t worked.” Instead of financing the military and armed measures, Obrador wants the U.S.’s money to go toward job development and economy stimulation (Ponce). Currently, the majority of the funds are being used to stop heroin and fentanyl from reaching the U.S. border via law enforcement, which doesn’t help Mexico at all. Mexico isn’t lacking in military or police. But the U.S. is selfish; proactively helping Mexico was never the primary objective.

The problems aren’t due to a lack of understanding, but the suppression of information and little motivation to act. Were the initiatives designed with the intent to fail at breaking up cartel activity? Probably not intentionally. But considering the amount of data highlighting the power of the gun lobby in the United States, it’s simply not feasible to believe domestic gun control reform was left out of past initiatives by accident.

### **Future alternative action and conclusion**

Unfortunately, if left up to the government, the state of gun violence in the United States and Mexico will continue to worsen if Democrats don’t take control of the presidency, the House of Representatives and the Senate all at the same time. Otherwise, policy will continue to die either in House committee, on the Senate floor or on the president’s desk. And the chances of creating successful bipartisan/nonpartisan legislation are slim until the gun lobby loosens its grip on the GOP. In the meantime, one option that the United States should seriously consider is lowering the voting age to 16 years old. If secondary schools are going to continue to be at risk for gun violence, then at least half of high school students should be able to perform their civic duty, especially if they’re being taxed after getting their first job. When it comes to international relations going forward, the U.S. has to prioritize what’s important to Mexico by scrapping the current version of the Mérida Initiative, verbally committing to not pursue another federal

gunwalking overwatch operation and redirecting funds to expand Mexico's access to quality mental health services to combat the rising rates of PTSD and related trauma-induced mental illnesses since addressing the cause of the trauma head-on is too difficult. No matter the alternative solution, it is clear that none will compare to banning assault rifles from the American market. Until comes to pass, then the U.S. will not only continue to facilitate mass shootings domestically, but also remain moderately liable for cartel violence in Mexico and its resulting repercussions on the living. The least the U.S. can do is attempt to *react* with Mexico's best interests in mind until they make the decision to be *proactive*.

#### Work Cited

Busch, Monica. "24 Gun Control Laws That Have Failed Since Sandy Hook." *Bustle*, Bustle, 14 Dec. 2017.

Frieden, Terry. "Top Justice Official Expresses Regret for Failure to Warn on 'Gun Walking' ." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 1 Nov. 2011.

Fry, Wendy. "Mexico, U.S. Will Attempt to 'Freeze' Arms Trafficking at San Diego-Tijuana Border Crossing." *Tribune*, San Diego Union-Tribune, 23 Oct. 2019.

Guerrero, Jean. "Mexico's American Gun Problem." *KPBS Public Media*, KPBS, 30 Apr. 2019.

Harp, Seth. "Arming the Cartels: The Inside Story of a Texas Gun-Smuggling Ring." *Rolling Stone*, Penske Business Media, LLC. , 7 Aug. 2019.

Horsley, Scott. "Guns In America, By The Numbers." *NPR*, National Public Radio, 5 Jan. 2016.

Kates, Graham. "Report: U.S. Averages Nearly One Mass Shooting per Day so Far in 2017."

*CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 3 Oct. 2017.

Lee, Jaeah, and Julia Lurie. "16 Charts That Show the Massive Cost of Gun Violence in

America." *Mother Jones*, Mother Jones and the Foundation for National Progress, 20 Nov. 2018.

Linthicum, Kate. "Mexicans Are Killing Each Other at Record Rates. The U.S. Provides the

Guns." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 6 Oct. 2019.

MacBride, Elizabeth. "America's Gun Business Is \$28B. The Gun Violence Business Is

Bigger." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 25 Nov. 2018.

McCann, Adam. "States Most Dependent on the Gun Industry." *WalletHub*, Evolution

Finance, 9 Apr. 2019.

Romo, Vanessa. "El Paso Walmart Shooting Suspect Pleads Not Guilty." *NPR*, NPR, 10 Oct.

2019.

Swift, Art. "Personal Safety Top Reason Americans Own Guns Today." *Gallup.com*, Gallup,

Inc., 14 Mar. 2018.

*The State of Safety in the United States*. SafeWise, 2 May 2019.

"Trump Tells NRA He Will 'Never, Ever' Infringe on 2nd Amendment Rights."

*NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 28 Apr. 2017.

Weiss, Brennan. "5 Charts That Show How Powerful the NRA Is." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 20 Feb. 2018.

Yablon, Alex. "Mexico Says Its Working with the U.S. to Stop Gun Smuggling. Washington Isn't Offering Details." *The Trace*, 29 July 2019.