

Norte de Santander: illegal arms trafficking and border closure, 2015-2022

Norte de Santander: tráfico ilegal de armas y cierre de fronteras, 2015-2022

Jorge Alonso Isaza Quebrada^a  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7415-2830>

Carlos Augusto Paez Murillo^b  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5221-8437>

William Pachón Muñoz^a  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4111-9441>

William Andrés Sanabria Álvarez^{a*}  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2742-3444>

^a Universidad Militar Nueva Granada, Bogotá, Colombia, e-mail:
jorge.isaza@unimilitar.edu.co, william.pachon@unimilitar.edu.co,
est.william.sanabria@unimilitar.edu.co

^b Escuela Militar de Cadetes General José María Córdova, Bogotá, Colombia, e-mail:
carlos.paez@esmic.edu.co

Abstract

From the perspective of security studies, and with a pragmatic and constructivist theoretical approach, this article analyzes the characteristics of illegal arms trafficking in Norte de Santander (Colombia) during the border closure (2015-2022), in order to understand its evolution and determine the impact of the border closure on this crime. Using a mixed methodology, data from the Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020, statistics on non-administrative arms seizures by the Colombian National Police, and interviews with National Army officers who served in this region during the period studied were used. The results show that trafficking persisted through unofficial routes, and that corruption in sectors of the Venezuelan armed forces was key to the continuation of this crime. Revolvers and shotguns prevail in the seizures, especially concentrated in border municipalities such as San José de Cúcuta, Tibú and Puerto Santander.

Keyword: border closures, corruption, illegal arms trafficking, seizures, unofficial routes.

Resumen

Desde la perspectiva de los estudios de seguridad, y con un enfoque teórico pragmático y constructivista, este artículo analiza las características del tráfico ilegal de armas en Norte de Santander (Colombia) durante el cierre de fronteras (2015-2022), con el fin de comprender su evolución y determinar el impacto del cierre fronterizo en este delito. Con una metodología mixta, se usaron datos del Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020, estadísticas sobre incautaciones no administrativas de armas de la Policía Nacional de Colombia y entrevistas a oficiales del

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*Corresponding author: William Andrés Sanabria Álvarez. E-mail:
est.william.sanabria@unimilitar.edu.co

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Ejército Nacional que durante el periodo estudiado prestaron su servicio en esta región. Los resultados muestran que el tráfico continuó mediante rutas no oficiales, y que la corrupción en sectores de las fuerzas armadas venezolanas fue clave para la continuidad de este delito. En las incautaciones prevalecen revólveres y escopetas, concentradas especialmente en municipios fronterizos como San José de Cúcuta, Tibú y Puerto Santander. Palabras clave: cierre de fronteras, corrupción, tráfico ilegal de armas, incautaciones, rutas no oficiales.

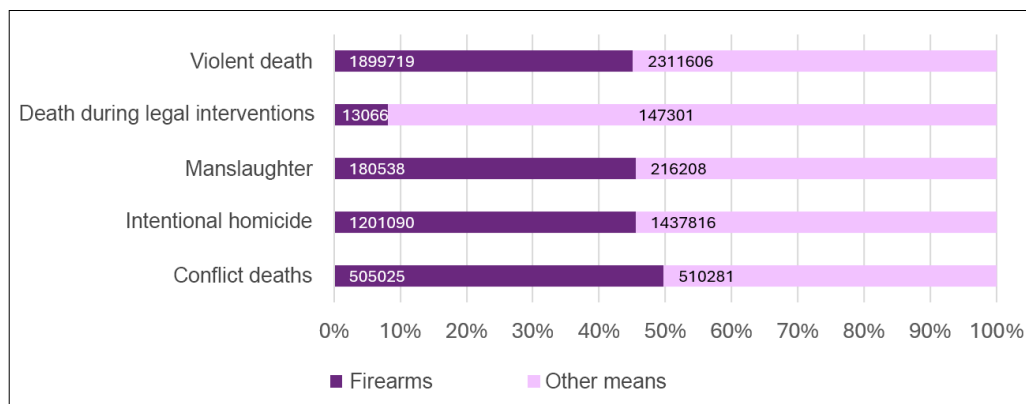
Introduction

Illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons is a crime and a global problem that affects all regions and transforms local conflicts into international challenges due to their use by armed groups and criminal organizations. This phenomenon limits fundamental rights such as life and liberty and harms vulnerable communities regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020a; Wolfe, 2011). At the international level, instruments such as the Firearms Protocol, linked to the Palermo Convention (2000), and the Arms Trade Treaty aim to prevent, regulate and criminalize this crime, establishing a general framework for combating it (Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el Delito, 2016, 2020).

