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Research Report

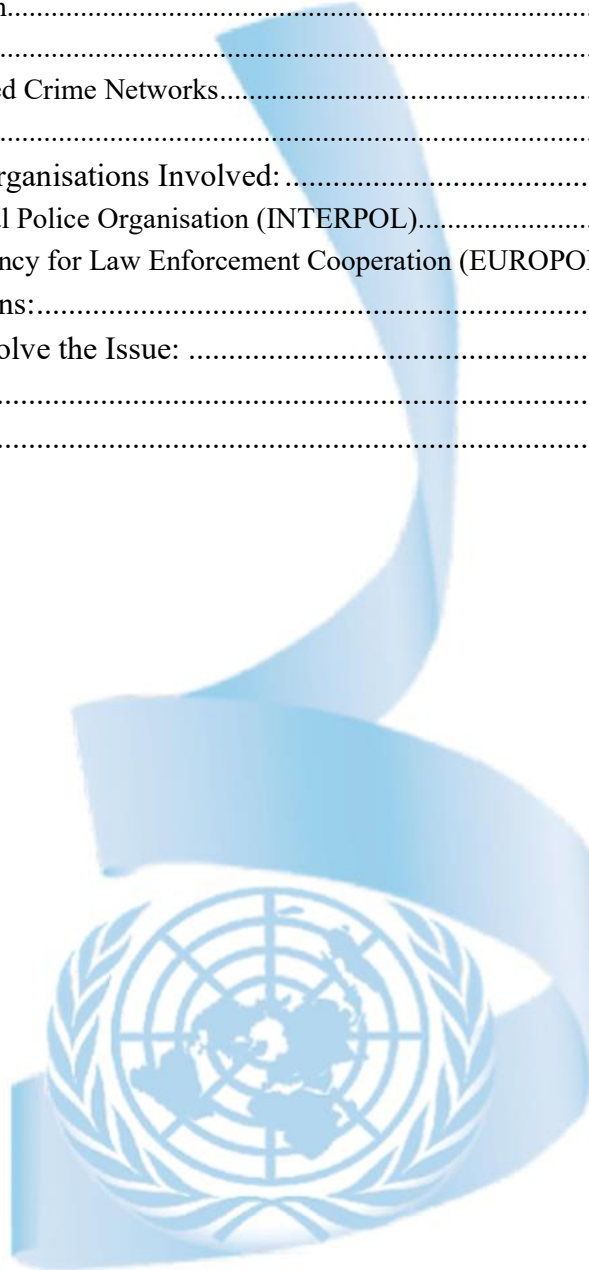
Topic 2: Combatting cross-border trafficking of illicit firearms.



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Introduction:

Cross-border trafficking of illicit firearms refers to the illegal movement, sale, and distribution of guns and ammunition across national boundaries. The use of firearms by criminals endangers the safety of citizens all around the world. As well as their obvious usage in armed robberies and murder, how these firearms are obtained raises a question and can also be linked to many other crimes, such as corruption, maritime piracy, environmental crime, and terrorist activities. Small arms and light weapons are easily transported and concealed by criminals, which makes trafficking firearms a profitable business, fuels and funds other types of crimes capitalised by this crime. These weapons are usually smuggled without authorisation, outside official control, and in violation of international and domestic laws. This problem is global; it affects conflict zones, developing regions, and even stable countries with advanced law-enforcement systems. This ongoing issue fuels armed conflicts, which prolongs wars and increases casualties, empowers criminal networks such as gangs, drug cartels, and terrorism. Firearms are the lifeblood of organised crime in Europe, as well as other countries. According to the 2021 SOCTA, 60%¹ of criminal networks active in the EU use violence as part of their criminal businesses. The supply of stolen, smuggled and converted guns fuels these urban gang conflicts. It is estimated that in 2017, 35 million illicit firearms were owned by civilians in the EU (56% of the estimated total of firearms).² According to those estimates, illicit firearms would outnumber legally held firearms in twelve EU countries. The smugglers use a variety of routes whilst trafficking, converting replica or deactivated weapons into functional firearms and using sea routes via falsified shopping containers. These weapons often originate from, the diversion from legal stockpiles of military or police, black-market manufacturing, theft and resale from civilian owners or dealers. The key challenges whilst stopping these illicit firearms are the lack of border capacity; modern scanning equipment, trained customs officers, and robust data-sharing systems. Also, weak governance and corrupt governments make a path for this illegal trafficking since they can be bribed to overlook shipments or falsify documents. Additionally, the differing laws for guns across the world also make the countries where weapons are easy to purchase very exploitable.

