



Research Report No. 10

# Black & Grey

The illicit online trade of small arms in Venezuela

Pedro Pérez with  
Jonathan Ferguson & N.R. Jenzen-Jones

July 2020



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## Credits

**Authors:** Pedro Pérez with Jonathan Ferguson & N.R. Jenzen-Jones  
**Copy Editor:** N.R. Jenzen-Jones  
**Technical Reviewers:** Jonathan Ferguson & Kristóf Nagy  
**Layout & Design:** Justin Baird

## Bibliographic Information

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## About the Author

### Pedro Pérez

Pedro Pérez is the pseudonym for an intelligence analyst who focuses on security issues in Latin America. He holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science and International Relations from a Latin American university and a master's degree with distinction in Security and Intelligence Studies from a European university. He served with a military intelligence unit in Venezuela before being honourably discharged. Mr. Pérez has produced several analyses of small arms proliferation and use in Latin America for ARES.

### Jonathan Ferguson

Jonathan Ferguson is a Technical Specialist with ARES and Curator of Firearms at the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds, UK. He is based at the National Firearms Centre, successor to the MoD Pattern Room and one of the most comprehensive firearms collections in the world. Mr. Ferguson is a specialist in the identification of small arms and light weapons, and routinely delivers reports and training on behalf of ARES to military, government, and law enforcement on subjects including firearms technology, criminal use of firearms, familiarisation with legacy and non-service weapons, and the identification of component parts. He is proficient at conducting the identification and tracing of criminal firearms and the provision of technical advice and expert witness statements. Mr Ferguson has published various articles and books including his forthcoming title, *Thornycroft to SA80: British Military Bullpup Firearms, 1901–2018*, which will be published by Headstamp Publishing.

### N.R. Jenzen-Jones

N.R. Jenzen-Jones is an arms and munitions intelligence specialist focusing on current and recent conflicts and weapons technologies. He is the Director of Armament Research Services (ARES), the Director of Research for Headstamp Publishing, and holds Visiting Fellowships at the Centre for the Reduction of Firearms Crime, Trafficking and Terrorism at the University of Northampton, and in the School of Law, Policing and Forensics at the University of Staffordshire. He serves in consultancy roles with a number of prominent organisations in the field, and has produced extensive research and analysis on a range of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and small- and medium-calibre ammunition issues. Mr. Jenzen-Jones maintains a broad focus on how weapon systems are selected, acquired, stockpiled, and employed.

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**AVOID** the area

**RECORD** all relevant information

**MARK** the area to warn others

**SEEK** assistance from the relevant authorities

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*Cover image: ARES.*

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## Abbreviations & Acronyms

ACP	Automatic Colt Pistol (cartridges)
AEX	<i>Alta Expansión</i> ('high expansion'; ammunition)
AP	Armour-piercing
Bs.F.	<i>Bolívares Fuertes</i> ('Strong Bolívars'; currency)
Bs.S.	<i>Bolívares Soberanos</i> ('Sovereign Bolívars'; currency)
CAVIM	<i>Compañía Anónima Venezolana de Industrias Militares</i> ('Venezuelan Company of Military Industries')
CICPC	<i>Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas Penales y Criminalísticas</i> ('Scientific Penal and Criminal Investigations Corps')
<i>Cocosette</i>	A high-capacity handgun magazine (Venezuelan colloquialism)
Colectivos	Government-supported paramilitary groups
CS	Confidential source
DAEX	<i>Dirección de Armas y Explosivos</i> ('Directorate of Arms and Explosives')
EFMJ	Expanding full-metal jacket
EUR	Euro (currency)
FMJ	Full-metal jacket
FN Herstal	<i>Fabrique Nationale de Herstal</i> ('National Factory of Herstal')
FSSG	Fire Selector System for Glock pistols
Gen1, Gen2, etc.	First-generation, second-generation, etc. (when referring to Glock pistols)
HK	Heckler & Koch
IDPA	International Defensive Pistol Association
IPSC	International Practical Shooting Confederation
JHP	Jacketed hollow-point
JSP	Jacketed soft-point
LR	Long Rifle (when referring to .22 LR ammunition)
<i>Material de apoyo</i>	'Support material' (Venezuelan euphemism)
MKEK	<i>Makinave Kimya Endüstrisi Kurumu</i> ('Machinery and Chemical Industry Corporation')
OG	<i>Organismo Gubernamental</i> ('government agency')
OP	<i>Organismo Policial</i> ('police agency')
PNB	<i>Policía Nacional Bolivariana</i> ('Bolivarian National Police')
PPC	Police Pistol Combat
<i>Pran</i>	Prison gang leader (Venezuelan colloquialism)
RF	Rimfire (when used as a suffix in a cartridge designation)
RTF (& RTF2)	Rough textured frame (when referring to Glock pistols)
SIIPOL	<i>Sistema de Investigación e Información Policial</i> ('Police Investigation and Information System')
SMG	Sub-machine gun
S&W	Smith & Wesson
TPI	Threads per inch
<i>Trenes</i>	Prison gangs (Venezuelan colloquialism)
USP	Universal-Selbstlade-Pistole ('Universal Self-loading Pistol')

## Introduction

A countrywide and total ban on the sale of small arms and ammunition to and between private individuals in Venezuela took effect in 2012, codified by written legislation promulgated in 2013 (*Noticias24.com*, 2012; Venezuela, 2013). From 1 June 2012, only agents of the state were permitted to sell firearms and ammunition. This has driven a new and thriving segment within Venezuela's black-market arms trade, which has proliferated primarily through social media and secure messaging platforms. Whilst the illegal arms trade certainly existed prior to the ban, it was primarily operated by and for criminal gangs. Post-ban, the market has evolved, with numerous private individuals without criminal ties now participating in interrelated and parallel black and 'grey' markets (see *Online Arms Sales in Venezuela*, p. 13).

There were 77 registered firearms dealerships in the country when the ban was enacted in June 2012. These businesses were ordered to turn over all of the weapons and ammunition they possessed to the *Dirección de Armas y Explosivos* ('Directorate of Arms and Explosives'; DAEX). The majority of businesses either went out of business or adjusted their business model to operate as more general sporting goods stores; some weapons accessories remained legal to sell. Despite this, a small number of dealers continued to trade arms and ammunition with trusted customers, providing mostly ammunition and in some cases firearms which had not been registered with the DAEX when they were first imported into the country.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the issuance of the 2013 Act, there was no requirement for private individuals to seek government permission prior to gifting to another individual. This provided, for a period of some months, a legal loophole through which individuals were able to 'gift' firearms to one another via a legal document of donation. This document was used to transfer the ownership of the firearm to its new owner, along with all of the associated responsibilities under the law, and legally allowed the new owner to register the weapon in their own name. The document itself, covering a 'donation', would not indicate any quid pro quo; the price would be negotiated privately between the buyer and the seller. Such documents are still in use today, but now require government approval, often necessitating the parties have government connections or pay bribes.<sup>2</sup>

Available estimates of illicit firearms in Venezuela are now over a decade out of date and vary so wildly as to be of limited utility. Figures provided by the Small Arms Survey in 2009 give an estimate between 800,000 and 4.1 million, whilst Venezuela's own government figures from that same year put the figure as high as 15 million (Karp, 2009; Primera, 2012). Although the Venezuelan government claimed in 2018 to have destroyed over 450,000 weapons, these claims cannot be verified (Venezuela, 2018). In April 2019, the Venezuelan opposition NGO *Fundaredes* claimed that more than 228,000 firearms were missing from military and police armouries (Noticiero Digital, 2019).

According to confidential government sources in Venezuela, the number of illegal firearms circulating in the country has increased between 2009 and 2019. Given the increase in reported narco-guerrilla activity along the border with Colombia and the illegal gold mining operations near the border with Brazil, there is also a high probability that greater numbers of weapons have been smuggled into Venezuela from abroad over the past decades. Many of these have likely ended up in criminal hands, most under the control of the organised criminal groups that control the illegal gold trade and the *trenes* (prison gangs) and *prans* (prison gang leaders) that control the penitentiaries. In addition to cross-border influences, the rise in *colectivo* (government-supported paramilitary group) activity is also

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<sup>1</sup> ARES interviews with confidential sources.

<sup>2</sup> ARES interviews with confidential sources.



believed to have contributed to an increase in arms trafficking, as well as an increase in the diversion of firearms and ammunition from military and police armouries (Delgado, 2017 & Newman, 2019). *Colectivo* members thus have access to modern self-loading (including automatic) firearms, whereas they might otherwise be forced to rely upon obsolescent military firearms, civilian-type rifles or shotguns, or even craft-produced designs.

The illegal arms trade in Venezuela has traditionally operated as it has in most of the world; private individuals might make an illegal sale on a small-scale, and dealers of varying sizes would service different segments of the criminal and broader markets. In more recent years, this translated initially to Facebook, but has since substantially migrated to private WhatsApp groups and then to broadcast lists. The private groups which initially existed on Facebook and spearheaded the arms trade on social media caught the attention of intelligence services. Many were successfully infiltrated, and most of them subsequently shut down due to fear of being prosecuted. Many of the core members of these Facebook groups migrated to WhatsApp, forming groups there, and using broadcast lists. Broadcast lists on WhatsApp (and similar functions on other platforms) operate in a similar fashion to the 'blind carbon copy'; (BCC) function in an email sent to many recipients—that is, the recipient of a broadcast list message can see the sender's details, but not that of any other recipients. Replies from the initial recipient will not be seen by other recipients (WhatsApp, n.d.).

There is limited activity on the online marketplace Mercadolibre, but this appears to be minimal and amateurish—firearms offered for sale on this platform are priced up to 200% higher than their actual market value. Whilst WhatsApp groups remained the go-to place for arms sales for quite some time, further fear of prosecution led to them being converted to broadcast lists. This allows the main sellers to offer firearms, ammunition and accessories to former members, without each other knowing who else is part of the group. It became a way to prevent the whole group becoming compromised in case one of the members had his phone examined by security services. A source in Venezuela shared with ARES a *Policía Nacional Bolivariana* ('Bolivarian National Police'; PNB) intelligence report dated 4 July 2019, which extolls the successes of operations to infiltrate WhatsApp groups that facilitate the trade in arms and ammunition. Similar results have not yet been reported from operations targeting broadcast groups.

This report presents a snapshot of the illicit trade in small arms and ammunition in Venezuela, focusing on those trades made via online platforms. Furthermore, the report is limited to trades made in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, between 1 January 2019 and 1 July 2019. The report identifies a number of broad trends, and presents the following key findings:

- Small arms manufactured in at least 17 modern states were offered for sale or trade via the illicit online arms market in Venezuela.
- A significant portion of the firearms documented within Venezuela are believed to be illicitly imported from the United States, or assembled using parts and components purchased legally in the United States but illegally imported into Venezuela.
- Noteworthy quantities of so-called '80%' lower receivers and frames were documented, with all of these believed to have originated in the U.S. Glock pistol frames and AR-15 rifle receivers were overwhelmingly dominant, in keeping with regional and global trends.
- Handguns are disproportionately represented in the dataset compared to the estimated percentage of the total small arms holdings in Venezuela that they comprise. This is primarily due to high demand for concealable firearms for self-defence, and the thriving trade enabled by this.
- Most trades are apparently conducted with sporting, hobby, and self-defence uses or commercial benefit in mind, but some participants involved in the illicit online arms trade have strong ties to criminal groups within Venezuela.

## Methodology

### Data Collection

The original research informing this report is primarily based on raw data collected from online platforms used to facilitate the arms trade in Venezuela. The methodology employed with respect to collecting this information follows the proprietary *Open Source+* model established by prior ARES research. The data forms a dataset comprised of more than 500 images of small arms and ammunition offered for sale on the black market in Venezuela, collected from Facebook groups, WhatsApp groups, WhatsApp broadcast lists, and Snapchat groups or lists (referred to collectively herein as ‘groups’). Access to these groups was gained in a variety of ways, including the use of traditional human intelligence methods. None of the groups or lists were publicly listed; in common social media terminology, they were either ‘closed’ or ‘secret’ groups.

The groups were of varying size, had differing levels of member activity, and were monitored for different lengths of time. In some cases, it was not possible to precisely determine the number of members or participants, due to technical limitations or platform design constraints. As the online illicit arms trade has evolved in Venezuela—and in many other countries around the world—participants have tended to migrate to platforms which offer increased anonymity, and this frequently makes counting group members difficult or impossible.

Additional information beyond imagery—including the asking price, time and date of posting, and the seller’s details—was collected wherever possible. Almost all of the images in the dataset represent an individual sale. In some cases, predominantly with ammunition, the image represents various items that were sold separately. In other cases, firearms are shown with additional accessories which were optionally sold, or were not offered for sale, with the firearm. Nonetheless, in most cases firearms and accessories were advertised and sold together.