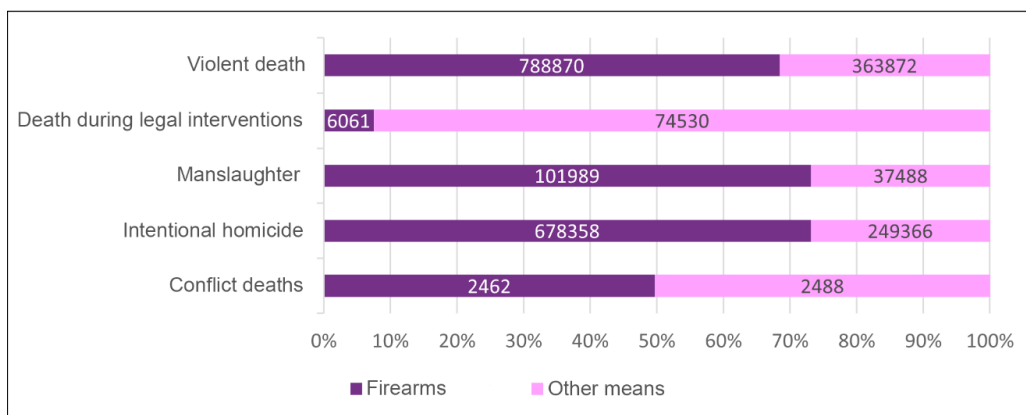
According to the 2001 Palermo Protocol, illegal arms trafficking involves the unauthorized transfer of arms between States Parties, highlighting the need to strengthen controls at source to prevent their circulation among criminal groups (Organización de las Naciones Unidas, 2001; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020a). The legal right protected is collective security, understood as a state that enables individuals to function with confidence within a community and to exercise their individual legal rights safely under state protection against dangerous elements (Hava García, 2019). Therefore, the importance of controlling illegal arms trafficking is evident in the fact that these weapons are highly involved in homicides and violent deaths worldwide (see Figure 1).

Globally, intentional homicide rates showed a downward trend between 2016 and 2020; however, in 2021, they rebounded. The Americas maintained a high proportion of homicides committed with firearms (75%), in contrast to Europe (13%) (Boo & Hideg, 2023; Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el Delito, 2023).

The subregion of South and Central America accounted for the greatest number of homicides in the region but saw a 27.65% reduction in the rate between 2015 and 2021 (Boo & Hideg, 2023). In 2021, organized crime was linked to 50% of homicides, followed by 20% linked to other crimes and 17% linked to non-family interpersonal violence. Globally, these percentages were 22%, 16%, and 18%, respectively (Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el Delito, 2023). It is worth noting that the analysis of crime in 42 cities in the subregion revealed a high spatial concentration: 50% of homicides occurred in only 1.4% of street segments, a phenomenon unrelated to variables such as population or territorial extent (Chainey et al., 2019; see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Causes of homicide by type of weapon worldwide (2015-2021)

Source: created by the authors based on data from Small Arms Survey (2023)

Figure 2. Causes of homicides by type of weapon in South America and Central America (2015-2021)

Source: created by the authors based on data from Small Arms Survey (2023)

Estimates indicate that between 26% and 63% of weapons seized in Latin America are linked to illicit trafficking. The subregion also leads in firearms seizures, which is directly related to the high incidence of violence. The main weapons reported were pistols (52%), followed by revolvers (24%), with Colombia and Argentina having the highest numbers. In the case of Mexico, a higher number of rifles is reported, due to their use in drug trafficking (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020a). Mexico also has limited institutional capacity, potentially corrupt authorities, and poor implementation of public policies under the *Federal Firearms and Explosives Act* and the *National Code of Criminal Procedure*, which has led to outdated data, an armed and insecure society and obstacles to disarmament and pacification (Hernández & Orozco Reynoso, 2021).