¹ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/organised-crime/trafficking-firearms_en

² https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/organised-crime/trafficking-firearms_en

Definition of Key Terms:

Illicit: Illegal or disapproved by society.³

Trafficking: the practice of dealing or trading in a commodity or service, often an illegal one.⁴

Smuggling: Smuggling is the crime of illegally importing or exporting goods across a border. This includes articles that are prohibited by law or those on which required customs duties and taxes have not been paid.⁵

Corruption: Corruption is the dishonest, fraudulent, or criminal use of entrusted **authority** or power for personal gain or other unlawful or unethical benefits. Corruption occurs in politics, business, education, media, and other social and economic fields. A lack of transparency, accountability, and effective regulation are common causes of corruption. Corruption undermines institutional reputation and effectiveness, destabilizes governance, hinders economic development, distorts individual rights and freedoms, and weakens democracy and justice.⁶

Background Information:

Gun trafficking is a significant problem, which leads to hundreds of thousands of illegal guns being channelled into communities around the globe. By the end of 2026, every town estimates that 1.27 million guns will have been trafficked since 2017.⁷ The cross-border trafficking of illicit firearms is not just a problem of the individuals who make these transactions possible but also a problem of the dealers who supply those guns. When dealers fail to recognise the indicators of suspicious trafficked firearms, they also become a part of this crime as the suppliers of trafficked guns. The modern market for illicit firearms emerged in the late 20th as technological advancements, geopolitical instability, and the expansion of trade networks made the trafficking of these weapons easier to produce and transport. Today, we can see criminals using “ghost guns”, which are guns that were made from different trafficked weapon components in order to facilitate violent crimes. These “ghost guns” do not have serial numbers or any other markings, making them almost impossible to trace. These advancements in 3D printing technology allow criminals to manufacture ghost guns on a larger scale. The “dark web” or just the internet in general has also simplified the process of downloading instructions on building and assembling these weapons.

³ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/illicit>

⁴ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/trafficking>

⁵ www.lsd.law/define/smuggling.

⁶ www.law.cornell.edu/wex/corruption.

⁷ <https://everytownresearch.org/issue/trafficking-of-guns/>

Origin of the Problem

During the Cold War, large stockpiles of weapons were distributed to allied groups worldwide; after the Cold War ended, many of these arsenals were poorly secured, diverted or sold illegally. With the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991 unsecured weapons caused a flood in the market. The breakup of the USSR created an enormous surplus of stockpiles, former Soviet republics lacked the money or resources that were needed to secure and track these arsenals. This led to the sale of weapons by corrupt officers of the former USSR and insurgent networks, and arms smuggling networks emerging in the Balkans, Caucasus, and Eastern Europe. Conflicts in the Balkans, West Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East in the 1990s and 2000s further supplied the illicit arms trade due to the surplus of weapons. This new supply for cheaper weapons created demand. Subsequently, brokers and traffickers connected to these zones, establishing transnational networks. After the 2000s with cheaper transportation, container shipping, the evolution of the dark web, and online markets the moving of firearms became more discreet and easier. These developments transformed firearms trafficking from a regional problem to a global problem, affecting all regions across the world.⁸