The core dataset was supplemented by additional, targeted collection of contextual images and information (beyond that forming the dataset) from other sources, including Facebook, Mercadolibre, and directly from sources in Venezuela. The authors also conducted interviews with seven confidential sources (CS) in Venezuela, each of whom was connected with the illicit arms trade in some fashion.

**Figure 2.1** A screenshot of an example trade offer, in this case without a price explicitly stated. The seller is offering a Glock 27 self-loading pistol chambered for .40 S&W, complete with three magazines. He notes that neither a box (sometimes used to mean original pistol case and/or outer cardboard packaging) nor ‘papers’ are included (Source: ARES CONMAT Database).

## Data Compilation & Verification

The data was recorded in the ARES Conflict Materiel (CONMAT) Database, before being assessed and graded following established ARES data verification procedures to ensure data quality, source reliability, and, where possible, to obtain information on suppliers.<sup>3</sup> A variety of criteria informed the initial assessment of the data, including the amount and quality of the material;<sup>4</sup> the nature and credentials of the material's source; the quality of any imagery, including key signs of staging;<sup>5</sup> and any available meta-information. Once data has been gathered, a review is undertaken, duplicates removed, and individual entries graded according to their perceived credibility and reliability. Entries that do not meet the given requirements are cut.

## Data Analysis

Following this process, formal identification (positive identification; PID) was made based upon physical features and any visible markings, in accordance with the ARES Arms & Munitions Classification System (ARCS).<sup>6</sup> Any necessary caveats or limitations in the PID were noted. Items were then catalogued, to include an assessment of country of origin, manufacturer, model, and calibre. This complete dataset was then analysed (see below) and cross-referenced with open source material, as well as further confidential material previously held by ARES. Entries were again cross-checked by ARES personnel for duplication and errors. Finally, each entry was reviewed for accuracy by the authors and the technical reviewer in the course of preparing this report.

Functions of the database program were utilised to produce summaries of national origins and composition by type (e.g. self-loading rifles, handguns, etc.). These were then tabulated and ordered to provide a general snapshot of the broad trends present in the dataset, which was again vetted for duplicate and erroneous entries. With the vetting process completed, the refined counts were used to calculate ratios and percentages relevant to the study. This information was compiled into tables and graphic outputs that visualise the prominence of items by country of origin. All ratios were calculated as percentages to one decimal place. Finally, items of unknown national origin were reassessed to determine if they could be incorporated into the more general grouping of states by geopolitical bloc. For instance, some AK-pattern rifles of unknown national provenance are nevertheless easily attributable to a broader 'Eastern Bloc' group. This analysis diminishes the margin of error brought about by items of unknown national origin.

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<sup>3</sup> As per, for example, Jenzen-Jones & McCollum, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The image quality of some posts was low, likely due to the use of cheaper mobile phones with low-quality cameras. While some could be verified by the content and nature of the photographs and contextual information, some had to be excluded from the dataset as unverifiable.

<sup>5</sup> While in other intelligence contexts 'staging' may denote a more nefarious or intentionally misleading intent, the main consideration for this report was the inclusion of weapons not in the possession of the poster. These were carefully removed from the dataset.

<sup>6</sup> Jenzen-Jones, 2020b.

## Confidential Sources

The data analysed in this paper is supported up by a number of interviews with seven confidential sources (CS) operating within Venezuela. All of these sources are, or were, involved in the black or grey markets within the country, and most were operating within the networks monitored during the research phase of this project. A summary of each source's background is presented below. The interviews were conducted by a Venezuelan Spanish speaker via telephone or VOIP services.<sup>7</sup>

**CS1** is a retired police officer in his early 40s. He sells small arms for profit and is known for producing high-quality reloaded ammunition, usually in harder-to-obtain calibres, such as .40 S&W and .45 ACP.

**CS2** is a bodyguard for government officials in his late 40s. He buys and sells a wide variety of small arms and ammunition for profit, and is responsible for the highest volume of sales by any individual in the dataset.

**CS3** is a retired police officer in his early 50s. He mostly trades small arms illicitly acquired from military and law enforcement sources.

**CS4** is an armourer in his late 50s. He performs skilled custom work for military, police, and civilian customers, as well as trading in small arms and ammunition.

**CS5** is a retired senior military officer in his late 50s, who mostly purchases ammunition to support his sport shooting hobby.

**CS6** is a small business owner in his early 30s who trades in small arms and ammunition, particularly the latter, to support his sport-shooting hobby.

**CS7** is a is a CICPC officer in his late 30s who mostly purchases ammunition to support his sport-shooting hobby.

At the time of writing, one CS had been detained by the CICPC for possession of a Glock pistol and had to pay a 'fine' of 3,000 USD to be released. Another CS was detained by security services in possession of various AR-type self-loading rifles. He is no longer operating within the firearms industry.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Note that the majority of quotes provided by confidential sources have been translated from Spanish to English, and some grammar has been adjusted for clarity.

<sup>8</sup> ARES treats confidential sources carefully and enforces strict protections. An internal investigation and further correspondence with the sources indicate that the process of sharing information with ARES in no way precipitated or contributed to the complications they experienced. At the time of publishing, confidential sources in Venezuela indicated that authorities have recently been cracking down on the illicit arms trade.

## Online Arms Sales in Venezuela

### General Trends

Within Venezuela at the time of writing, the illicit arms trade is generally conceived of as two parallel and interrelated markets: the ‘black’ and the ‘grey’. In the Venezuelan context, ‘black market’ activities are those that are not only illegal at present, but have always been illegal. This includes the purchase of all light weapons and munitions. Particularly popular are hand grenades, which are used in attacks by criminal groups across Venezuela. The so-called ‘grey market’ exists primarily to cater to participants who hold or have formerly held the legal authority to possess firearms, and is comprised primarily of sports shooters, current and former military and law enforcement personnel, hunters, and civilians who held firearms permits for self-defence. Despite this, a limited amount crossover between the markets exists, and there are small numbers of criminals operating in the grey market. Whilst strictly illegal, grey market activities are generally self-policed, relying in many ways on an ‘old boys’ network’ of informally trusted individuals that generally requires a recommendation from another participant to access. The term ‘grey market’ is used herein to refer solely to the trade in firearms and ammunition by formerly licensed individuals and the quasi-legal trades associated with that. Whilst this report is primarily built upon grey market data, it can be difficult to distinguish the two trades, and they are treated collectively within the dataset.

The grey market existed prior to the ban, but was primarily oriented towards the sale and purchase of ammunition, in order to skirt the monthly limit (50 cartridges per calibre registered) placed on permit holders prior to 2012 (Venezuela, 2013). This limit presented a problem for some sport shooters, for example, whose matches would require significantly more ammunition in order to complete, as well as additional requirements for training. It was common for gun stores to offer imported ammunition under the table; this was usually sold at a higher price than that manufactured locally by the *Compañía Anónima Venezolana de Industrias Militares* (CAVIM). These transactions were typically conducted only with cash, so as not to generate a digital record of the sale. A significant quantity of the ammunition sold under the table were jacketed hollow-point (JHP) cartridges, as this type of ammunition was not produced by CAVIM until the late 2010s.<sup>9</sup>

Interviews and an analysis of contextual information indicate that the vast majority of the trades are conducted for the purposes of self-defence, hunting, or sport shooting (primarily the disciplines of IDPA, IPSC, and PPC<sup>10</sup>), although some firearms do end up in criminal hands despite the attempts made by many of the sellers to avoid this. There is very high demand for weapons conducive to concealed carry, particularly in urban areas such as Caracas. Although self-defence is a primary motivator in the more rural areas of the country, there is a higher demand for long guns in those areas. The fact that this study primarily records trades in Caracas accounts for the disproportionately high number of handguns contained within the dataset, as compared to the estimated proportion such weapons comprise of total Venezuelan small arms holdings. This general preference for handguns in urban areas has been reflected in several other ARES studies of illicit arms markets, including those in Libya, Iraq, and Colombia, and distinguishes the threats faced by people in Venezuela from those in countries with ongoing, large-scale conflicts—such as Syria and Yemen—where self-loading rifles are the dominant weapons traded.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ARES interviews with confidential sources.

<sup>10</sup> International Defensive Pistol Association, International Practical Shooting Confederation, and Police Pistol Combat, respectively.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Jenzen-Jones & McCollum, 2017, pp. 29–30; 37–38; other ARES reporting (confidential).

There is significant participation from members of the security services within the grey market, and limited participation by some individuals in the black market. Perhaps needless to say, former and current military, intelligence, and law enforcement personnel participating in and benefitting from the grey market are willing to overlook the illicit nature of these activities. Regardless of their personal background, many participants in the grey market are able to use their security contacts to access databases maintained by military or law enforcement units. Sometimes, security forces' participation in the grey market crosses into 'black' activities. In some cases, for example, firearms which are falsely reported as lost by police or military personnel—or stolen outright—are then offered by these individuals for sale on the black market. CS4, for example, has sold items on the black market that were stolen from military or police armouries. Despite participation from police, military, and intelligence personnel, attempts to crack down on the grey market have continued. Sellers and buyers, especially the former, have increasingly taken more elaborate precautions to avoid detection by intelligence services. The increasing government control over the possession and trade of small arms has pushed the market farther underground than ever, with many participants resorting to tactics such as having their WhatsApp account affiliated to a foreign number. This is the case for CS1, who uses an Argentinian SIM card to avoid undercover intelligence and law enforcement officers; he said: "I don't suspect anybody, but I distrust everyone". Another method that sellers and buyers use to evade the authorities is to meet on private property, avoiding exchanges in public spaces. In an extension of this tactic, some buyers pay a premium to have their items delivered to their residence by a uniformed police or military officer, dramatically decreasing the chance of a seller or courier being stopped at one of the checkpoints that are abundant throughout Caracas. This service is sometimes explicitly offered by sellers, and in such cases a premium is added to the price of the item. An example provided by CS7:

*A seller was offering a Mossberg 500A 12ga shotgun for sale. As it [sic] not an easily concealed weapon, and hiding it inside a car could be difficult, he offered the buyer the option of having it delivered to a location near to the buyer's house where there are not commonly any checkpoints, due to it being a residential area.*

*When the buyer arrived at the prearranged location, he was astonished to find a CICPC agent, in uniform, with his issued Beretta PX4 9mm in hand, asking for him by name. He answered yes, and in his own words 'I thought he was going to arrest me, instead he smiled and asked me if I had the money, after handing it to him, he told me to open my trunk, handed me the shotgun and told me to have a nice day.' In this case the price of the delivery was 50 USD. I have no way of knowing how much of those 50 USD the CICPC agent received for making the delivery. I don't remember how much the price of the shotgun was, but let's say it was 500 USD, he payed [sic] the CICPC agent 550 USD in cash.*

Many sellers will only send pictures of the merchandise to buyers on request, and will delete them as soon as the transaction is completed. It is common to see a "This message has been deleted" notification in one's WhatsApp chat, which typically indicates that the item has been sold to another buyer and is no longer on the market. On other occasions, it means the item was deemed to be 'illegal'. This must be explained in the context of the Venezuelan grey market: items considered to be 'illegal' by sellers are those weapons that are discovered to have been involved in a crime, or that are otherwise known to be sought after by security services. Determining whether a weapon is the subject of an ongoing investigation is accomplished by searching the *Sistema de Investigación e Información Policial* ('Police Investigation and Information System'), an electronic database which contains, amongst other information, the serial numbers of firearms which have been involved in crimes and are being sought after by the criminal and or military justice systems. SIIPOL cross-references the DAEX serial number database to flag firearms that have been reported stolen, involved in a crime, or recovered by police. A key shortcoming of the DAEX database is that, according to CS3, it only

contains the serial numbers of firearms registered after 2010. If a weapon's serial number does not appear in SIIPOL, sellers generally consider that firearm to have a clean record. Of course, neither SIIPOL nor the DAEX database is comprehensive. If a firearm was smuggled into the country, for example, it will not appear on SIIPOL even if it has been involved in a crime. It is important to note that military firearms in Venezuela are typically marked as such (see Figures 3.1 & 3.2), meaning that they can generally be identified and discounted as being externally supplied. Unmarked weapons are therefore immediately suspect in the Venezuelan context, and the source of such weapons and their means of ingress should be closely examined.



**Figure 3.1** Military ownership markings ('Fuerzas Armadas de Venezuela') as seen on the right-hand side of the slide of an FN Herstal Browning Hi-Power self-loading pistol. This is the typical formulation of markings from the pre-Chavez era. A national crest is also typically present; in this case, it is marked atop the slide just forward of the rear sight and is partially visible above the slide serrations. Note that some identifying markings have been redacted to protect the source (source: confidential source/ARES).