A similar situation can be observed in Peru, where there is poor control of seized weapons, with manual records and no coordination between entities, which favored illicit trafficking and homicides with unregistered weapons between 2018 and 2022 (Mires-Agip & Solís-Castillo, 2024; Rivas Peña & Trujillo Tarazona, 2024). This phenomenon has negatively impacted citizen security, criminal victimization, institutional trust and social coexistence (Mires-Agip & Solís-Castillo, 2024; Valdivia Ramírez, 2021). In the city of Lima, the illicit arms trade has developed in three phases: 1) diversion from the legal to the illegal market; 2) consolidation of the illicit market; and, 3) delivery under strict security measures (Mires-Agip & Solís-Castillo, 2024).

The above cases reflect a widespread condition that also affects Brazil, where the phenomenon remains largely hidden internationally due to the lack of adequate monitoring of the origin and illegal circulation of weapons (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020a). Additionally, countries employ various legislative approaches to address the illegal possession and carrying of weapons.

Mexico punishes possession of weapons as an administrative offense and carrying them as a crime, depending on the type of weapon or ammunition. In Colombia, both behaviors are treated as administrative offenses, although they are elevated to the level of crime when linked to arms trafficking. For its part, Spain considers illegal carrying to be an aggravated form of the basic crime of illegal possession, rather than classifying it as a separate crime. In all cases, there is a need to implement more effective mechanisms to deprive offenders of the illicit gains obtained (Moya Guillén & Tapia Ballesteros, 2021; Villegas Díaz, 2020).

Arms trafficking operates in four fundamental phases: recruitment, procurement, mobilization and delivery, which range from theft and storage in clandestine centers to transport and international marketing (Acuña Lopez, 2021). Traffickers use methods such as disassembly and shipment in parts to evade controls, as well as the use of human “mules”—including migrants and refugees—in small-scale trafficking operations, known as “tráfico hormiga” (ant trafficking) (Broadhurst et al., 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020a).

These activities are carried out through transnational networks that utilize both maritime and land routes. Although there is a domestic component in the origin of the seized weapons, the cross-border dimension is particularly evident in border areas, where vehicles and boats are used as the primary means of transport. This situation is exacerbated by the involvement of members of the security forces in supplying weapons to criminal networks (Hernandez-Roy et al., 2024; Policía Federal de Brasil, 2025; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020a; United States Attorney’s Office, Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 2022).

In the Colombian context, the period from 2015 to 2022 reveals an intricate network of illicit markets and criminal dynamics. Seizure statistics show that revolvers and pistols accounted for 41.4% and 28.6% of non-administrative seizures, respectively (Policía Nacional de Colombia, n. d.). Likewise, it is estimated that approximately 4 971 000 weapons are in circulation in the country in the hands of civilians, of which only 14% are registered, in contrast to the weapons in the possession of law enforcement (283 000)

and the army (350 689) (Schroeder, 2022). This situation highlights gaps in control, despite the Colombian state's restrictive policies and technological advances in information implementation (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2023).

One of the conditions that has fueled illegal arms trafficking in Colombia was the departure of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP, Spanish acronym for *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo*) from the political-military scene, which led to a reconfiguration among guerrilla groups, paramilitary groups and criminal networks that initiated new territorial disputes (Celi Jimenez, 2020; Ibarra Cordero, 2022; Indepaz, 2023). These disputes were concentrated in regions previously affected by the armed conflict, where these organizations often surpass state authority, which conditions local communities (Lessing, 2021). The 2016 Peace Agreement led to an oversupply of illegal weapons, which, by reducing their prices, increased their accessibility in rural and urban areas. This phenomenon was exacerbated by the diversion of weapons from legal companies, the exchange of weapons for cocaine between Mexican cartels and local organizations, the high permeability of the border with Venezuela and the economic collapse of that country (Gariglio, 2023).

In addition, armed violence in Colombia has characteristics that transcend traditional armed conflict. According to Nucci (2011), 80% of homicides are not directly related to the conflict but rather to violent reactions between armed citizens, which increases the risk of death in households with firearms by 2.7 times. This trend is in line with global patterns, where interpersonal violence accounts for between 50% and 60% of homicides (Gariglio, 2023).