Global Impact

Illicit firearms powered and prolonged violence in conflict zones, increasing homicide rates, and empowering transnational criminal networks. In regions such as Sahel, Central America and the Western Balkans, firearms trafficking became directly tied to terrorism, and the trafficking of drugs as well as humans. This global issue even affected stable countries where illegal weapons contributed to gang violence, organised crime, and mass shootings. Because a weapon can circulate for decades, a single trafficked firearm can pass through multiple countries and get used for numerous crimes, making traceability and accountability extremely difficult. The cross-border trafficking of illicit firearms also strengthens transnational organised crimes since using almost untraceable guns which are bought for so much cheaper than the actual market price makes it easier for these groups to access and purchase weapons. These weapons that are bought are then used to protect those trafficking routes, enforce territorial control, intimidate political actors, and expand kidnapping operations. Particularly in Central America (Northern Triangle), illegal firearms drive some of the world's highest homicide rates.⁹ As another global problem, gun trafficking also weakens governance and the rule of law. Illicit firearms undermine state authority by; empowering non-state armed groups, encouraging corruption among borders and customs officials, reducing public trust in law enforcement, and making it more difficult for governments to enforce national gun regulations. The trafficking of guns also causes human rights violations and civilian harm since they are used in homicides,

⁸ <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-Report-2025-Annual-Report-2024-web.pdf>

⁹ https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/2023/GSH_2023_LAC_web.pdf

gender-based violence, kidnappings, armed robberies, and extrajudicial killings by armed groups. In many regions, over 70% of violent deaths involve a firearm, women and children are disproportionately affected, especially in areas where there are high rates of domestic violence and child soldier recruitment.¹⁰

The Role of Organised Crime Networks

Firearms trafficking rarely occurs on its own, most organised crime groups integrate weapons into multi-commodity smuggling systems. These systems include narcotics, counterfeit goods, human and wildlife trafficking, alongside money laundering. Because these groups are already in control of reliable smuggling corridors, firearms become just another profitable product. These crime groups often heavily rely on systematic corruption within a country's governance. They bribe custom officials, border guards, police, military personnel, and much more. This allows falsification of gun export certificates, the negligence in inspection of suspicious containers, a safe passage through the border and access to seized weapons. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), documented cases show border police accepting bribes for shipments of trafficked guns to pass into the EU in the Western Balkans.¹¹ Since this issue has gotten bigger in recent years, the professionalisation of trafficking logistics has gotten better. Modern crime organisations use systems such as encrypted communication platforms and front businesses in order to limit the possibility of being tracked down. Some European crime groups smuggling Glock pistols use small parcels labeled as "machine parts" and shipping them piece-by-piece to avoid getting detected according to the Europol's European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA).¹² Another thing these crime networks rely on is professional brokers. A broker is a person who facilitates transactions between a buyer and seller.¹³ Arms brokers in particular organise and facilitate transfers in military equipment. Although most brokering activities are carried out in a legal framework, unethical brokers operate with impunity by taking advantage of the weaknesses between national laws and control regimes. Because these organised crime networks operate alongside these types of corrupt brokers, whenever the brokers are caught that directly puts those crime networks at risk. An example to this case is the case of a British broker, Gary Hyde, who was accused of illegally transferring 40,000 AK-47 assault rifles, 30,000 rifles, 10,000 9mm pistols and 32 million rounds of ammunition from China to Nigeria in 2006. In January of 2012, due to the lack of clarity on the national provisions of brokering, his trial was dropped. Hyde's defence laid on the fact that he was operating outside of the United Kingdom (UK) and therefore that he did not need an export licence to carry out his activities. However, the Court of Appeal

¹⁰ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/arms-control/gun-violence/>

¹¹ https://unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Firearms/2020_REPORT_Global_Study_on_Firearms_Trafficking_2020_web.pdf

¹² <https://www.europol.europa.eu/socta/2017/trafficking-of-firearms.html>

¹³ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/broker>

rejected this argument and concluded that Hyde had violated the British export control legislation. Hyde was later sentenced to seven years in prison and the arms businesses he worked alongside such as York Guns and Jago Ltd were also uncovered, caught, convicted and jailed. The total value of the deals were estimated to be 6 million pounds.¹⁴

