

# Arizona guns are fueling a drug cartel war in Mexico

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By Morgan Fischer

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Nearly two-thirds of illegal guns seized in Mexico in 2024 were bought in Arizona and smuggled over the border for cartels.

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Arizona has some of the nation's weakest gun restrictions.

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*Editor's note: This story has been updated with a statement from the GIFFORDS Law Center.*

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Nearly two years ago, violence erupted around Mexico due to an ongoing drug cartel war. And, according to a new report from The Guardian, fueling that war is an increasing

number of guns purchased in Arizona.

In 2024, The Guardian reported, “62% of the guns seized in Mexico and traced to a U.S. purchase less than a year earlier — a key indicator they were bought to be trafficked — came from Arizona.” The outlet notes that’s about when the current hostilities erupted within the Sinaloa cartel, which is a major fentanyl tracker and was founded by infamous drug lord Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman.

Arizona has now overtaken Texas as the state that supplies the most illegal firearms to Mexico.

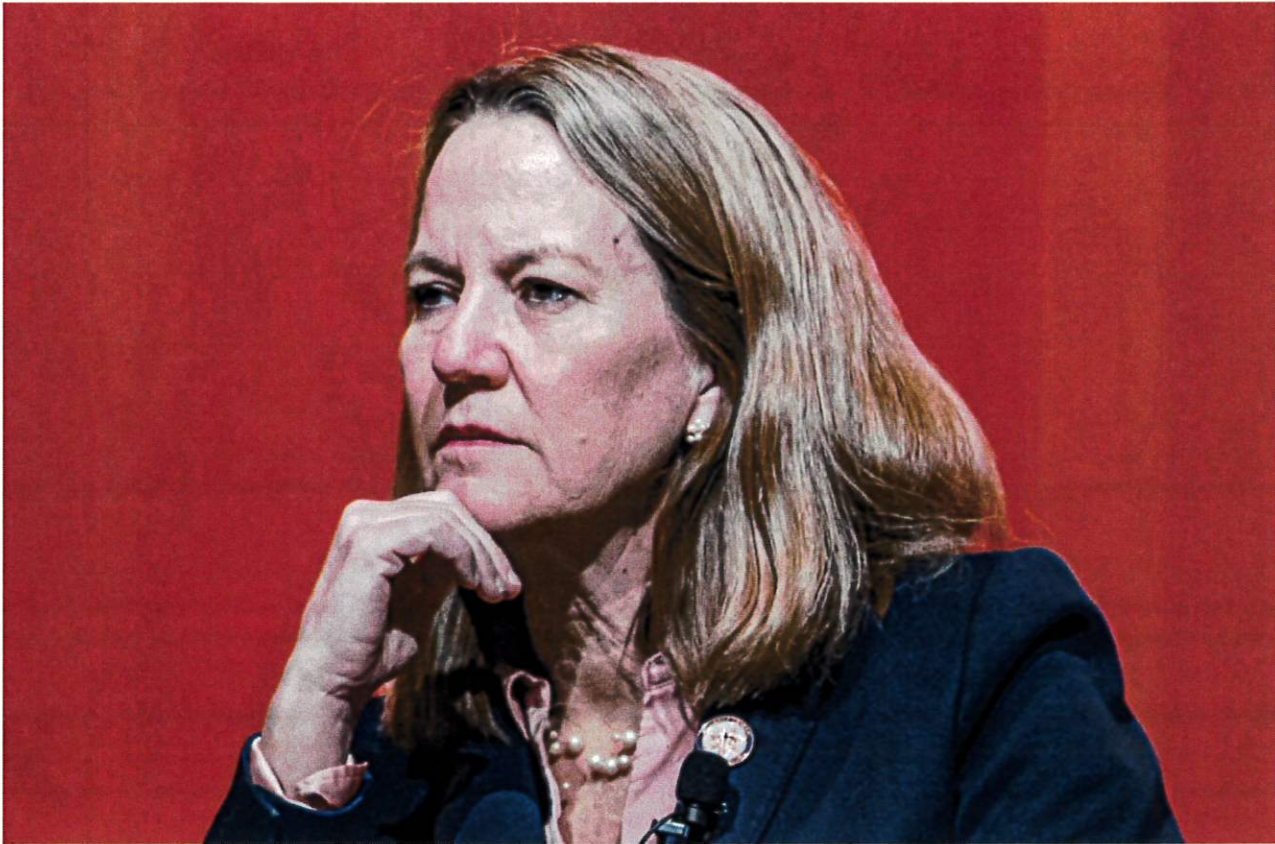
“Arizona has become a major source of guns trafficked into Mexico,” Arizona Attorney General Kris Mayes wrote in a statement to Phoenix New Times. “That has devastating real-world consequences for communities and families.”