The increase in crime is dramatically reflected in the rise in armed robberies, which increased from 14 593 in 2010 to 45 042 in 2019, with a differentiated geographical distribution. While urban areas such as Bogotá managed to reduce violence through gun control policies, rural areas have experienced a sustained increase in homicides involving firearms since 2015 (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2023).

Furthermore, although the rate of homicides involving firearms decreased between 2013 and 2017, and the COVID-19 pandemic caused a temporary reduction, the national reactivation resumed crime trends, with homicides involving firearms remaining above 70% during the last decade (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2023; Organización de las Naciones Unidas, 2023; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020b).

This reflects a complex dynamic of insecurity and crime that favors the proliferation of firearms and affects collective security. This situation requires international cooperation between states, which is lacking among the northern countries of South America (Ibarra Cordero, 2022). This led Colombia to rank second in 2021 in terms of global crime rates, surpassed only by the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It also shared a score of 8.0 with Mexico in arms trafficking and ranked fourth worldwide in criminal actors, with 8.13 points (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021).

Norte de Santander

Norte de Santander is a Colombian border department that borders the Venezuelan states of Apure, Táchira and Zulia, with which it is connected by three international bridges: Simón Bolívar, Francisco de Paula Santander and Tienditas. It has

forty municipalities, with San José de Cúcuta as its capital and the most important city in the region.

It is a border area that has been affected by the lack of a comprehensive border security policy between the two countries, a situation exacerbated by diplomatic tensions arising from divergent political positions. These have contributed to institutional fragmentation, the absence of effective channels of communication between armed forces, the use of confrontational narratives and the media exploitation of the border as a political tool to divert attention from internal problems, which has favored the expansion of illegal actors and regional instability (Ardila et al., 2021; Linares, 2019; Rodríguez & Ito C., 2016).

The regional landscape has undergone significant changes since the Venezuelan crisis of 2015, creating a context of heightened vulnerability and altering migration patterns. By 2019, the number of Venezuelan citizens entering Colombia had reached 4.5 million, reconfiguring the territorial dynamics between Cúcuta and Ureña and allowing criminal networks to exploit the precarious situation of migrants to consolidate their strategic territorial control (Maldonado Lara, 2022; Maldonado Lara & Vega V., 2022; Oficina de Naciones Unidas para la Coordinación de Asuntos Humanitarios, 2021; Valero Martínez, 2020).

The Venezuelan government's decision to close legal border crossings had a significant economic impact: between 2017 and 2021, losses were estimated at around 6.197 billion Colombian pesos, with a 4.06% drop in regional gross domestic product, which affected key sectors such as footwear and clothing (Luna-Pereira et al., 2020; Patiño Suarez & Caballero González, 2021; Sayago Rojas, 2016; see Table 1). All of this underscores the need for multidimensional solutions that address structural causes such as unemployment, institutional weakness and social fragmentation, beyond traditional security approaches (Ardila et al., 2021).

Table 1. Monetary poverty rates in Norte de Santander and other Colombian departments and neighboring Venezuelan states after the border closure

State or department	Poverty	Extreme poverty
Boyacá	36.3 %	14.1 %
Cesar	51.9 %	21.7 %
Norte de Santander	44.8 %	14.7 %
Santander	37.3 %	13.8 %
Apure	96.0 %	70.0 %
Táchira	93.0 %	62.0 %
Zulia	96.0 %	81.0 %

Note: Data for Colombia are from 2022, while data for Venezuela are from 2021.

Source: created by the authors based on data from the Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (2023) and the Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales (n. d.)

Marked social inequality and the migration crisis affecting both Colombians and Venezuelans have exacerbated adverse conditions in border regions, accentuating problems such as unemployment, poor education and lack of opportunities. This pushes many inhabitants toward illegal activities and increases the vulnerability of local

communities (Khanna et al., 2023; Morffe Peraza, 2016). Such dynamics are reinforced by the normalization of illicit practices such as smuggling and “bachaquerismo” (black market trading), which are exploited by actors such as the military, guerrillas, paramilitaries and government officials to control drug trafficking, human trafficking and other illegal economies (Bustos Moreno, 2016; Espinel-Rubio et al., 2021; Jaimes Méndez, 2018; Torres Rodríguez, 2017), practices that intensified in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Niño Vega et al., 2022).