**Figure 3.2** Visible national crest markings—circled in red—on MP5 (left) and Uzi (right) sub-machine guns. These weapons are likely to have been stolen from the armouries of security services, or captured from military or law enforcement personnel (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

In the past, when Facebook groups were still the primary method of online arms trading in Venezuela, small arms had been paid for via wire transfers and in cash (in Bs.F.). In recent years, the massive devaluation of the Bs.F. has dictated that the vast majority of sales are now made only in U.S. Dollars and Euros, and most transactions are conducted in cash. Confidential sources indicated that some transactions still take place via wire transfer, however evidence suggests that these usually made use of US-based digital payments network Zelle, which places limits of 2,500 USD per day on transactions via some banks affiliated to the network.

## Ammunition

Ammunition is generally scarce in Venezuela. It is quite common for police and military personnel, with the exception of some select units, to go on patrol with a single magazine for their service weapon. Accordingly, ammunition commands a high price on the illicit market. An analysis of headstamps, contextual information, and interviews with CS indicates that the primary sources for ammunition traded on the illicit market are military and police stockpiles—ammunition is stolen and sold to the highest bidder. 9 × 19 mm is the most sought-after pistol cartridge, as the standard service sidearms of almost all security personnel are chambered for the cartridge, and it remains one of the most popular sports-shooting cartridges. Additionally, it has historically been produced in very high volumes by CAVIM, the state-owned arms and ammunition manufacturer and the most commonly found ammunition brand in the dataset (Jenzen-Jones & Pérez, 2020). CS5 indicated that government stockpiles were dangerously low at the time of writing, and many security personnel have resorted to buying ammunition from the black and grey markets with their own funds.

CAVIM currently offers three types of 9 × 19 mm cartridges for domestic sale to security forces. The first is packaged in brown cardboard boxes, each containing 25 rounds marked with a headstamp that reads “CAVIM” at the 12 o’clock position and features a two-digit year of production code in the 6 o’clock position. The second consists of 25-rounds packaged in white cardboard boxes (see Figure 3.3). Local sources claim the latter cartridges are imported from China, and an assessment of the physical features and markings of the cartridges supports this assessment. There is variance between different lots of cartridges packaged in this way, however the headstamp always reads simply “II-II”—irrespective of the year of production and lot number displayed on the packaging. The third is the highly sought-after AEX (*Alta Expansión*; ‘high expansion’), a flat-nosed expanding full-metal jacket (EFMJ)-type round—allegedly a copy of the Federal Ammunition EFMJ—which is widely issued to Venezuelan law enforcement and is now available on the illicit market (see Figure 3.4) (Jenzen-Jones & Pérez, 2020). CS3 noted that many police personnel sell their issued AEX rounds in order to purchase a larger quantity of standard FMJ rounds, due to the premium the EFMJ-type commands versus standard FMJ rounds on the illicit market. The AEX cartridges normally feature a headstamp which reads: CAVIM – OP[XXX] – [year of production] (where ‘XXX’ is a three-digit number which corresponds to which police department they were issued to (OP stands for Organismo Policial, or ‘police agency’). In other examples ‘OG’ (for *Organismo Gubernamental*, or ‘government agency’) rather than ‘OP’ is used (Jenzen-Jones & Pérez, 2020).

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<sup>12</sup> A confidential military source in Venezuela told ARES that, as of March 2020, CAVIM is only producing the following pistol calibre cartridges: .380 ACP, .38 Special, and .357 Magnum.

<sup>13</sup> ARES interviews with confidential sources. China has been aggressively marketing small arms and ammunition throughout Latin America over the previous decade.





Figure 3.3 9 × 19 mm ammunition supplied by CAVIM for domestic Venezuelan use, in the ‘brown box’ and ‘white box’ packaging. Note that the lot numbers have been redacted to prevent their connection with the confidential source who supplied the images (source: ARES).



Figure 3.4 A 50-round plastic box containing CAVIM 9 × 19 mm AEX (‘high expansion’) cartridges (source: ARES).

## U.S.-sourced Weapons & Components

After domestic theft and diversion, the United States remains the single most important source of arms and ammunition for the illicit market in Venezuela. According to confidential sources in Venezuela, the United States is the primary market for most local gun enthusiasts looking to acquire modern firearms, with sports shooters and wealthy firearms owners regularly engaging in the illicit arms trade to acquire parts and components from the U.S., or buying these off brokers who specialise in importing and assembling U.S.-origin firearms, parts, and components. ARES monitoring and interviews with confidential sources indicate that there was a notable increase in sales of U.S.-origin firearms and components—especially AR-15-type rifles—subsequent to the opposition uprising of 30 April 2019.<sup>14</sup> Many of the AR-15-type rifles within the dataset which were sold after 30 April appear to have originated with a single seller. These all include the same type of lower receiver, possessed of distinctive physical appearance and lack markings of any kind; this could indicate their import as so-called ‘80%’ lower receivers from the United States.

Firearms are ‘straw’ purchased from otherwise legitimate dealers in the U.S. by a third party—making use of false details as necessary—and are then smuggled in person or illicitly shipped to an end user in Venezuela, often using a mail-forwarding company. This is well documented in several instances (see, for example, cases in Miami, Utah, and Mesquite<sup>15</sup>). CS7 gave an account of how firearms components are smuggled into Venezuela from the United States:

*I am a citizen and resident of Venezuela. In late 2019, I was able to purchase a Polymer 80 lower receiver [frame] parts kit for a Glock pistol via the Internet. I ordered it from a [sic] online firearms and accessories retailer in the US and paid with a European debit card. I used a freight forwarding address in a US city, supplied by a Venezuelan courier company I contracted online. The package was forwarded to Venezuela, where I understand customs officials have been routinely bribed to avoid checking the freight received.*

*Within three weeks of ordering the parts, they had arrived at a residential address in Venezuela. At no point was I contacted by any of the parties involved in the transaction or transfer of these parts, and once billed by the courier company, the Polymer 80 was labelled as a “sporting accessory”.*

CS7’s ‘80% kit’ was photographed for this report (see Figure 3.5). The method of smuggling firearms parts which CS7 described is quite common and has been used for many years, according to numerous other sources in Venezuela. Another confidential source shared a photo of a Glock barrel (threaded to accept a suppressor) that they imported using the same method (see Figure 3.6).

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<sup>14</sup>This uprising was a brief attempted coup launched on behalf of opposition leader Juan Guaidó and seeking to depose incumbent President Nicolás Maduro. It was widely reported in the international media (see, for example, BBC, 2019).

<sup>15</sup>CBS Miami, 2016; ATF, 2011; Nicholson, 2012.



**Figure 3.5** A Polymer 80 '80% lower' Glock frame (model PF940v2) in Venezuela, as supplied from the manufacturer in kit form—including a plastic jig and the tooling necessary to complete the pistol using a cross-vice and drill press (source: ARES CONMAT Database).<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 3.6** A KKM Precision aftermarket threaded barrel for Glock 17 self-loading pistols (9 × 19 mm) and a suppressor. The barrel was imported from the United States using a mail forwarding company (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

<sup>16</sup> See 2020 Inc., 2020.

### Craft Production & Custom Work

During the research phase of this paper, extant reports of a small-scale craft-production industry in Venezuela were confirmed. The trade is mostly located in the capital city of Caracas, and focuses primarily on the assembly, final fitment, and custom finishing of firearms, as well as the craft-production of firearms accessories. Whilst a limited number of entirely improvised or craft-produced weapons do exist, they are usually extremely crude and are only used by low-level criminal elements in very small numbers (*Reporte Confidencial*, 2019; *Noticias Ahora*, 2016; See also Figure 3.7). A notable exception to this which was identified within the dataset is a small quantity of ‘pen guns’ (Hays & Jenzen-Jones, 2018), which appear to be of good quality. There is noticeable demand for otherwise-inaccessible small arms accessories and custom work, including locally produced suppressors, conversions of semi-automatic weapons to automatic fire, and aesthetic modifications such as coloured finishes. It is important to note that although the Venezuelan ‘Law of Weapons and Explosives’ can be quite vague at times, there are a few modifications which are explicitly banned. These include modifications which convert a semi-automatic-only firearm to automatic operation, and any addition of a suppressor to a firearm (Venezuela, 2013).



**Figure 3.7** A crude craft-produced handgun recovered by police in the Venezuelan state of Nueva Esparta (source: *Policía Regional de Nueva Esparta*).

<sup>17</sup> Craft produced weapons are defined by ARES as those fabricated primarily by hand and in relatively small quantities (Hays & Jenzen-Jones, 2018).

### Craft-produced Suppressors

The dataset contains weapons fitted with craft-produced suppressors, as well as both pistols and rifles and rifles sold with barrels which have been locally threaded to accept suppressors. The suppressors most commonly found for sale in Venezuela are intended for use with .22 LR ammunition, due to the relative ease of suppressing that calibre and the correspondingly reduced production requirements for an effective suppressor design. There are also examples of integrally suppressed rifles in this calibre in the dataset, some of which are believed to be craft-produced.



**Figure 3.8** *An integrally suppressed Remington Model 597 self-loading rifle chambered for .22 LR (source: ARES CONMAT Database).*

Amongst suppressed handguns within the dataset, the most common examples are chambered for the ubiquitous 9 × 19 mm cartridge. Extended, threaded barrels for popular models such as the Beretta 92 series and the FN Herstal Browning Hi-Power have been produced by local gunsmiths and are included in the dataset. Whilst the most popular handguns are, by a wide margin, the Glock 17 and 19 models, the dataset includes no examples of locally produced or modified barrels for these pistols. This is probably due to the fact that factory-made threaded barrels are easier to source than for many other manufacturers' handguns. Suppressors for rifles consist almost entirely of those designed for AR-15-type rifles, although, these are limited in capability. As CS4 put it: "Suppressors for 5.56 rifles are very ineffective, we don't have the materials or manufacturing capabilities to build them like in the US, small and light. Here, in Venezuela, they end up being too big or too heavy and the sound reduction that it delivers is just not worth it".

All examples of suppressors found in the database are of the standard U.S. thread pattern of  $\frac{1}{2} \times 28$  threads per inch, and the majority are of the classic 'K-baffle' design (so-named for its resemblance in cross-section to the letter 'K'). Most are constructed from aluminium. More advanced components, such as locally produced Nielsen devices (a spring-loaded module intended to improve functioning with tilting barrel designs) have also been found. These are both sourced from U.S. companies (such as Gemtech) and manufactured locally.



**Figure 3.9** An AR-15-type self-loading rifle fitted with a large sound suppressor. The rifle, suppressor, and an EOTech-type holographic sight have all been finished with a camouflage pattern. The rifle has been built with a low-profile gas block lacking the classic AR-15 triangular front sight structure (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 3.10** A suppressor improvised from a Maglite torch body, with a similar Maglite model for comparison (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 3.11** An elaborately accessorised and highly impractical Generation 3 Glock 17 self-loading pistol fitted with selector backplate, optical sight mount, Primary Arms Microdot series red dot sight, rifle bipod, FAB Defense shoulder stock, and 50-round drum magazine from SGM Tactical (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

### Semi-automatic to Automatic Conversions

A very popular craft-produced accessory is a selector switch backplate for Glock pistols, which allows for both semi-automatic and automatic fire. These replace the flush-fitting, grooved backplate on the slide of a typical Glock pistol, interfacing with the sear and preventing the disconnecter from limiting the weapon to semi-automatic-only fire. The designs seen in the dataset are based upon the original ‘Fire Selector System for Glock pistols’ (FSSG)—invented by Venezuelan designer Jorge A. Leon in the United States in 1987—and are known locally as simply *selector* (‘selector’).<sup>18</sup> This is a deceptively simple device, using a simple cross-bolt (or in another variant, sliding) catch that either extends or retracts an arm that, in turn, either depresses the weapon’s disconnecter (allowing automatic fire) or allows it to intrude as normal, disconnecting the trigger after each shot (i.e. providing semi-automatic fire). Only one of the selectors recorded for sale was a genuine FSSG model; the remainder were illicit craft-produced copies.



**Figure 3.12** The sole original FSSG in the dataset, with OEM carrying case allowing replacement of the stock backplate with the FSSG and vice versa (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Craft-produced copies of the FSSG have been commonly available in Venezuela for some time, with the price depending largely on manufacturing quality. They range from very crude examples to competently machined devices that rival some those made legally by licensed machine shops in the U.S. All examples in the dataset are made from aluminium and many are spuriously marked with the Glock logo and marketed as ‘original’ components. CS1 has indicated that the majority of the locally made selectors he has seen are manufactured “outside of Caracas”.

