

American guns are a key driver in the migration crisis. When will the US address it?

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US Vice President Kamala Harris will embark on during her first international trip to Guatemala and Mexico. JIM WATSON/AFP via Getty Images

(CNN) — This week, US Vice President Kamala Harris will spend two days south of the border, during her first international trip to Guatemala and Mexico to meet local leaders and help address the root causes of undocumented migration.

The official agenda is focused on economic development, climate and food insecurity, strengthening the rule of law and deepening bilateral law enforcement cooperation, but violence and the means of violence – weapons – seem to be the elephant in the room.

United States may be the ultimate destination for many migrants, but it is also the origin of many weapons employed in the violence driving them northward in the first place. On average, more than 500 firearms from the US cross the southern border each day. Yet for now, there's little sign that gun smuggling will be a priority at the Vice President's meetings in Guatemala and Mexico.

Armed violence is one of the prominent root causes that push men, women, and children to leave Central America and Mexico and head north. According to the NGO Doctors Without Borders, 62% of migrants arriving at the US southern

~~MEXICO AND HEAD NORTH. ACCORDING TO THE NGO DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS, 62% OF MIGRANTS ARRIVING AT THE US SOUTHERN BORDER SAID THEY WERE EXPOSED TO A VIOLENT SITUATION DURING THE TWO YEARS PRIOR TO LEAVING THEIR HOME COUNTRY, AND THREE QUARTERS OF FAMILIES WITH KIDS ARRIVING AT THE BORDER SAY VIOLENCE, INCLUDING FORCED RECRUITMENT BY GANGS, WAS A KEY REASON FOR LEAVING.~~

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It's an issue that everyone knows is there, but there's no action on either side.

Adam Isaacson, Director for Defense Oversight at the Washington Office for Latin America

About 70% of firearms seized by law enforcement in Mexico and 42% of those seized in Guatemala were first sourced in the US before being trafficked south of the border, according to data from the US Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) as of December 2019.

This flow of guns into Central America is known as the “iron river,” and it is vast in scale; according to the Mexican foreign ministry, an estimated 200,000 guns are trafficked from the US into Mexico each year – an average of more than 500 per day.

US authorities do not publish figures for the number of weapons believed to be trafficked, but between 2014 and 2019 the ATF traced more than 70,000 guns from Mexico back to the United States.

The US Government Accountability Office believes the Mexican estimate is the best available; in a recent report, it recommended US agencies such as ATF, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Protection, and the State Department to increase data collection on weapons smuggling and, most importantly, to develop performance measures to assess the efforts in place to stem the traffic.

The US State Department has declined to detail whether gun smuggling is part of the Vice President's agenda and referred the question to the White House. CNN has reached out to VP Harris' office and is waiting for a response.



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A spokesperson for the State Department however did tell CNN the Department is committed to working with Mexico to reduce the amount of illicit firearms, weapons parts, and ammunition crossing the US-Mexico border. In particular, the US provides training and equipment to the Mexican government and to the Mexican customs agency.

The problem no one wants to talk about

Experts say policymakers' discussion of the migration crisis often overlooks the source of the weapons exacerbating it.

“It's pathetic frankly how little attention is spent on this,” says Adam Isaacson, Director for Defense Oversight at the Washington Office for Latin America, a research and advocacy organization based in the US.



Harris faces first major diplomatic test

“You end up banging your head on the same barriers over and over again: it's like Groundhog Day... It's an issue that

















