

Counting Mexico's Guns

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President Obama says 90 percent of Mexico's recovered crime guns come from the U.S. That's not what the statistics show.

Summary

There's no dispute that thousands of handguns, military-style rifles and other firearms are purchased in the U.S. and end up in the hands of Mexican criminals each year. It's relatively easy to buy such guns legally in Texas and other border states and to smuggle them across.

But is it true, as President Obama said, that "[m]ore than 90 percent of the guns recovered in Mexico come from the United States?" Government statistics don't actually support that claim.

The figure represents only the percentage of crime guns that have been submitted by Mexican officials and traced by U.S. officials. We can find no hard data on the total number of guns actually "recovered in Mexico," but U.S. and Mexican officials both say that Mexico recovers more guns than it submits for tracing. Therefore, the percentage of guns "recovered" that are traced to U.S. sources necessarily is less than 90 percent. Where do the others come from? U.S. officials can't say.

Fox News has put the percentage of guns that have been traced to U.S. sources at only 17 percent, but we find that to be based on a mistaken assumption that throws its figure way off. We can't offer a precise calculation because we know of no hard information on the total number of guns Mexican officials have recovered. But if a rough figure given by Mexico's attorney general is accurate, then the actual percentage of all Mexican crime guns that have been traced to U.S. sources is more than double what Fox News has reported.

Correction, April 22: We originally concluded that Obama's 90 percent figure was "not true" and based on a "badly biased" sample of recovered guns. We are retracting both those characterizations, and we apologize to our readers for this error. We have rewritten the article throughout to correct this.

Our error was to think we had confirmed that Mexican officials submit for tracing only those guns they believe likely to have come from the U.S. Law enforcement officials say they don't know if that's the case.



Analysis

In recent weeks, efforts by the United States and Mexico to stop the illegal transfer of guns and drugs along their shared border have been on the front

burner. U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano [traveled to Mexico](#) earlier this month to meet with their Mexican counterparts to discuss what can be done. And this week President Barack Obama [traveled](#) down south to continue talks between the two nations.

During a [joint press conference](#) with President Felipe Calderón of Mexico, Obama said of the raging violence by Mexican drug gangs:

Obama, April 16: A demand for these drugs in the United States is what is helping to keep these cartels in business. This war is being waged with guns purchased not here, but in the United States. **More than 90 percent of the guns recovered in Mexico come from the United States, many from gun shops that line our shared border.**

Obama would have been correct to say that 90 percent of the guns *submitted for tracing* by Mexican authorities were then traced to the U.S. The percentage of all recovered guns that came from the U.S. is unknown.

The 90% Claim

The president isn't the first to make this mistaken claim; far from it. During an interview on CBS' "Early Show" on March 26, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said: "We have to recognize and accept that the demand for drugs from the United States drives them north, and the guns that are used by the drug cartels against the police and the military, 90 percent of them come from America."

The 90 percent figure was similarly cited by Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) during a March 17 congressional hearing on the subject. Durbin said: "According to ATF [the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives], more than 90 percent of the guns seized after raids or shootings in Mexico have been traced right here to the United States of America." Feinstein added: "It is unacceptable to have 90 percent of the guns that are picked up in Mexico used to shoot judges, police officers, mayors, kidnap innocent people and do terrible things come from the United States, and I think we must put a stop to that."

And it's been reported by a phalanx of news organizations, including the [Christian Science Monitor](#), the [New York Times](#), NBC and the [Chicago Tribune](#), that 90 percent of Mexico's recovered guns come from the U.S.

Mexican authorities have made the same error: On CBS' "Face the Nation" on April 12, Mexican Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan [said](#): "Ninety percent of all weapons we are seizing in Mexico, Bob, are coming from across the United States."

Most who have used the statistic attribute it to ATF. Others attribute the figure to officials within the Mexican government. But that's not correct.

Without A "Trace"

In a joint [statement](#) presented to the Senate Judiciary Committee's

Subcommittee on Crimes and Drugs, ATF Assistant Director for Field Operations William Hoover and Anthony Placido, assistant administrator of intelligence with the Drug Enforcement Administration, clarified that the 90 percent figure is true of guns that were *submitted* and could be traced:

Hoover and Placido, March 17, 2009: Firearms are routinely being transported from the U.S. into Mexico in violation of both U.S. and Mexican law. In fact, according to ATF's National Tracing Center, **90 percent of the weapons that could be traced** were determined to have originated from various sources within the U.S.