<sup>18</sup> Leon’s original U.S. patent for his FSSG can be viewed at: <https://patents.google.com/patent/US5705763A/en>



**Figure 3.13** Two craft-produced selector backplates for Glock pistols, with black finish and spurious Glock markings. The large cross-bolt is pressed to the left for automatic fire, right for semi-automatic (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 3.14** An 'in-the-white' selector shown fitted to a pistol (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



The majority of the AR-15 type rifles in the dataset have been converted to be select-fire capable (i.e. capable of both semi-automatic and automatic fire).<sup>19</sup> These include several rifles with unmarked lower receivers—the origin of which are practically impossible to trace from available imagery—as well as U.S.-made and marked receivers that started life capable only of semi-automatic operation and have been modified in Venezuela. These conversions are performed by skilled local gunsmiths, some of whom have experience in servicing and maintaining these weapons from their military or law enforcement service as armourers. Having retired from the security services, some individuals continue to provide these services within, primarily, the grey market. So-called ‘drop-in auto sears’ (DIAS) are also produced locally, and these can convert an AR-type rifle to automatic fire without modification of the receiver (Ferguson & William, 2014).

### ‘80%’ AR-15 Lower Receivers & Glock Frames

A significant number of so-called ‘80%’ lower receivers and pistol frames (sometimes called ‘unfinished’ receivers or frames) have been smuggled into Venezuela from the United States, before being finished locally. The term refers to a near-complete (80% or less) lower or frame which may be sold without restriction in the United States, under Section 921 of the federal *Firearms Act of 1934*, which specifies “the frame or receiver of any such weapon...” as the legally controlled part—literally the ‘firearm’ for legal purposes.<sup>20</sup> Most other components may be freely traded, including parts that would be otherwise controlled in other countries such as barrels, bolts, and upper receivers. This was further codified by the *Gun Control Act of 1968* which, with reference to this existing definition, mandated that all receivers or frames must carry an “engraved or cast” serial number to ease control of manufacture, import, and sale (Govinfo, n.d., pp. 1213–1236). Broadly speaking, what the ATF terms ‘receiver blanks’ that do not meet the NFA definition of a ‘firearm’ (i.e. are not a complete ‘receiver’) are not subject to regulation (ATF, 2020). An 80% lower receiver or frame can be completed by the possessor before being assembled into a finished firearm. Whilst this legal situation is not directly applicable in Venezuela, it makes for a useful convenience; as a result of the U.S. legal approach to both unfinished receivers/frames and the uncontrolled availability of other critical firearms components, it is possible those seeking to acquire a viable firearm for use in Venezuela to purchase nearly-complete firearms in the U.S. without legal resistance.

In Venezuela, this is most commonly the case with both AR-15 lower receivers<sup>21</sup> and with Glock pistol frames. The Polymer 80 brand of Glock frames, which have appeared on the grey and black market as both components and in a completed state, appears to be the most common 80% pistol frame in Venezuela. The Polymer 80 is designed for Generation 3 (Gen3) Glock components, although Gen1 and 2 slides are also compatible, and it is understood that later-production frames can be modified to accept Gen4 components.

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<sup>19</sup> It is not possible from the available intelligence to determine in every case whether a given firearm has been converted or not, however only a very small number of semi-automatic-only variants have been documented, and sources indicate the general preference is for automatic AR-15 models.

<sup>20</sup> For a quick reference, see the ATF website (ATF, 2018). For the letter of the law, see *United States Code 2012 Title 18*, Section 921, paragraph (a)(3) (B) (Govinfo, 2012, p. 204).

<sup>21</sup> A limited number of AR-15-type lower receivers may have been manufactured in-country. There are examples in the dataset that appear to be ‘in-the-white’ (unfinished, raw material) and lack any markings whatsoever.



**Figure 3.15** A Glock pattern self-loading pistol built on a Polymer 80 ‘80% lower’ frame, mounting a pre-Gen4 (likely Gen3) slide assembly. The (grooved, U.S. pattern) trigger, disassembly catch, slide lock and magazine release are standard Gen3 Glock pattern components, readily available online (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

### Other Craft-production & Custom Work

According to local sources, firearms customisation trends in Venezuela in recent years have paralleled similar U.S. trends towards increased customisation of personal firearms. Small-scale firms and individuals are offering custom finishing services (such as multiple colours or patterns of finish using Cerakote and similar oven-cured durable paint finishes<sup>22</sup>) and the provision of custom-moulded Kydex accessories. Gunsmiths have long offered traditional finishes such as bluing or hard chrome, there are now a few who offer Cerakote camouflage patterns or other designs. The lack of availability of holsters and other accessories such as magazine pouches, has created a secondary market of a handful of custom Kydex makers<sup>23</sup> to supply that demand.

The lack of spare parts and accessories that would be commonly available online or at a gun store in the U.S. or Europe, has also led to gunsmiths improvising or adapting replacement parts. These include a wide range of components and accessories. For example, there are a handful of examples in the dataset of firearms fitted with custom sight mounts or ‘iron’ sights produced entirely in-country. Similarly, high-capacity (‘extended’) pistol magazines are in high demand, such as the factory 33-round or aftermarket 31-round magazines available for the Glock series of pistols. An extended magazine is commonly referred to in Venezuela as a *Cocosette*, after a popular candy bar of roughly similar proportions. There are examples in the dataset of magazines that consist of two factory-made magazines welded together, as well as examples of factory-made extended magazines that have been modified to work in a model of weapon other than that intended. This is a modification typically made to serve pistols that don’t have factory or aftermarket extended magazines readily available.

<sup>22</sup> For more information on firearms finishes, see Jenzen-Jones & Ferguson, 2018, pp. 96–99.

<sup>23</sup> Confidential sources identified two well-known local makers, including one of whom is an active-duty special operations officer.



**Figure 3.16** A locally made Kydex holster for Glock pistols (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 3.17** A locally produced extended magazine, known as a 'Cocostette', which is made by welding together two 17-round 9 x 19 mm magazines for the Beretta Px4. Demand for this modification may be due to the fact that there are no commercially manufactured magazines for the Beretta Px4 that have a higher capacity than 20 rounds. (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

## Locally Reloaded Ammunition

One grey market dealer interviewed by ARES, CS1, focuses on another locally produced commodity: high-quality reloaded ammunition for hard-to-find pistol calibres. Ammunition is generally scarce in Venezuela, and many calibres cannot be readily obtained. CS1 reloads calibres that are difficult to acquire, such as .40 S&W, .45 ACP, .357 Magnum, .32 ACP, .380 ACP, and occasionally 12 gauge 00 ‘buckshot’. He specifically refrains from producing 9 × 19 mm cartridges since he estimates that his production costs would almost equal the price of factory-loaded CAVIM ammunition. CS1 acquires components for his reloaded ammunition from a variety of sources. The cartridge cases are recycled, and generally obtained by paying someone at a police or military range to gather fired cartridge cases for him. The primers and powder are generally sourced from the U.S. however CS1 said that more recently he has been using “a contact in the factory”, implying that they are obtained from an employee of CAVIM. Lead bullets are craft-produced locally, whilst more elaborate projectile designs such as JHPs are smuggled from the U.S. via a courier service.

## Describing the Dataset

The dataset contains a total of 535 small arms. A general breakdown of small arms in the dataset by type and sub-type<sup>24</sup> is given in Figure 4.1, below. Reflecting global trends in civilian small arms possession, the vast majority of weapons are handguns and, of these, the majority are self-loading pistols.<sup>25</sup> As described previously, handguns are highly sought-after in Venezuela, primarily for self-defence purposes (including mobile carriage, in vehicles). Glock brand pistols are the most common of these. The next most common category is the self-loading rifle, within which the generic AR-15-type self-loading rifle is the leading choice. The dominance of Glock handguns and AR-15-type rifles is due in large part to the unrivalled global success of these weapons for a variety of civilian, law enforcement, and military applications (see below). With U.S.-origin firearms representing a significant portion of the dataset (see below), the popularity of these weapons within the United States is another leading factor in explaining their prevalence.

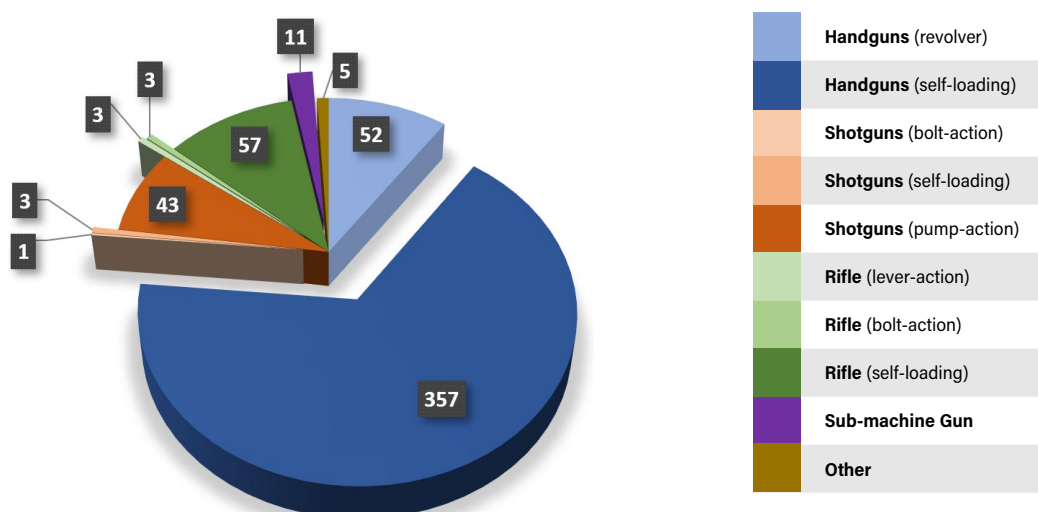
It is important to note that some weapons in the dataset feature limited or novel markings that denote either local manufacture/assembly or render the subject weapon ‘unknown’ in terms of its country of origin. As highly modular designs, this affects Glocks and AR-15 rifles in particular (see for example **AR-15 Type Self-Loading Rifles**, p. 42). Nonetheless, many of these incorporate identifiable original Austrian and/or U.S.-made components. Some weapons feature entirely spurious markings, such as falsified ‘Colt’ markings on several AR-type rifles.

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<sup>24</sup> Weapons are classified according to the ARES Arms & Munitions Classification System (ARCS). See: Jenzen-Jones, 2020b.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Jenzen-Jones & McCollum, 2017.

Figure 4.1 — Breakdown of Small Arms by Type and Sub-type



Source: ARES CONMAT Database.

### Small Arms by Country of Origin

Figure 4.2 shows the various countries of origin (by make<sup>26</sup>; see next page) for the SALW which comprise the dataset. As noted above, the vast majority of Glock pistols are made in Austria and the United States, and the AR-15 rifle as a broad type both originates and predominates in the United States. Thus, the majority of firearms in the dataset originate from these two countries.<sup>27</sup> Austria leads with 26% of all firearms in the dataset, made up entirely of Glock pistols; no other Austrian firearms are represented. It should be noted that, as some Glock-type pistols were of unknown national origin, they have been counted within Austria’s total. As such, it is likely that more handguns were produced in the United States than is expressed here.

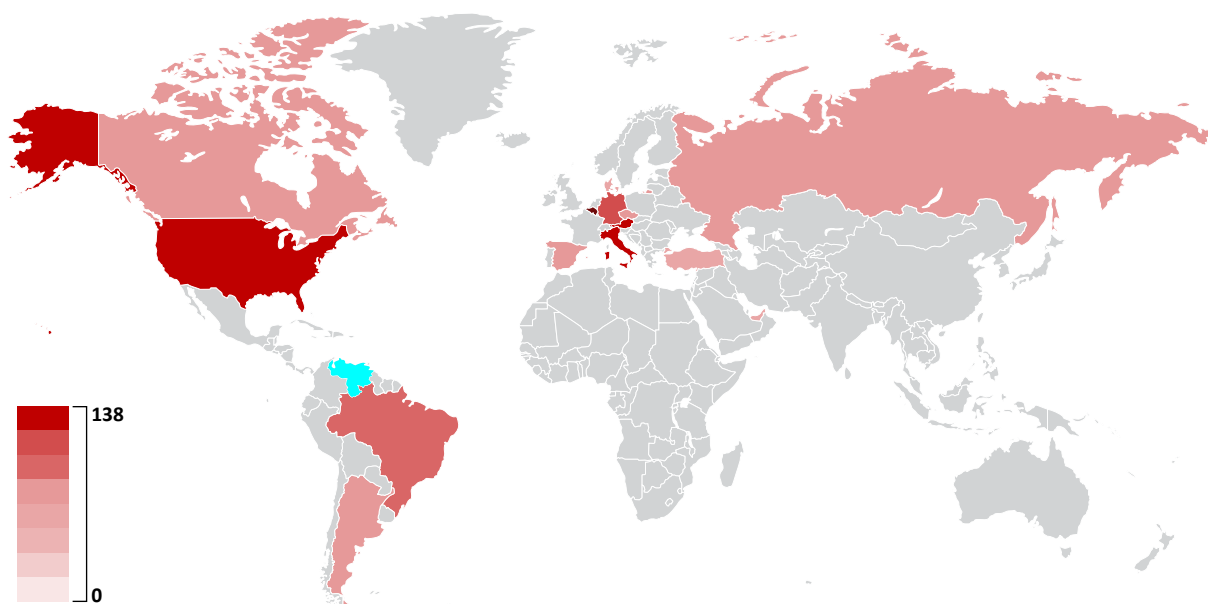
The next most common country is the United States, with the second-most firearms from a single country at 25% of the total. Unlike Austria, firearms of U.S. origin found in the dataset vary by type and model and span all of the categories examined. The U.S.-made samples in the dataset are mostly comprised of Glock USA and S&W handguns and Mossberg pump action shotguns. It is important to note that, whilst 4% of the samples listed in the dataset as manufacturer and country of origin unknown, it is likely that many of these have a U.S. provenance, as they are mostly AR-15-type self-loading rifles. Almost all AR-15-type rifles identified in the dataset were produced in the United States. Many of these weapons lack identifiable markings. At least some of these appear to be ‘80%’ lower receivers, and these were most likely smuggled in from the U.S. and completed in Venezuela. As a result of these factors surrounding Glock pistols and AR-15-type rifles, the highest percentage of firearms in the dataset are likely to be of U.S. origin—the number could be as high as 36%.