Roughly 5,000 people are now dead or missing due to the conflict, and since it began, Mexican security forces have seized almost the same number of firearms in the region, which is more than 600 miles south of Arizona’s southern border. Per The Guardian, that represents about 20% of the illegal guns seized in Mexico in 2024. The Mexican state of Sonora, which borders Arizona, has the second-highest number of gun seizures by the Mexican government, suggesting a trafficking connection to Arizona.

The guns almost certainly do not come from Mexico itself, which has strict firearm laws and only two legal gun shops that are run by the Mexican military, none of which are located in Sinaloa. By contrast, in the United States — and in Arizona especially — it’s relatively easy to buy a firearm. For that reason, cartel associates often recruit Arizona residents to be “straw purchasers” by paying them cash to purchase guns, which are then trafficked over the border into Mexico.

“Requiring firearm dealers and their employees to undergo training on how to identify and prevent straw purchases, and enacting firearm industry accountability legislation, could help reduce the number of firearms bought in the state and trafficked into Mexico,” Erin Earp, a senior state policy attorney at GIFFORDS Law Center, told New Times in an emailed statement. “Additionally, Arizona’s current firearm preemption statute blocks local leaders with high numbers of trafficked firearms in their municipalities from enacting policies to address their community’s enforcement issues. Arizona should repeal this law to empower local leaders to seek solutions on the ground.”

Recently, multiple straw purchasing operations have been uncovered by federal and state investigations in Arizona.



Arizona Attorney General Kris Mayes.

Kevin Hurley

On Wednesday, the owner of a southern Arizona gun store was arraigned in federal court on charges related to “providing material to support” the Sinaloa cartel and the Jalisco New Generation cartel, according to the Office of the U.S. Attorney for the District of Arizona. Laurence Gray, the 65-year-old owner of Grips by Larry in Cochise County, is accused of firearms trafficking and assisting in the straw purchasing of weapons in 2025 through his gun store. Another man, 73-year-old Tucson resident Barrett Weinberger, was indicted alongside Gray. Weinberger’s LinkedIn profile lists him as a federal firearm license dealer.

Additionally, in October, Mayes announced the discovery of an alleged large-scale operation that trafficked more than 330 firearms through straw purchasers from Arizona into Mexico. She announced the indictments of 20 defendants, who she says were a part of a network that included straw purchasers paid in cash for buying firearms to be trafficked. That court case is still ongoing — although as of mid-March, five of the defendants have pleaded guilty to a class 3 felony “misconduct involving weapons” charge for their role in the operation, according to court documents.

The Mexican government is also suing five Arizona gun shops for their alleged role in selling trafficked weapons. That suit was filed in 2022 and is ongoing. The U.S. Supreme

Court rejected a related suit that would have held gun manufacturers liable for cartel gun violence, but the suit against the gun shops — which it claims had more direct knowledge of the sold guns' ultimate purpose — continues.

The alarming number of seized Arizona-sold guns underscores a less-examined aspect of the United States' age-old debates about illegal immigration.

For decades, people from Latin America have fled to the U.S. to escape violence in their home countries, which in many cases were destabilized by U.S. actions and foreign policy priorities. And often, U.S. politicians have been reticent to reckon with the underlying causes of the so-called immigration crisis the American government helped to create.

As much as the Trump administration has tried to look tough while supposedly cracking down on drug cartels — by kidnapping the president of Venezuela and bombing tiny boats off the country's coast, among other actions — the U.S. "keeps feeding cartel power" through weapons trafficking and "erosion" of the country's asylum system, said Beth Strano, the executive director of the Border Resource Initiative in Arizona.

The result is that residents of Latin American countries continue to flee violence that, in one way or another, the U.S. helped stoke. They wind up at the southern U.S. border, where the Trump administration has made it almost impossible for them to apply for asylum, which is a right under U.S. law. This week, the Supreme Court appeared likely to sign off on Trump's aggressive tactics to limit asylum requests, according to SCOTUS Blog.

"Closing pathways to asylum turns real human desperation into revenue for the same criminal networks," Strano wrote in a text message. "The United States profits from an unequal relationship while Mexico bears the violence."

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