In these circumstances, illegal armed groups such as the Rastrojos, the Popular Liberation Army (EPL, Spanish: *Ejército Popular de Liberación*), the Gaitanista Army of Colombia (EGC, Spanish acronym for *Ejército Gaitanista de Colombia*, formerly also known as the “Urabeños” and Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia), dissidents from the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN, Spanish acronym for *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) have a presence in the department, particularly in border regions such as Catatumbo and in medium-sized cities such as Cúcuta. From these points, they develop small-scale or “hormiga” mobilization strategies through hard-to-reach cross-border corridors, seeking to consolidate key routes for drug trafficking, gasoline smuggling, illegal mining, human trafficking and arms trafficking. These activities generate high levels of violence, forced displacement, kidnappings and the planting of explosive devices, with devastating effects on local communities (Aguirre Tobón, 2011; Arenas Piedrahita et al., 2022; Bustos Moreno, 2016; Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2017, 2018; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2022).

There is also a close correlation between arms trafficking and drug trafficking, as weapons are essential for armed groups to maintain control of illegal routes and activities, which extend into Venezuela (García Pinzón & Trejos, 2021; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020b). Some of these weapons come from surplus stockpiles from armed conflicts, diversions from official inventories and systematic theft, mainly from Central America, Eastern Europe and the Middle East (Aguirre Tobón, 2011). This phenomenon not only strengthens illegal armed groups but also fuels common and organized crime networks, increasing rates of violence and serious crimes such as homicide, which are directly linked to the proliferation of illegal weapons (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020a).

Table 2. Homicides in Norte de Santander (2015-2022)

Weapons/means	Quantity	Percentage
Blade weapon/sharp object	480	12.2 %
Firearm	3 232	82.4 %
Explosive device/dynamite charge	69	1.8 %
Blunt instrument	112	2.9 %
Others	31	0.8 %
Total	3 924	100 %

Source: created by the authors based on data from the Policía Nacional de Colombia (2024)

The presence of illegal armed groups in Norte de Santander, as in other regions of the country, falls into two forms of governance: criminal and rebel. Criminal governance refers to contexts where illegal actors assume *de facto* governmental functions,

taking advantage of the state's weakness or absence, with a focus on obtaining economic benefits (Alda Mejías, 2020; Lessing, 2021; Lessing & Willis, 2019; Páez-Murillo & Manosalva-Correa, 2022). In contrast, rebel governance involves a more complex interaction between non-state armed actors and local communities, organized around ideological or political motivations related to internal conflict (Arjona et al., 2015). Although both forms arise from state vacuums, criminal governance prioritizes economic interests, while rebel governance pursues profound political or social transformations (Barnes, 2017; Feldmann & Luna, 2022; Lessing, 2021).

Within the framework of criminal governance, illegal actors seek to legitimize themselves by controlling resources, providing basic services, or resolving local conflicts, thereby reducing their exposure to the state and strengthening their influence through community support (Arias & Barnes, 2017; Trejo & Ley, 2020). On the other hand, rebel governance is sustained through revolutionary rhetoric that appeals to ideals of social justice or structural change. In both cases, the interaction between these actors and the state generates scenarios of divided sovereignty, fragmenting violence, territorial control and the social fabric, which complicates local governance (Moncada, 2020; Trejo & Ley, 2020). This fragmentation is exacerbated by competition between illegal actors, which affects communities by increasing insecurity, forced displacement and the violation of fundamental rights (Lessing, 2021).

Given the incidence of illegal arms trafficking as a criminal phenomenon with global, national, and regional implications—especially in contexts marked by inequality, poverty and social dynamics that facilitate illegality—this research aims to analyze the characteristics of illegal arms trafficking in Norte de Santander during the period 2015-2022. This analysis takes place at a particular moment in history, characterized by the closure of legal border crossings between Colombia and Venezuela, intending to understand how this measure impacted the routes, actors and operations related to this crime in the region.

The paper begins with an analysis of the behavior, impact and functioning of illegal arms trafficking worldwide and in some Latin American countries. It then describes Colombia, with an emphasis on the Norte de Santander region, which provides insight into the socioeconomic dynamics in which this crime occurs in that area. The methodology used in the study is then presented, followed by the results, which provide an overview of how this crime manifested during the closure of the binational border between Colombia and Venezuela. Finally, the study's findings and conclusions are discussed.