<sup>26</sup> The ‘make’ of a weapon is defined by ARES as generally analogous to a weapon’s ‘brand’ and is typically marked on the weapon (see: Jenzen-Jones, 2020b; Jenzen-Jones & Ferguson, 2018). Nonetheless, it is distinct from the identification of ‘manufacturer’ as a ‘make’ may be known where a definitive place of manufacture cannot be determined. This can often cross state borders in the absence of identifying markings (for example, the production of Glock ‘make’ pistols in the United States, where such is not identifiable from available imagery).

<sup>27</sup> Needless to say, not all U.S.-made pistols are Glock models.

Due to the relative prevalence of Beretta handguns in Venezuela, Italy is the next most significant country of origin with 24%. Self-loading pistols account for 99% of the Italian weapons identified. After Austria, the U.S. and Italy, small arms of other categories and/or from other countries make up a relative fraction of the dataset by comparison, with the exception of pump-action shotguns. The comparatively large quantity of pump-action shotguns is likely due to the reduced enforcement of legal restrictions on manually-operated shotguns; their low cost and low maintenance requirements; relative ease of operation; and their perceived flexibility for a range of applications (agricultural, recreational, home defence etc.). Other states identified in analysing the data include Germany (21 firearms), Belgium (20), Brazil (18), Switzerland (15), Israel (9), the United Arab Emirates (7), and Turkey (5).

**Figure 4.2 — Small Arms by Country of Origin**



### Small Arms by Make or Manufacturer

Table 4.1 lists the various makes or manufacturers documented in the course of preparing this report. Note that ‘make’ and ‘manufacturer’ are often confused. A ‘make’ is akin to a ‘brand,’ and does not necessarily reflect the actual manufacturer, i.e. the entity that actually produces that weapon. A simple rule to remember is that what is marked on the weapon can generally be considered its make. This may also in fact be the manufacturer, but the weapon may instead have been produced by a third party on behalf of the branded ‘make.’ If a manufacturer or ‘make’ marking is consistent with the overall physical features of a weapon, a tentative identification is relatively easy to establish. Even where the ‘make’ and ‘manufacturer’ are the same, there may be more than one country of origin. This can be a result of unilateral or multilateral sanctions, a lack of friendly trade relations, or corporate practice that restricts U.S. subsidiaries from making foreign (or sometimes extra-regional) sales. Note that unlike Glock, the AR-15 is a generic type and not a make *per se*; such rifles are nonetheless reflected in the presence of several commercial makes of AR-15 rifles. These are marked with an asterisk in Table 4.1.<sup>28</sup> They are few in number due to the unidentified nature of the many of the generic ‘AR’ rifles in the dataset.

<sup>28</sup> Some of these brands also produce other types of firearm. For example, of the 20 Colt firearms listed, 17 are handguns.

Other guns, such as the Heckler & Koch SP89 ‘pistol’, may have been manufactured exclusively for the U.S. market and marketed by the U.S. subsidiary (HK USA), but produced overseas—in this case, in Germany. Complete Glock pistols or components have been manufactured in Austria, Russia, Slovakia, and the United States<sup>29</sup>, but Austrian-made-and-marked components—including primary pressure-bearing components such as barrels and slides—are also supplied to overseas subsidiaries for assembly in those countries. As a result, it is common to encounter examples marked prominently with ‘Austria’ on the slide, despite being finally assembled in the U.S. As such, it is often possible to determine a weapon’s ‘make’, but not its country of origin. This problem is compounded in Venezuela. When analysing the illicit markets in other countries (such as Libya, or Yemen) it is often much easier to rule out U.S.-origin arms due to highly restrictive export and import regimes, and a lack of documented evidence of direct smuggling from the United States to the country in question. In Venezuela, however, such direct arms trafficking is known to have occurred on numerous occasions. In many cases, further investigation would yield more definitive results. For example, the unique identifiers (e.g. serial numbers) visible in many of the images in the dataset may allow for tracing operations to determine where and when a firearm was produced, and to which country it was originally exported.

**Table 4.1 — Small Arms by Make or Manufacturer**

Make/Manufacturer	Number in Dataset	Make/Manufacturer	Number in Dataset
Akkar	1	MKEK	1
American Tactical	1	Palmetto State Armoury*	1
Arcadia Machine & Tool	1	Para Ordnance	2
Arsenal Firearms	1	Polymer 80	11
Astra	3	Remington	6
Baikal	1	Rexio	1
Benelli	1	Rock River Arms*	1
Beretta	98	Rossi	6
Bernardelli	1	Ruger	4
Caracal	7	Salient Arms	1
Cobray	1	Sarsilmaz	2
Colt*	20	SIG Sauer	14
Česká Zbrojovka Uherský Brod	4	Smith & Wesson	35
Craft-produced <sup>30</sup>	4	Sphinx	1
FN Herstal*	20	Springfield Armoury	1
Freedom Arms	1	Star	1
Glock	147	Stoeger	1
Heckler & Koch	13	Tac Defense	1
HS Produkt	1	Tanfoglio	23
Israel Military Industries	9	Taurus	11
KelTec	2	Walther	10
Kriss	1	Winchester	3
Dansk Industri Syndikat	1	Unknown	21
Magtech	1	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>535</b>
Marlin	5		
Mossberg	32		

<sup>29</sup> Unlicensed copies have been produced elsewhere, including Pakistan and Iran.

<sup>30</sup> All four firearms in this category are locally made ‘pen guns’, which appear to have been made by the same producer.

## Small Arms by Type

### Handguns

Handguns account for some 77 per cent of firearms captured in the dataset. This appears to be primarily driven by the high demand for concealable firearms for self-defence, however this also reflects the limited geographical scope of this study (Caracas). Whilst the concealed carry of handguns for self-defence is prevalent throughout the country, sources indicate there are increased sales of long guns in the more rural areas of Venezuela. This is consistent with black market sales patterns that ARES has observed in other conflict-affected and fragile states. Within the handguns category, self-loading pistols represent 86 per cent of all examples documented. The remainder are primarily revolvers (13%), supplemented by a small number of craft-produced pen guns. A range of international self-loading pistol manufacturers were observed, with 25 brands from 14 different countries represented. In addition to the four craft-produced pen guns made in Venezuela, several guns built around U.S.-made Polymer80 '80% frames' were also documented (see below). Whilst handguns in 13 calibres were observed, 9 × 19 mm was the dominant chambering, accounting for 81 per cent of all examples in the dataset (see Table 4.2).

**Table 4.2 — Handguns by Calibre**

Make/Manufacturer	Number in Dataset	Make/Manufacturer	Number in Dataset
.22 LR	7	9 × 19 mm	335
5.7 × 28 mm	4	.38 Special	31
.22 Magnum	1	.357 Magnum	11
.25 ACP	1	.40 S&W	10
.32 S&W Long	1	.44 Magnum	1
.32 ACP	2	.45 ACP	12
.380 ACP	12	Unknown	14

The revolver category is primarily comprised of Colt and Smith & Wesson products—unsurprising given the historic and continuing popularity of revolvers from these manufacturers—although other producers, including regional (Argentinian) manufacturer Rexio, are represented. A variety of calibres, barrel lengths, and frame sizes were in evidence, although a preference for either compact (concealed carry) or long-barrelled 'magnum' class revolvers was evident. .38 Special was the dominant calibre (60%) amongst revolvers, with .357 Magnum (21%) and .22 LR (13%) guns accounting for most of the remainder. Single examples chambered for .22 Magnum, .32 S&W Long, and .44 Magnum were also observed.

### Glock

Reflecting an increasingly global trend, Austrian-designed Glock pistols are the single most-sold brand of all firearms in the dataset, representing 41% of all of the self-loading pistols observed. In fact, Glock products account for 27% of all small arms recorded in the dataset. According to confidential sources, Glock has become the most sought-after brand in Venezuela, and a Glock handgun fitted with an automatic fire-selector and a 33-round magazine has become something of a prestige weapon. Some examples were customised with aftermarket slides, sights, and/or accessories. The vast majority of the Glock handguns in the dataset are chambered for 9 × 19 mm; the most common are the models 19 (compact), 17 (full-size), and 26 (sub-compact), in that order. The remaining examples in order of popularity are the compact and full-size models 22 and 23, chambered for .40 S&W, and the (again, compact and full-size) models 25 and 21, chambered for .380 ACP and .45 ACP respectively. The Glock pistols in the dataset were almost



certainly all made in either Austria or the United States. Note that not all U.S.-retailed Glock handguns are U.S. manufactured, and may in fact be *assembled* in the U.S. from Austrian made components. For clarity, this report categorises Glock pistols where an 'Austria' slide marking is visible as Austrian in origin. This is to avoid listing a sizeable number of Glock handguns as being of 'unknown' origin, which could mislead readers. It should be noted that many of these pistols could have been assembled in the United States.



**Figure 4.3** A U.S.-made Gen3 G17 fitted with a Hogue 'HandALL' aftermarket grip sleeve. Note the clear manufacturer's markings for Glock's Smyrna, Georgia plant. The curved 'fish-gill' slide serrations denote a rare variant of the Gen3 pistol with the RTF2 frame texture (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

The dataset indicates that Glock pistols were usually priced between 1,000 and 1,700 USD. The lower end of that spectrum typically represents older first- and second-generation (known as 'Gen1' and 'Gen2', respectively) models, which were manufactured from 1982–c.2000. Later 'Gen3' and 'Gen4' models (1998–present) occupied the higher end of the spectrum. However, price also varied depending on the condition of the firearm, what accessories it was sold with, and the presence of any unique, unusual, or desirable features. Models with coloured or textured frames (such as Glock's 'Rough Textured Frame', or RTF) and those which have been ported with a 'compensator' are all relatively rare in Venezuela, and command higher prices. Glock handguns chambered for calibres other than 9 × 19 mm are also typically more valuable, despite being much harder to obtain cartridges for.