Smuggling Routes

Smuggling routes are crucial for gun trafficking since without them the mass shipping of these weapons cannot be done. For instance, illicit gun-smuggling from the United States (US) to Mexico has armed organised crime groups with firearms increasingly, including military grade firearms. Mexican authorities have claimed that at least half a million firearms are smuggled into Mexico from the US each year.¹⁵ This pace and volume of smuggled guns has earned this route the name “Iron River”. Although it is possible to legally obtain some guns in Mexico, the process for their ownership is highly regulated. Buyers must undergo background checks and the confirmation that there is the absence of a criminal record. Additionally there is only one store in the country that sells firearms to private citizens.¹⁶ The US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) found that at least two-thirds of the guns recovered from Mexican Crime were smuggled from the US.¹⁷



(Flow of drugs and firearms between the US and Mexico, Vision of Humanity)

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/dec/05/uk-arms-dealer-jail-china-nigeria>

¹⁵ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/720/712530.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/03/02/mexico-us-gun-lawsuit-supreme-court/>

¹⁷ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/720/712530.pdf>

Major Countries and Organisations Involved:

International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL)

INTERPOL plays a crucial role when it comes to combatting cross-border trafficking of illicit firearms such as coordination and intelligence sharing rather than acting like a police force. INTERPOL's strength lies in connecting 196 countries to fight crimes amongst national borders. INTERPOL operates INTERPOL Illicit Arms Records and Tracing Management Systems (iARMS), the world's only global database dedicated to illicit firearms. Police worldwide can record illicit firearms with this database. There are more than 1.5 million records within the iARMS, that is the reason why this database is so crucial when it comes to identifying trafficking patterns and smuggling routes. The iARMS is divided into three modules: Firearm Records Module, Trace Requests Module, and Statistics Module. The Firearm Records Module hosts a database, which categorises weapons reported as lost, stolen, trafficked or smuggled in another country. This module helps the efficiency and effectiveness of investigations which tries to tie trafficking to related crimes. The second module, Trace Requests Module, helps law enforcement agencies send trace requests to the 196 member states. These trace requests can help identify the initial point of firearms diversion. They can also reveal essential information, which could help identify potential firearm traffickers or detect trends, linking a suspect to a firearm. Since 2013, law enforcement officers have carried out over 1.4 million tracing operations through the database and have submitted more than 80,000 international trace requests (INTERPOL, 1). And the last module, Statistics and Reports Module, provides analytic and strategic data to assist countries in strengthening their intelligence at a national and international level. The iARMS is also unique because it is placed to support countries in promoting and implementing sustainable development goals (SGD) which like development to peace and security.¹⁸

European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL)

One of Europol's flagship reports, the European Union (EU) Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (EU-SOCTA) updates the Europe's law enforcement community and decision-makers on developments like in serious and organised crime that proposes a threat to the EU. This important part of Europol also identifies a number of high priority crime areas that the EU should make its priority focus. The EU-SOCTA is also three layered similarly to the iARMS. In the first layer, data and information that is readily available for the purpose of analysis is exchanged or cross-checked. On the second layer, external data collected from Member States and other relevant partners are dedicated to questionnaires for criminal networks and crime areas. On the final layer, open-source information gets used as a complementary data source. This includes research, reports, official statistical data, case examples, or contextual information from academic institutions, research networks and more. These sources get verified

¹⁸<https://www.interpol.int/Crimes/Firearms-trafficking/Illicit-Arms-Records-and-tracing-Management-System-iARS>

and approved as part of the review process. Another key element of EUROPOL is the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT). Its role is introducing an integrated approach to EU internal security, involving measures that range from external border controls, police, customs and judicial cooperation. It provides a robust framework that brings the law and enforcement authorities of the Member States together. EMPACT is an instrument adopted by the European Union in 2010 to address the most significant criminal that the EU is facing.¹⁹

Relevant UN Resolutions:

Security Council resolutions:

<https://docs.un.org/en/s/res/2117%282013%29>

On small arms and light weapons.