Methodology

To answer the research question, a mixed-methodology approach was employed, based on the report "Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020" by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and its Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire tool, which is distributed annually to member states. This instrument collects information on seized weapons, broken down by type, State, origin, legal reason, location and region, to identify trafficking routes, classify relevant seizures and reflect the complexity of illicit trafficking. Its application contributes to standardizing data on this phenomenon and complying with indicator 16.4.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020c; 2024).

The main objective of UNODC is to collect information on seizures in criminal contexts, excluding administrative seizures. In Colombia, administrative seizures are regulated by Decree 2535 of 1993, which establishes rules on weapons, ammunition and explosives (Decreto 2535 de 1993 por el cual se expiden normas sobre armas, municiones y explosivos, 1993), defines the regime for carrying and possessing weapons and classifies them as military, restricted use, personal defense, or prohibited. Weapons of war, such as rifles and automatic weapons, are reserved for the exclusive use of the security forces; those for restricted use may be authorized in exceptional cases; those for personal defense (some pistols, revolvers and shotguns) are limited to certain calibers and technical characteristics; and homemade or modified weapons are prohibited. The law also establishes grounds for seizure, such as carrying without a permit, while intoxicated or under the influence of psychotropic substances or in prohibited places. These seizures are carried out by the police, prosecutors and other officials, as per Article 165 of the *National Code of Security and Citizen Coexistence* (Ley 1801 de 2016, por la cual se expide el Código Nacional de Seguridad y Convivencia Ciudadana, 2016).

As the UNODC warns: “Seizure data represent one of the most relevant proxies to disclose and monitor illicit trafficking flows, but need to be enriched with complementary analysis on the criminal context and on the illicit origin of the seized items” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020a, p. 86). In line with this, this research requested data from the Colombian National Police on seizures made between 2015 and 2022, differentiating between administrative and non-administrative seizures, since the information published online lacks this distinction, which is essential to avoid distortions between the data and the observed reality.

The database organization process began with a cleaning stage, in which the absence of missing or inconsistent data was verified and then variables of low relevance to the research objectives were eliminated. As a result, only four key variables remained, containing descriptive, spatial, temporal and quantity-related information on seized weapons. The weapon categories of “machine gun, carbine, shotgun, pump-action shotgun, rifle, rocket launcher, grenade launcher, pistol, revolver and submachine gun” were reviewed. The records obtained were used as the basis for descriptive statistical analyses; that is, according to Contento Rubio, a type of analysis that “uses numerical measures, as well as graphical expressions, to summarize as accurately as possible the characteristics that identify a set of observations” (Contento Rubio, 2019, p. 45). In addition, heat maps were generated to facilitate understanding of the phenomenon in Norte de Santander through georeferencing, which provides insight into “how different phenomena and characteristics are distributed in space and the reasons why that distribution changes over time” (Guhl Corpas, 2017, p. 238). Both analyses were performed using the R Studio tool.

These data have some limitations. First, in terms of timing, the information provided by the entity was annualized, which prevented the analysis of possible seasonal patterns in the data. Second, as noted in the *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020*, when seizures are taken as the main variable, the data may be somewhat inaccurate compared to cases prosecuted for arms trafficking. Nevertheless, this source was chosen because, according to the report, it is uncommon in various national regulations for individuals to be prosecuted specifically for arms trafficking, as they

are more often charged with other crimes, such as illegal possession of weapons. This situation makes it difficult to obtain detailed information through judicial proceedings. Furthermore, weapons seizures represent state action against crime, but do not necessarily directly reflect the phenomenon of illicit arms trafficking. Therefore, these quantitative data provide a general approximation of the phenomenon under study, making it essential to consider the context in which the research is conducted to interpret the results accurately.