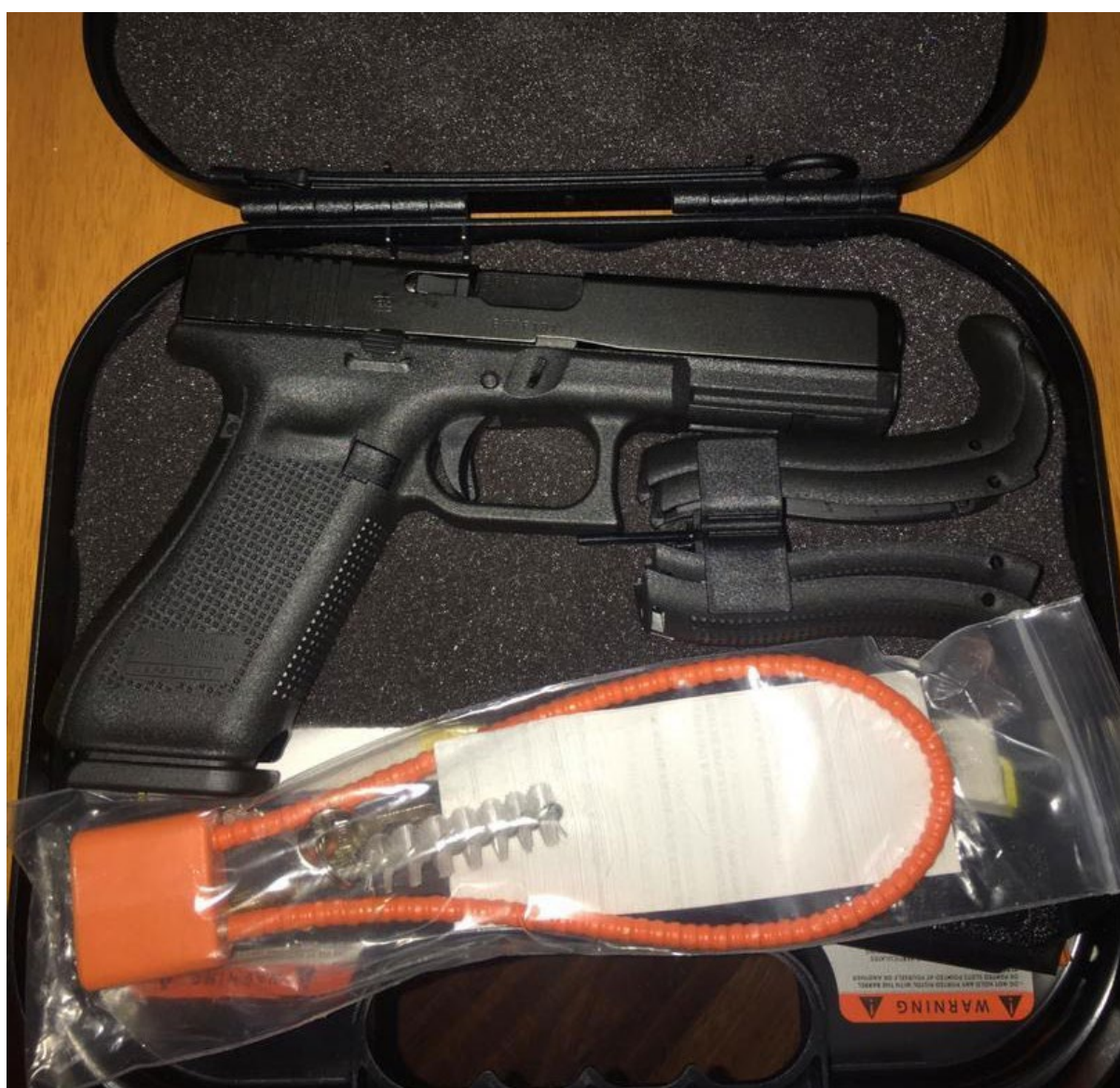
**Figure 4.4** A Gen3 Glock 23 (.40 S&W) compact self-loading pistol with ported barrel and slide and aftermarket fibre optic sights (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.5** A Gen3 Glock 21 (.45 ACP) full-size self-loading pistol sold with Glock case and two magazines (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

There are only limited examples in the dataset of the more recent Gen4 and Gen5 models (introduced in 2010 and 2017 respectively), and prices for these far exceed the average due to their rarity. A former European firearms manufacturer's representative for Venezuela told ARES "Gen4 models didn't exist when Glock stopped importing pistols to Venezuela, therefore, any pistols newer than Gen3 were, without a doubt, smuggled into the country". It should be noted that Gen3 models are still available from Glock.

A handful of Glock pistols were sold with 'chassis'-type stock systems, designed to convert the weapons to function much like pistol-calibre carbines or SMGs. The Israeli-made CAA RONI carbine kit for Glock pistols is a highly desirable accessory, typically selling in Venezuela for 1,000–1,500 USD. This chassis is usually paired with an extended magazine and a selector switch to assemble a makeshift SMG. A heavily accessorised Glock/RONI firearm is shown in Figure 4.7.



**Figure 4.6** What appears to be a new-in-case Gen5 Glock 17 full-size service pistol complete with interchangeable backstraps, cleaning kit, and case lock (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.7** A Gen3 Glock 17 fitted into a CAA Roni stock/chassis and further accessorised with extended barrel, sound suppressor, Truglo optical sight, extended ETS magazine, and 33-round spare magazine (source: ARES CONMAT Database)

## Beretta

Beretta handguns are the second most common brand, accounting for 23% of all self-loading pistols, and 16% of the total number of small arms. The dataset shows that the most prevalent model was the Model 92 series, which has been issued to police and military units for many years in Venezuela, and has been historically popular among civilians as well. One notable example, offered for sale by CS2, is a Beretta 92F pistol converted to be capable of automatic fire (see Figure 4.8). The price was 500 USD—much lower than the average price (around 1,000 USD) for unmodified examples. CS2 openly advertised that the pistol was stolen, explaining the lower price. The CS is a retired police officer and later worked in close personal protection roles for government officials. He explained that although he does not usually offer stolen weapons for sale, this handgun was of a class of weapons known as *material de apoyo* ('support material'). This Venezuelan euphemism refers to weapons that have been seized or confiscated in crimes and later repurposed for use in illegal or deniable operations by security forces. To better explain this concept, CS2 gave an account of when he was still active duty. He told ARES that his former unit used to maintain a rucksack which they called 'the bag', and which contained a collection of *material de apoyo*. The weapons in the bag were used by his units when they were involved in operations which may have been illegal, or to which they otherwise did not want to be connected. This avoided them having to use issued service weapons and thus greatly reduced the chance of their being linked to a crime by later forensic analysis of the scene. The bag was also used as a source for weapons to be 'planted' on unarmed gang members who had been killed by the members of the unit, to retroactively justify the shooting.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>ARES interviews with confidential source.



**Figure 4.8** A stolen Beretta 92F pistol offered for sale by CS2. The serial number on the left-hand side of the frame has been abraded (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.9** Beretta pistols are commonly available in Venezuela, especially the '90' series. Seen here are two new-in-case Model 92FS self-loading pistols (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

The manufacturing situation with Beretta pistols is somewhat complex. Some models, including the Beretta 9000-series, were only ever produced in Italy. Conversely, the Px4 sub-compact model is only made by Beretta USA and has never been manufactured in Italy. The more common Beretta 92-series however, has been made in both the U.S. and Italy.<sup>32</sup> All standard models of Beretta 92-series handguns produced in Italy have a single-letter prefix (e.g. A, C, M) followed by a 5- or 6-digit numerical sequence, and end with a single-letter suffix (e.g. M, Z). US marking schemes have varied, but differ from the Italian format, often by having either a numeral before the prefix letter, or by having multiple prefix letters (most commonly 'BER'; See Figure 4.10). The compact polymer-framed Px4 is another type in government use, and was also well-represented in the dataset. The vast majority of the Beretta pistols in the dataset are in 9 × 19 mm, with the few exceptions being chambered for .380 ACP and .32 ACP.

<sup>32</sup> Note that Beretta's serial number search tool only covers firearms imported and distributed by Beretta USA. Beretta records prior to 1994 are also only partially complete.



**Figure 4.10** A US-made Beretta 92FS handgun. Note the US manufacturer markings and the distinct ‘BER’ serial number prefix used only on US-made firearms. The serial number indicates the weapon was produced in 1997 (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

### FN Herstal

Belgian maker FN Herstal was somewhat popular in this dataset, with pistols including the legacy steel-framed ‘Hi-Power’ model (9 × 19 mm) observed. Two of these were found to be marked “Fuerzas Armadas de Venezuela”, denoting appropriated military sidearms. Three comparatively modern Five-sevenN pistols were also recorded. Although the 5.7 × 28 mm cartridge is in use with Venezuelan security forces with both the Five-seveN and the P90 sub-machine gun, the pistol is also available on the civilian market in the United States, making it difficult to determine the source of these examples. The 5.7 × 28 mm SS190 cartridge was conceived as a means for SMG-class weapons to defeat soft body armour. This was achieved via a rifle-style spitzer (pointed) type bullet providing greater ‘sectional density’, and specific armour-piercing (AP) loads (usually identified by a black bullet tip). The latter are not typically available to civilians, and indeed no ‘black-tip’ ammunition was evident in photographs. Nonetheless, one of the weapons offered for sale was described as having “armour-piercing” ammunition. In fact, the photo shows magazines loaded with SS197SR sporting-purpose ammunition, that is not armour-piercing in nature (see Figure 4.11).<sup>33</sup> All cartridges visible in the available imagery had projectiles that were either unmarked—likely being either FN Herstal SS194, SS195LF or SS198LF types, or American Eagle TMJ—or featured the prominent blue polymer ‘ballistic tips’ of the FN Herstal SS197SR cartridge (Jenzen-Jones, 2020a).

<sup>33</sup> For further information on the common types of 5.7 × 28 mm ammunition and their relative armour-piercing merits, see Jenzen-Jones, 2020a.



**Figure 4.11** One of three FN Herstal Five-seveN pistols offered for sale. Both early (curved trigger guard, as here) and late (straight guard) types were represented. Note the prominent blue ballistic tips of the SS197SR 5.7 × 28 mm ammunition. Despite this, the cartridges were described by the seller as “armour-piercing” (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

### Other Self-loading Pistols

Derivatives of the Czech CZ 75 were also popular in military circles, allegedly due to their robust construction and ability to withstand more powerful loadings of 9 × 19 mm ammunition produced by CAVIM. Whilst only a single Czech-produced CZ 75 was recorded, several copies and close copies were documented. Notable amongst these are the Jericho/‘Baby Eagle’ pistols produced by IMI/IWI and those made by Italian firm Tanfoglio, especially their polymer-framed Force 99 model. Sixteen of these were documented in the dataset, many still in their original pistol cases. One was even supplied with a full set of polymer accessories suitable for a police ‘duty belt’, including a retention device for handcuffs. ARES has had sight of a military order for Force 99 pistols, circa 2010, and other security services within Venezuela also make use of the weapon. It is highly likely that some, if not all, of the Force 99 pistols documented were stolen from Venezuelan security forces.



**Figure 4.12** Two derivatives of the Czech CZ 75 from the dataset: an IMI/IWI Jericho (left) and a Tanfoglio T95 (right) (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Other notable makes and models included in the dataset<sup>34</sup> include Smith & Wesson Model 36 and derivatives (with only one of S&W's modern 'M&P' range of self-loading pistols); the SIG Sauer P226/228/229 series; Heckler & Koch (HK) types, including the USP and derivatives; the .45 ACP Colt Government ('1911') type; a handful of Walther P99 models; two 'Strike One' pistols produced by Arsenal Firearms (one assembled and modified by Salient Arms); and the Caracal, in both F (full-sized) and C (compact) variants. The Caracal is a modern polymer-framed striker-fired self-loading pistol designed and made in the United Arab Emirates.

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<sup>34</sup>All are chambered for 9 × 19 mm unless otherwise noted.





**Figure 4.13** An as-new Caracal F self-loading pistol (9 × 19 mm) with case, three magazines, user manual and even its manufacturer-supplied trigger lock device. Note that this model is fitted with Caracal's proprietary 'Quick Sight' system, a point-shooting sight reminiscent, in some respects, of the ASP 'Guttersnipe' sights (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.14** One of two cased Strike One pistols (9 × 19 mm) self-loading pistols from the dataset, this one finished and sold by Salient Arms in the United States (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

## Rifles

Rifles account for 12% of all the firearms in the dataset and self-loading rifles for 90% of all the rifles listed. Overall, the most common type encountered is the AR-15. These weapons command an average price of 5,000 USD, whilst a minority of examples were offered around the 3,500 USD price point. Many of these rifles were '80% lower' builds, and were either unmarked on the lower receiver, or were marked with distinguishable 'local' markings. Sources within Venezuela indicate that the absence of markings and unknown manufacturer diminished an AR-15 rifle's price, whilst known brands such as Colt command a much higher price. This likely accounts for the examples of spurious markings—especially Colt markings, but also other U.S. 'prestige' brands, such as Noveske—seen on some rifles. Due to the dominance of AR-15-type rifles, 5.56 × 45 mm is the dominant calibre, accounting for 62 per cent of all rifles. Other calibres include 7.62 × 39 mm (16%), .22 LR (11%), 7.62 × 51 mm (5%), .30 Carbine (3%), .30-30 Winchester (2%), .300 Blackout (1%), and .357 Magnum (1%).

### AR-type Self-loading Rifles

91% of the AR-15 variants encountered were chambered for 5.56 × 45 mm calibre whilst the remaining examples were chambered for 7.62 × 39 mm. whilst AR-type rifles chambered for 7.62 × 39 mm are somewhat uncommon worldwide, one might think that it makes more sense in a country where the issued rifle for the armed forces is chambered for that calibre. However, 7.62 × 39 mm ammunition is extremely scarce on the illicit market in Venezuela, and sources indicate that rifles in the calibre are generally purchased only by those with connections to procure the correct ammunition.

FANB's standard issue Kalashnikov AK-103 (7.62 × 39 mm) self-loading rifles are supplemented by M4-pattern AR-15 models (5.56 × 45 mm) and models. The M4-pattern rifles are readily distinguishable from unusual types like the AR-57, but do pose an ID complication for more generic M4-style examples that might find their way into the country by other means. M4-pattern AR-15 rifles were part of the dataset, but most of these featured 16 inch barrels, rather than the 14.5 of the military 'USGI' (U.S. General Issue) selective-fire equivalent. Such M4-style rifles are sometimes known as an 'M4gery' in the U.S. civilian sphere. At least one example did have the correct 14.5 inch barrel, but was not entirely to military specification.