<https://docs.un.org/en/s/res/2220%282015%29>

On small arms and light weapons.

<https://docs.un.org/en/s/res/2616%282021%29>

“on consideration during mandate renewals of role of peace operations in supporting national authorities in combating illicit transfer and diversion of arms in violation of arms embargoes”.

General Assembly resolutions:

<https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/80/36>

“Assistance to States for curbing the illicit traffic in small arms and light weapons and collecting them”.

<https://docs.un.org/en/a/res/79/40>

“The illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects”.

<https://docs.un.org/en/a/res/78/54>

“Assistance to States for curbing the illicit traffic in small arms and light weapons and collecting them”.

<https://docs.un.org/en/a/res/77/71>

“The illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects”.

¹⁹<https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/eu-serious-and-organised-crime-threat-assessment-socta>

<https://docs.un.org/en/a/res/76/232>

“The illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects”.

UNODC/UNTOC resolutions:

https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/COP/SESSION_10/Resolutions/Resolution_10_2_-_English.pdf

“Strengthening international cooperation against the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms, their parts and components and ammunition”.

https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/COP/Session_11/Resolutions/English/Resolution_11_6.pdf

“Strengthening international cooperation to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms, their parts and components and ammunition”.

https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/COP12/Resolutions/E/Resolution_12_3.pdf

“Enhancing measures, including under the Firearms Protocol, to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms, their parts and components and ammunition, in view of technological developments”.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue:

Previous attempts to solve the issue of cross-border trafficking of illicit firearms include the creation of INTERPOL (details in section titled “Major Countries and Organisations Involved”) that records and tracks firearms. This organisation prevents the smuggling of illicit firearms by tracking illicit firearms across country borders and recognising routes and patterns in the movement of illicit firearms. Intelligence sharing between countries also makes this tracking easier and ensures all involved countries can be warned and act on any such trafficking. One specific organisation is the EUROPOL, which serves about the same purpose as INTERPOL, except it works within the EU. This organisation helps specifically the EU in regard to the issue.

As mentioned in the previous section, many UN resolutions have been written and passed to combat the issue of trafficking illicit firearms. These resolutions target the manufacturing of the dealing of, the supplying of materials for illicit firearms, small arms, and light weapons.

Each individual country combats the trafficking of illicit firearms by following UN protocols and enforcing similar sets of laws. Many countries make the manufacturing, dealing, and smuggling of illicit firearms illegal, as well as the supplying of manufacturing materials and changing the

IDs of illicit firearms illegal. Another big part of this is marking and registering all legal firearms, making the tracing of firearms easy.

Possible Solutions:

According to the United Nations Charter, the UN's purpose is to "maintain international peace and security" as well as cooperate between countries to solve international problems, in this case the issue of the trafficking of illicit firearms.²⁰ More specifically, the Security Council works to identify and respond to any breaches of peace or security by using armed forces connected to the UN or parties relevant to the situation.

With this in mind, solutions to the issue at hand include the recording and tracking of illicit firearms, create laws combatting this using the UN firearms protocol, and consequences for any parties that do not comply with UN policy or protocol. INTERPOL and EUROPOL already record and track illicit firearms, but it can always be expanded upon or be given more funding if countries see the need. There may also be need for more laws in each country to prevent trafficking or further surveillance in some countries, as the UN charter article 2 outlines, "All Members shall give the United Nations every assistance in any action it takes in accordance with the present Charter, and shall refrain from giving assistance to any state against which the United Nations is taking preventive or enforcement action."²¹ In addition, there can be punishments for individuals in each country for dealing, manufacturing, and trafficking illicit firearms.

There can also be changes made to existing policies or consequences to either strengthen or weaken these systems and laws. For example, increasing punishments for member states that don't comply with the UN or strengthening the tracking and recording of illicit firearms.

²⁰ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

²¹ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

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