And Mexico recovers a lot more guns than it submits to the U.S. In December 2008, Mexican Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora put the number of recovered crime weapons in the country over the past two years at nearly 29,000, according to [USA Today](#). And figures given by ATF make clear that the agency doesn't trace nearly all of those.

According to ATF, Mexico submitted 7,743 firearms for tracing in fiscal year 2008 (which ended Oct. 1) and 3,312 guns in fiscal 2007. That adds up to a fraction of the two-year total given by Mexico's attorney general. He may be referring to a slightly different 24-month period, but that can't account for more than a part of the discrepancy. The number is growing, and already this year, Mexico has submitted more than 7,500 guns for tracing, according to ATF. But even if all those guns are added in, the total submitted for tracing since the start of fiscal 2007 doesn't come close to the 29,000 figure that Mexico says it has recovered.

The Myth of 17 Percent

According to a Fox News report, titled "The Myth of 90 Percent," only "17 percent of guns found at Mexican crime scenes have been traced to the U.S." But the 17 percent figure is a myth, too. The reporters made some mistaken assumptions about how many guns had actually been traced to U.S. sources.

Fox News reporters William La Jeunesse and Maxim Lott note, quite correctly, that Mexico doesn't submit all the guns it recovers to the U.S. for tracing. Furthermore, Fox News reported, this is "because it is obvious from their markings that they do not come from the U.S." And it quoted a law enforcement official as to why:

Fox News, April 2: "Not every weapon seized in Mexico has a serial number on it that would make it traceable, and the U.S. effort to trace weapons really only extends to weapons that have been in the U.S. market," Matt Allen, special agent of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), told FOX News.

If that's true, then the guns given to ATF for tracing constitute a badly biased sample of all crime guns seized in Mexico. But the ATF officials we contacted don't confirm that. What an ATF spokesperson would say is that the agency could trace more than 90 percent of all the guns submitted by Mexico to the U.S. – they either originated in this country or were imported here before heading south.

However that may be, the Fox figure of 17 percent is based on a misreading of some confusing House subcommittee testimony by ATF official William Newell. The Fox reporters come up with a figure of 5,114 guns traced to U.S. sources in fiscal 2007 and 2008. That figures to 17.6 percent of the 29,000 figure for guns seized in Mexico, as given by the country's attorney general.

The 5,114 figure is simply wrong. What [Newell said quite clearly](#) is that the number of guns submitted to ATF in those two years was 11,055: "3,312 in FY 2007 [and] 7,743 in FY 2008." Newell also testified, as other ATF officials have done, that 90 percent of the guns traced were determined to have come from the U.S. So based on Newell's testimony, the Fox reporters should have used a figure of 9,950 guns from U.S. sources. That figures out to just over 34 percent of guns recovered, assuming that the 29,000 figure supplied by Mexico's attorney general is correct.

Even that number is too low. At our request, an ATF spokesman gave us more detailed figures for how many guns had been submitted and traced during those two years. Of the guns seized in Mexico and given to ATF for tracing, the agency actually found 95 percent came from U.S. sources in fiscal 2007 and 93 percent in fiscal 2008. That comes to a total of 10,347 guns from U.S. sources for those two years, or 36 percent of what Mexican authorities say they recovered.

The mistake the Fox News reporters made was to focus on some numbers given by Newell and Hoover in separate testimony, regarding numbers of guns traced to specific states. But not all guns traced to the U.S. can be traced to specific states. The Fox numbers are "a subset" of the actual total traced to U.S. sources, one official said.

An Elusive Number

Given the lack of hard data from Mexico, we can't calculate a precise figure for what portion of crime guns have been traced to the U.S. Based on the best evidence we can find so far, we conclude that the 90 percent claim made by the president and others in his administration lacks a basis in solid fact. But we also conclude that the number is at least double what Fox News has reported, based on its reporters' mistaken interpretation of ATF testimony.

Whether the number is 90 percent, or 36 percent, or something else, there's no dispute that thousands of guns are being illegally transported into Mexico by way of the United States each year.

— *by D'Angelo Gore*

Sources

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