**Figure 4.15** Two generic M4-style AR-15-type self-loading rifles, both with longer (16-inch) barrels than the military equivalent (14.5 in) and both fitted with non-standard 'ergonomic' pistol grips. The bottom example also has the older style fixed carrying handle; not present on issue USGI M4 rifles (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

'Arm braces' are found on some of the AR-15 examples in the dataset. These include a range of manufacturers products, such as the Blade 'pistol stabiliser' produced by U.S. firm Shockwave and the SB Tactical SOB pictured in Figure 4.16.<sup>35</sup> These are noteworthy due to the fact that this is an accessory designed as a specific response to U.S. firearms legislation, which treats short rifles without a shoulder stock or a vertical foregrip to be sold as 'pistols' (and therefore to be more readily and quickly purchased than 'short-barrelled rifles'). Other examples in the dataset feature simple foam padding on their buffer tubes. These are all likely to be weapons configured as 'pistols' under U.S. law, and are likely of U.S. origin.<sup>36</sup>

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**Figure 4.16** AR-15 rifle in a U.S.-legal 'pistol' configuration, pictured with the SOB arm brace produced by U.S. firm SB Tactical, as well as a Strike Industries 'cookie cutter' muzzle brake (or Chinese copy), Keymod modular handguard with flashlight and mount, EOTech reflex sight, MOE pistol grip (or clone) and single-point sling (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

<sup>35</sup> See: <https://shockwavetechnologies.com/product/black-shockwave-blade-pistol-stabilizer/> & <https://phase5wsi.com/arm-braces-and-straps/>

<sup>36</sup> The generic 'AR' type requires a hollow tube mounted to the rear of the lower receiver, which houses a recoil buffer and spring without which the weapon cannot function. Note that some weapons with a similar appearance may use a different system of operation, and as such do not need to make use of a buffer tube arrangement.



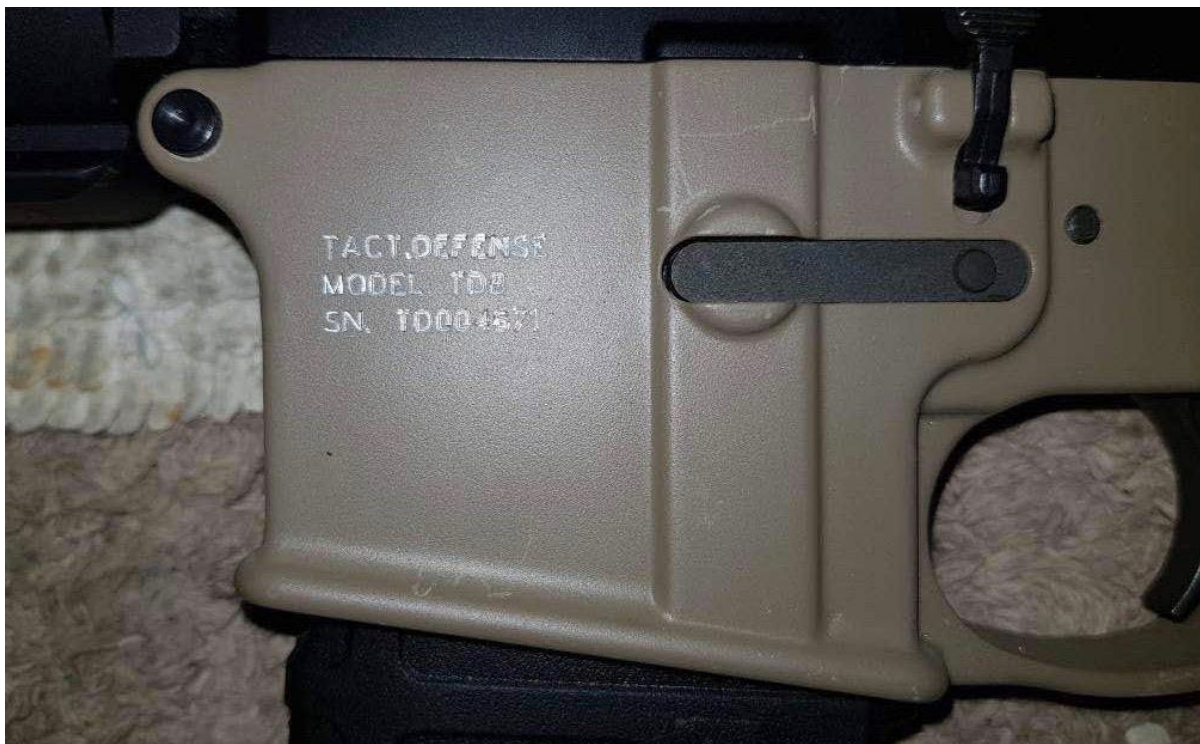
**Figure 4.17** AR-15 rifle in a U.S.-legal 'pistol' configuration built on a Diamondback DB-15 lower receiver with Magpul furniture and a 'Drum Magazines' 42-round box magazine.<sup>37</sup> The barrel lacks a muzzle device or any visible threading, suggesting that it may have been cut down (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Several recorded lower receivers were entirely unmarked, almost certainly as a result of '80%' manufacture. Others featured spurious markings. One had crudely applied markings for a purported company named, presumably, 'Tactical Offense' ("TACT. OFFENSE"). No such company is known to ARES, could not be located in any online searches, and was not recognised by sources in Venezuela. As such, this is likely an 80% receiver or blank finished by a small workshop or individual gunsmith, most likely in Venezuela. The desert tan finish is a Cerakote product or similar. Other lower receivers appeared to be genuine U.S. imports, made by companies such as Palmetto State Armoury of South Carolina. Many of these firms do not offer an 80% lower option, suggesting that these lower receivers were purchased as finished, registered components (legally, as firearms in the U.S.) and subsequently exported to Venezuela.<sup>38</sup> In the case of the Palmetto State Armoury rifle, this was not merely a lower receiver but a complete OEM PA-15 model rifle as supplied by PSA with 16 inch barrel, Magpul MOE furniture and back-up iron sights, the same pattern of M-Lok handguard and a pistol-length gas system. The latter identifies it as the PSA 16" 300AAC Blackout MOE M-Lok variant of the PA-15 (SKU 516444735).<sup>39</sup> For the avoidance of doubt, the vendor included a photo of the PSA-trademarked shipping box.

<sup>37</sup> See: [https://www.drummagazines.com/AR15-42-round-Magazine-Desert-Tan-col-a22b\\_p\\_100.html](https://www.drummagazines.com/AR15-42-round-Magazine-Desert-Tan-col-a22b_p_100.html)

<sup>38</sup> In this case the imported U.S. component is what is commonly known as a 'stripped' lower. i.e. a complete, serial-numbered receiver sold without any additional components.

<sup>39</sup> See <https://palmettostatearmoury.com/psa-16-300aac-moe-m-lok-rifle-516444735.html>



**Figure 4.18** A crudely finished and marked AR-15 lower receiver, purportedly produced by 'Tact. Offense', and most likely built from an 80% lower receiver within Venezuela (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.19** An AR-15 'pistol' build with completely unmarked lower receiver, one of a number likely produced from '80%' lower receivers (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.20** A spuriously marked lower receiver, purporting to be a Colt 'AR-15A2 Sporter II'. Amongst other incongruous features, the Colt logo is a crude copy of the genuine version (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.21** Also from the dataset, a genuine Colt AR-15A2 Sporter II with correct markings, valid serial number, and in original factory configuration (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.22** A Palmetto State Armoury PA-15 model rifle chambered for .300 Blackout, fitted with a short vertical front grip and a cheap Chinese red dot sight (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

AR-type self-loading rifles in the dataset are congruent with the known gunsmith assembly and hobbyist activity taking place in Venezuela. Confidential sources indicate that, much like in the U.S., Venezuelan firearms owners favour the customisable nature of AR-15 rifles, and are often willing to pay gunsmiths to modify their weapons. These hobbyists also support a thriving market in accessories which, whilst beyond the scope of this report, includes a wide range of primarily U.S. made items such as magazines, muzzle devices, optics, furniture (stocks, handguards, rail assemblies), laser aiming devices, illumination devices, and more.



**Figure 4.23** This 'AR' build incorporates a skull-shaped lower receiver known as 'The Jack', designed and produced by Spikes Tactical/Sharps Bros in the United States. Like many others in the dataset, it is festooned with accessories (source: ARES CONMAT Database).





**Figure 4.24** One of two 7.62 × 39 mm AR-type rifles in the dataset, with a Keymod-type handguard produced by U.S. maker BCM.<sup>40</sup> The extreme curvature of the magazine is indicative of the chambering (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

### AK-type Self-loading Rifles

A number of the AK variants found in the dataset are, like some of the AR-15 rifles, of a short-barrelled ‘pistol’ configuration (lacking even an ‘arm brace’). This is suggestive of a U.S. origin, although stockless short-barrelled rifles are also popular elsewhere in the world for their concealability and aesthetic, and can be readily created by removing or cutting off the shoulder stock. The examples shown in Figure 4.25, however, are in new or near-new condition and appear to match the U.S.-made Century Arms C39V2 ‘AK Pistol’.<sup>41</sup> This identification is made on the basis of barrel length; the form and length of the gas system; the combination of wooden handguard (with palm ‘swell’) and Russian style black polymer pistol grip; the unused (plugged) stock pivot point holes in the receivers; and the OEM use of Magpul PMAG 7.62 × 39 mm magazines.

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<sup>40</sup>Note that BCM do not themselves offer a 7.62 × 39 mm AR or upper receiver.

<sup>41</sup>See: <https://www.jgsales.com/century-c39v2-ak-pistol,-7.62x39,-milled-receiver,-wood-handguards,-usa-mfg.-new.-p-103849.html>



**Figure 4.25** U.S.-made Century Arms C39V2 AK-type self-loading rifles, sometimes called ‘AK Pistols’. Note the large circular hole at the rear of the receivers. This is present on all Century ‘under-folder’ receivers, regardless of whether or not the host rifle is sold with a butt-stock fitted (in this case, they have not been) (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

The other AK type self-loading rifle in the dataset was of generic AKMS pattern, with under-folding shoulder stock. No diagnostic features in terms of country of origin or manufacturer were evident. This weapon was both heavily used and highly modified, with railed handguard and top cover and an ‘A2’ style AR-15 pistol grip (with the necessary AK adaptor). As well as visible wear to the surface finish and a missing cleaning rod, its ‘slant’ muzzle device was installed upside-down.

### Other Self-Loading Rifles & Manually Operated Rifles

Single examples of two 5.56 × 45 mm self-loading rifles produced by Belgian manufacturer FN Herstal were noted. The first is the Special (Operations Forces) Combat Assault Rifle - Light (SCAR-L), supplied with optical sight, vertical foregrip, sling, and carrying case. The other was a ‘bullpup’ configuration rifle—now discontinued from the FN product line-up—the F2000/FS2000. Both of these have been manufactured in the United States as well as Belgium. The low quality of imagery and lack of supporting intelligence makes it difficult to determine whether these were select-fire weapons or the semi-automatic-only civilian equivalents (the ‘S’ in ‘FS2000’ stands for ‘semi-automatic’). However, the F2000/FS2000 was fitted with a modified handguard containing a flashlight. This is a user modification popularised on U.S. internet forums.<sup>42</sup> This, together with the relative ease of access to U.S. semi-automatic-only rifles as opposed to restricted selective fire variants, is suggestive of the former.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example: <https://fnforum.net/forums/fn-fs2000-accessories-mods/218749-custom-fn-f2000-fs2000-forend-handguard-light-tutorial.html>



**Figure 4.26** FN Herstal SCAR-L self-loading rifle, chambered for 5.56 × 45 mm (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.27** FN Herstal FS2000 self-loading rifle, chambered for 5.56 × 45 mm (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Other military-derived self-loading rifles comprised a single example of the Springfield M1A (7.62 × 51 mm/.308 Winchester) and two M1A1 Carbines (.30 Carbine); one with side-folding tubular stock (not the original military wire strut pattern) and one with no stock fitted and no attachment point for a stock. Both are likely civilian variants. The remainder of the self-loading rifles were of a strictly sporting or hunting nature, being chambered for .22 LR. These included three Marlin Model 60 rifles, all fitted with telescopic sights. Only a small number of manually operated rifles—comprising a single CZ 550 scoped bolt action rifle (.308 Winchester), and three lever action rifles (two by Winchester and one Marlin)—were documented.



