



Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 3, 2023

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We write to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct a review of illegal firearms trafficking from the United States to the Caribbean.

Recently, we have seen high levels of gun violence and trafficking of illicit firearms across the Western Hemisphere. This deadly trend has a tremendous impact on the people of the region and was the impetus for previous requests from our offices for GAO reports on U.S. efforts to counter firearms trafficking to Mexico (2021) and U.S. efforts to counter firearms trafficking to criminal organizations in Central America (2022). This new request, focused on the Caribbean, will allow us to obtain a more robust picture of the overall impact of the illicit trafficking and use of deadly weapons and munitions in the region.

We are particularly concerned about the effects of illicit U.S. firearms on the security situation in Haiti. Most recently, these concerns were raised in a September 29, 2022 House Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing titled *Haiti at the Crossroads: Civil Society Responses for a Haitian-led Solution*. The Committee heard testimony from four expert witnesses, including representatives of Haiti's civil society and a former U.S. ambassador to Haiti, Pamela A. White. Witnesses agreed that the United States is the principal source of weapons being used by criminal gangs, who are destabilizing the country, preventing the provision of basic government services, thwarting the distribution of humanitarian assistance, increasing levels of deadly violence, and causing an ever-increasing number of Haitians to lose hope and flee the country. Many are arriving at U.S. borders and are exacerbating the record-high level of irregular migration. Haiti does not stand alone as a Caribbean nation being destabilized by the influx of illicit American firearms. The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime's *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* evaluated firearms trafficking seizure levels in seven Caribbean countries in 2016 and 2017. The study found that between 2,000 and 3,000 firearms were seized each year, with Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and the Bahamas accounting for most of these seizures. We have also taken note of other recent reports, including the following:

- [“U.S. reports spike in weapons smuggling to Haiti and the Caribbean,”](#) Reuters, August 17, 2022.
- The State Department's 2022 *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, Volume I* (pp 149-151) touches on “guns for ganja” trafficking in which Jamaican traffickers exchange marijuana for guns from criminals in Haiti.
- [“Jamaica and Haiti Swap Drugs and Guns,”](#) *InSight Crime*, June 23, 2020.

- [“U.S. Guns Flow into Haiti, Fuel Gang Violence,”](#) *InSight Crime*, November 30, 2021.
- [“Scandal at Haiti Customs After Over 100,000 Rounds of Smuggled Ammunition Seized,”](#) *InSight Crime*, July 8, 2022.
- The Caribbean countries with high numbers of illicit firearms trafficking—Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Dominican Republic, and Haiti—also have high or increasing rates of violent crime and homicides. According to the United Nations, firearms are involved in 70% of the Caribbean’s homicides, compared to 30% at the global level. See U.N. Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean Community’s Implementation Agency for Crime and Security, [“Roadmap for Implementing The Caribbean Priority Actions on the Illicit Proliferation of Firearms and Ammunition across the Caribbean in a Sustainable Manner by 2030,”](#) fact sheet, 2020.

Arms trafficking originating in the United States is drawing increased scrutiny from U.S. law enforcement and increasing concern from Caribbean leaders. Media reports cite Bahamian claims that more than 90% of guns confiscated and used as murder weapons in The Bahamas can be traced back to U.S. manufacturers and gun shops. Prime Minister Philip Davis said, “Whereas we don’t want to get involved in their [U.S.] domestic issue of the right to bear arms, we are concerned that purchasers of guns are not just buying them to bear but rather to export and to traffic.”

After a large weapons seizure at Haina Port, near the capital of Santo Domingo, involving high-caliber rifles, pistols, and explosives, Dominican President Luis Abinader called the number of illegal guns in the country a public health and public security issue. He claimed there are up to three illegal weapons for each of the country’s 238,000 registered guns. In 2020, according to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), three-quarters of the illicit guns they traced in the Dominican Republic were manufactured in or originally exported to the United States.¹

ATF maintains an online database of firearms trace data that includes data for the Canada and Mexico since 2009 and Central America and the Caribbean since 2014. For the Caribbean in 2021, the database provides information on a total of 1,038 U.S. sourced firearms recovered and submitted to the ATF for tracing in five Caribbean countries: The Bahamas, 236; Dominican Republic, 94; Haiti, 106; Jamaica, 400; and Trinidad and Tobago, 202.²

Accordingly, we would like to obtain more in-depth information on the extent of the illicit American arms trafficking in the Caribbean and related effects, as well as current practices, and what more could be done to curtail the flow of these weapons. This would supplement the GAO’s previous work on this issue with respect to Mexico and Central America.

¹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, “HSI announces crackdown on firearms, ammunition smuggling to Haiti, the Caribbean,” August 19, 2022 <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/hsi-announces-crackdown-firearms-ammunition-smuggling-haiti-caribbean>

² See ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: The Caribbean – 2021,” September 15, 2022, at <https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/firearms-trace-data-caribbean-2021>

Specifically, we request that GAO's review include an examination of:

1. The latest country-by-country information on the number and types of U.S. arms being trafficked to Caribbean countries (excluding Cuba) and whether this number is growing annually;
2. Information on where and how illicit weapons are being obtained in the United States as well as how they are being smuggled into their final destinations;
3. A country-by-country breakdown on the legal export of American firearms to the Caribbean region;
4. Information on whether arms are being diverted to illicit actors from legally exported purchases by private or government entities in the region;
5. The measures being taken by U.S. and Caribbean law enforcement to share information, make arrests, and prosecute individuals or groups involved in the arms trafficking as well as what gaps exist in the efforts being taken by U.S. agencies and their regional counterparts;
6. What legislation might assist the efforts being taken by U.S. authorities to combat trafficking or diversion of U.S. origin firearms; and
7. What additional, enhanced, or modified foreign assistance would be helpful to regional efforts to curtail the arms trafficking.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue. Please contact Russell Brooks (Russell.Brooks@mail.house.gov) with Representative Joaquin Castro, Zakiya Carr (Zakiya.Carr@mail.house.gov) with Ranking Member Gregory Meeks, or Jonathan Hayes (jonathan_hayes@durbin.senate.gov) with Senator Durbin with any questions or concerns about this request.

Sincerely,



Joaquin Castro
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on
Western Hemisphere,
House Foreign Affairs
Committee



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Gregory W. Meeks
Ranking Member
House Foreign Affairs
Committee