**Figure 4.28** Springfield Armory M1A, the commercial (semi-automatic-only) variant of the M14 military rifle. This rifle was presented as an M14 by the seller (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.29** A Marlin Model 60 self-loading rifle (.22LR), fitted with scope and mounted in an aftermarket polymer chassis with thumbhole style butt-stock (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

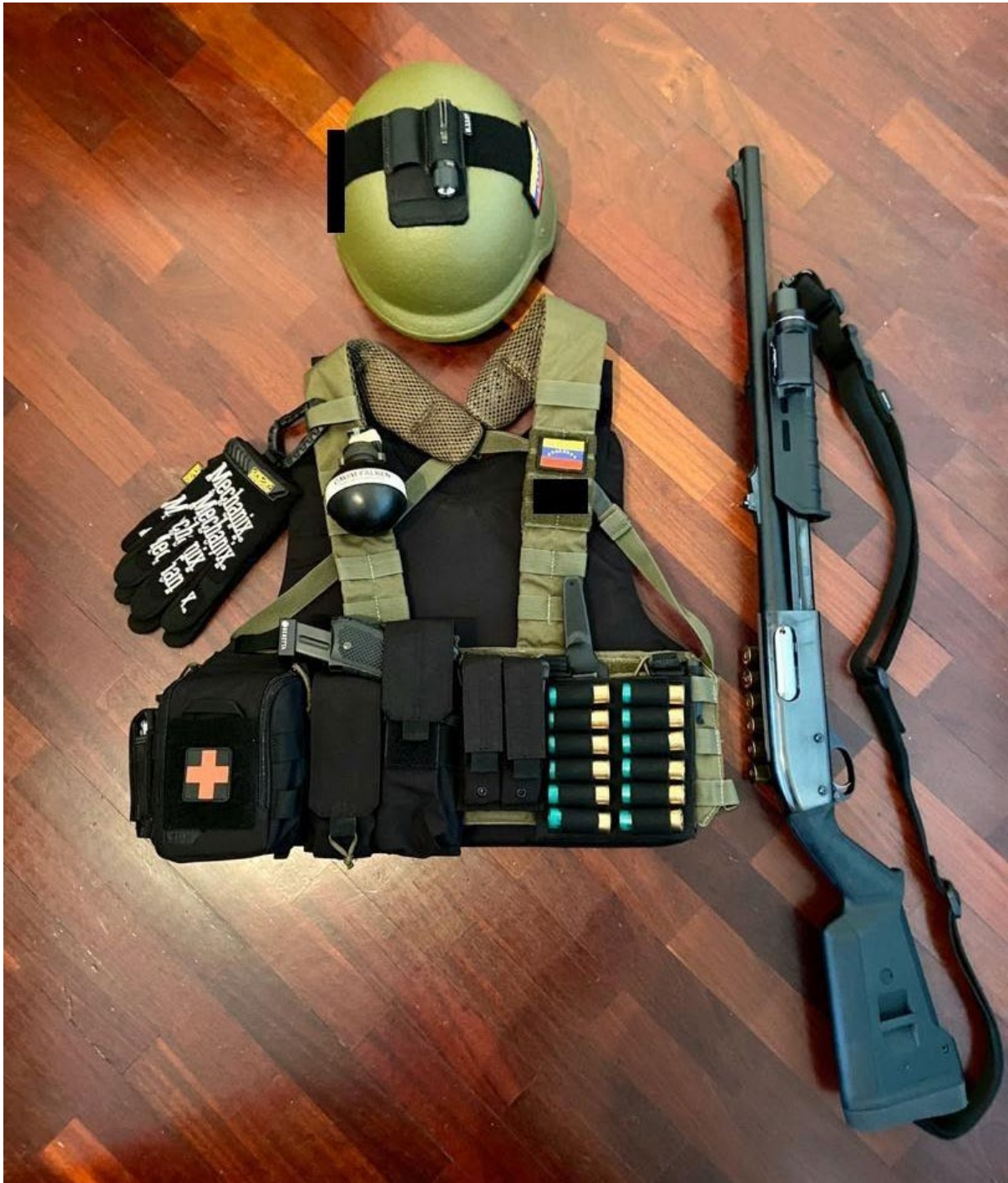
## Shotguns

Shotguns represent 9% of all firearms listed. All of the samples in the dataset are chambered for the commonly available 12-gauge cartridge, and 91% of examples are pump-action weapons. Manually operated shotguns of sufficient overall and barrel length are perhaps the most readily available and easily exported/imported of all firearms worldwide. Despite this, a disproportionate 68% of all the shotguns are from a single U.S. manufacturer, Mossberg. Many of these are extensively accessorised and are available in a range of models/configurations, such as the example pictured in Figure 4.30. Short barrels and ‘tactical’ configurations are preferred and traditional full-length unadorned examples (such as might have an obvious sporting purpose) are relatively rare. A more unusual Mossberg 12-gauge shotgun noted was the Maverick 95, a bolt-action design with vertically feeding fixed box magazine housed in a distinctive ‘bellied’ stock (in this case with an aftermarket camouflage finish).

Remington 870 (pump) and 1100 (self-loading) models are also represented in the dataset, albeit in small quantities. The 870 models follow the home/self-defence configurations of the Mossbergs, but the two 1100 series guns recorded were traditional full-length examples without accessories. Other manufacturers include the Italian firm Benelli. A confidential source in Venezuela indicated that Mossberg and Remington guns had the widest brand name recognition within the local firearms community, but confirmed that Mossberg examples were far easier to come by. Another source indicated to ARES that many people rely on shotguns for home defence in Caracas, and shared a photo of their personal home-defence setup with ARES (see Figure 4.31).



**Figure 4.30** One of many 12 gauge pump-action Mossberg shotguns in the dataset, in this case a Model 500 with pistol grip, short barrel, ‘Picatinny’ top rail, 6 o’clock railed pump grip fitted with ‘hand-stop’ accessories, a ‘side-saddle’ shell holder, fibre-optic front sight, and laser aiming unit (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.31** A personal home-defence setup shared with ARES by a confidential source in Venezuela. It comprises a Level III ballistic vest, ballistic helmet, and chest rig with various pouches and carriers for pistol magazines, shotgun cartridges, medical equipment, and a handgun. A Remington 870 series shotgun, Beretta 92 series handgun, riot control agent (CS) grenade, and a fixed-blade knife are carried. Note that the shotgun, pistol, and helmet are all fitted with white-light illumination devices. The source told ARES that combination of 00 buckshot and slugs are carried for the shotgun. Note that some potentially identifying features have been redacted.



**Figure 4.32** The sole example in the dataset of a Mossberg Maverick 95 bolt-action 12-gauge shotgun (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.33** A Benelli M3 Super 90 dual-mode (pump-action and semi-automatic) shotgun, fitted with a Streamlight TLR-2 tactical light with integrated red aiming laser, on a CDM gear picatinny rail mount, TacStar side-saddle shell carrier, and Blackhawk! sling (source: ARES CONMAT Database).



**Figure 4.34** A Russian Baikal IZH-81KM 12-gauge pump-action shotgun fed from detachable box magazines (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

### **Sub-machine Guns & Pistol-calibre Carbines**

Sub-machine guns (SMGs) and their self-loading-only counterparts (sometimes known as ‘pistol-calibre carbines’) are the least common type of firearm in the dataset, comprising just 2% overall. This follows global trends, in which such weapons remain relatively uncommon, being bulkier and more expensive than handguns, but less effective in most respects than other shoulder-fired weapons chambering ‘rifle-calibre’ ammunition such as 5.56 × 45 mm. Another key factor is that these types of firearms have never been legal for civilians to own in Venezuela. There is a very high probability that all of the examples listed have been stolen from government armouries or smuggled in from the United States. Even semi-automatic only ‘pistol-calibre carbines’ are rare: around 80% of all the examples in the dataset are select-fire. One of the semi-automatic-only weapons was a U.S. ‘pistol’ variant of the exotic-looking Kriss Vector SMG (pictured here), the other a CZ Scorpion Evo. In terms of cartridge types, all but two examples are chambered for 9 × 19 mm (the remaining two being in .380 ACP and 5.7 × 28 mm).





**Figure 4.35** *One of only two semi-automatic-only SMG/‘pistol calibre carbine’ firearms in the dataset; the exotic-looking Kriss Vector, here with short barrel and arm brace (source: ARES CONMAT Database).*

Two examples each of the well-regarded IMI (now IWI) Uzi and HK MP5 (in ‘A3’ variant form) type SMGs were identified. However, it was not possible to identify the manufacturer of any of the Uzi models, as Venezuela is known to have purchased these from multiple sources. Both the Uzi and the MP5 have been issued to security forces in Venezuela, and are used by Venezuelan investigators as a diagnostic indicator of theft or diversion from security forces’ armouries. One such stolen Uzi was recovered in a police operation of 21 November along with other arms.<sup>43</sup> The MP5 sub-machine guns were produced in Germany, and a national crest denoting government ownership was visible on one. A single Heckler & Koch SP89,—an early ‘pistol’ variant of the MP5, produced in Germany for the U.S. market—was also offered for sale. Other types represented singly were: an IMI Mini Uzi, U.S. Military Armament Corporation Ingram M10 (offered with five magazines), U.S. Rock River Arms model LAR-9 AR-15 type SMG, and Danish Dansk Industri Syndikat Madsen M50. All of these were chambered for the ubiquitous 9 × 19 mm cartridge.

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<sup>43</sup>ARES interview with a confidential source.



**Figure 4.36** A Danish Dansk Industri Syndikat Madsen M50 SMG, chambered for 9 × 19 mm (source: ARES CONMAT Database).

Perhaps most significant SMG within the dataset is a single FN Herstal P90 model, chambered for FN's proprietary 5.7 × 28 mm cartridge and offered complete with four magazines. As noted earlier, this is an issue weapon for the FNAB, and should not be confused with the civilian-market PS90, a semi-automatic-only variant with a (U.S.) legally-mandated 16-inch (406 mm) barrel. Although a PS90 can be fitted with a shorter barrel, the example pictured here is visibly marked 'P90' on its upper receiver and is therefore an original select-fire P90. According to confidential sources—and supported by a forthcoming ARES report—the 5.7 × 28 mm cartridge is difficult to obtain in Venezuela. This may explain why only one of the magazines displayed with the weapon when it was offered for sale was loaded<sup>44</sup> (see Figure 4.37).

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<sup>44</sup>Magazines and other ammunition carriage devices were frequently shown loaded in photographs used to advertise a sale or trade, whether or not the ammunition was included in the purchase price. See, for example, Figures 4.5, 4.11, 4.13, and 4.30, 4.33, and 4.34.



**Figure 4.37** *The single FN P90 SMG (5.7 × 28 mm) shown in disassembled state with four magazines (source: ARES CONMAT Database).*

## Conclusion

This dataset offers a limited window into the online sale of small arms and ammunition in Venezuela, and is particularly focused on the grey and ‘grey-adjacent’ markets in Caracas. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this report will shed some light on the gun culture of Venezuela and provide a useful baseline for future studies. The available data strongly suggest that the apparently limited pool of typical civilian-owned handguns, rifles, and shotguns available prior to imposition of broad legal restrictions in 2012 has become larger and more varied as a result of illegal acquisition, enabled by Venezuela’s civil unrest and security issues in general. This is evidenced by the presence of firearms within that dataset that were produced after 2012, and supported by a range of interviews with confidential sources that indicate the illicit import of small arms is ongoing.

Importantly, a relatively limited number of new firearms models have been observed; there is a very strong bias toward a handful of popular makes and models as discussed in this report. The types offered for sale reflect prevailing fashion in local, U.S., and global ‘gun culture’; the practical and perceived needs of the buyers; and the context of government attempts to restrict civilian ownership of firearms—although it is clear there is a separate group of firearms owners with government connections that may defy this trend. This subset of the firearms-owning community in Venezuela would be a useful focus for further study. Arms have been acquired through both licit and illicit means, both from the black and ‘grey’ markets, and via elements of the Venezuelan government. Diversion from the armouries of the military, police, and intelligence forces is an important contributing factor, and remains an ongoing issue within Venezuela. This is evidenced in materiel bearing government ownership marks, in the statements of confidential sources, and in presence of highly restricted types (e.g. sub-machine guns). Another key factor in the ongoing supply of arms to Venezuelan markets is the importation of complete weapons and critical components from the United States. This is reflected by the trend toward informal standardisation on AR-15 type rifles and Glock pistols—in large part comprising firearms that were recently imported—and the reflection of the broader U.S. gun culture in terms of accessories, customisation, and desirability. The market is finally supplemented by older firearms that have circulated for years or decades, including ex-Venezuelan military/police handguns, sports shooters’ weapons, and firearms that one might encounter in civilian hands in most jurisdictions worldwide, such as legacy revolvers, .22 LR calibre rifles, and pump-action shotguns.

Finally, the Venezuelan expression of the global trends toward combining craft-production and commercially available components—most notably 80% receivers—with aftermarket parts to create new weapons not subject to government control is of particular interest. This phenomenon is being reflected elsewhere in the region, as early results from ARES investigations in Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil show. In addition to underpinning the sales of small arms documented within this report, internet communication enables many of these ‘DIY’ firearms users. Local assemblers and craft-producers of undocumented firearms are able to access the parts and components required to produce weapons, the means to transfer them into the country, and the knowledge to assemble them via the internet. They are then able to advertise their wares directly to interested buyers, as well as through the broader online markets described herein. The domestic illicit arms trade in Venezuela is increasingly internet-enabled.

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