For the qualitative component, an in-depth interview was designed to “elicit a vivid portrait of the participant’s perspectives on the research topic, [where] interviewers do not guide participants according to a preconceived view” (Páramo Bernal, 2017, pp. 121-122). The interviews were conducted based on questions from the Illicit Arms Flows Questionnaire and relevant events that occurred during the study period. In total, eleven questions were asked, divided into the following sections:

- a) Trends in arms trafficking. Questions about the evolution of arms trafficking before and during border closures and how the pandemic affected these dynamics.
- b) Actors involved in arms trafficking. Questions to identify key actors in arms trafficking and their association with security in the region.
- c) Traffickers’ *modus operandi*. Questions to explore the methods used by traffickers, as well as specific cases of seizure, to provide a concrete insight into how trafficking networks operate.
- d) Strategies and measures implemented. Questions to understand the strategies adopted to combat arms trafficking and their effectiveness.
- e) Influence of the peace process on arms trafficking. Questions to assess how the peace process influenced the dynamics of trafficking and whether it changed the behavior of the actors involved.

Due to the illegal nature of the subject matter, the sample for applying this instrument was selected using non-probabilistic methods, which “involve a selection procedure guided by the characteristics of the research rather than by statistical criteria of generalization” (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2018, p. 189). The snowball sampling technique was used, which is useful for accessing groups that are difficult to locate or have specific characteristics. This technique is based on identifying key participants who refer other individuals, and so on, until the desired sample size is reached, allowing data to be collected from people who are not easily accessible by other methods (Hernández-Ávila & Carpio Escobar, 2019; Hernández Sampieri et al., 2018).

The sample consisted of officers belonging to the General Staff of the 30th Brigade of the National Army or the Vulcano Task Force during the years studied (2015-2022) or in previous periods, selected for their direct experience in managing security dynamics in Norte de Santander, particularly in relation to illegal arms trafficking. Ten interviews were obtained, all with informed consent, and the responses were analyzed and classified using the MAXQDA tool.

Results

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the department of Norte de Santander has been characterized by the presence of border crossings not controlled by the States, known as “trochas” (trails). Civilians, illegal armed groups and criminal networks have used these routes to cross international borders. In the early decades of the century, these crossings were mainly dominated by the ELN and the FARC, which took advantage of economic inequalities, the permissiveness of the Venezuelan government and the social dynamics of the region to facilitate drug and arms trafficking and contraband. These activities are linked to a degree of complicity between these illegal actors and sectors of the Venezuelan Army, which contributed to the flow of illegal weapons into Colombia.

The border closure decreed by the Venezuelan government had a negligible impact on the operations of illegal actors, who had already adapted to using the *trochas*. In contrast, the measure significantly increased the flow of people from both countries who resorted to these unofficial routes to maintain their routines, relationships and economic activities, thereby strengthening the trafficking of illicit goods, including drugs, gasoline, food and weapons. These paths are often located at strategic points with challenging geographical conditions, but close to Colombian roads, thus facilitating their use as corridors for illicit activities.

The persistence of these activities can also be explained by the so-called “balloon effect”, a phenomenon whereby illegal operations move to less monitored routes when the Colombian state and army increase controls in certain areas. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the shortage of military personnel in the department, a problem that is intensified by the nature of the internal armed conflict. As a result, the military forces must divide their resources to attend to multiple fronts, which limits the allocation of personnel for border surveillance and hinders control of the extensive network of illegal crossings exploited by illicit actors.

Another determining factor in the crime studied was the strengthening of relations between transnational criminal organizations and Venezuelan authorities, particularly the National Guard and the Armed Forces. Impacted by the economic crisis that led to the closure of the border by the Venezuelan government, some members of these institutions experienced a deterioration in their quality of life. In an attempt to maintain or improve their conditions, they began to participate systematically and routinely in illegal and corrupt activities.

Among the actions carried out, their role as facilitators in the diversion of Venezuelan weapons stands out, taking advantage of the chaos generated by the change in military equipment in the country, which left large arsenals of old weapons and modern equipment available, used as a bargaining chip for drugs. They also acted as intermediaries in obtaining military equipment from international sources, including the former Soviet republics, Indonesia, Russia, China, conflict zones in Africa, the United States and Central America. From the latter region, sophisticated weapons entered Venezuela through ports, especially in the state of Zulia, from where they were then distributed among armed groups in Colombia.

Similarly, both the Venezuelan armed forces and its government have allowed the existence of spaces used for training, storing military equipment and manufacturing artisanal weapons and explosives belonging to illegal groups. This has enabled them to

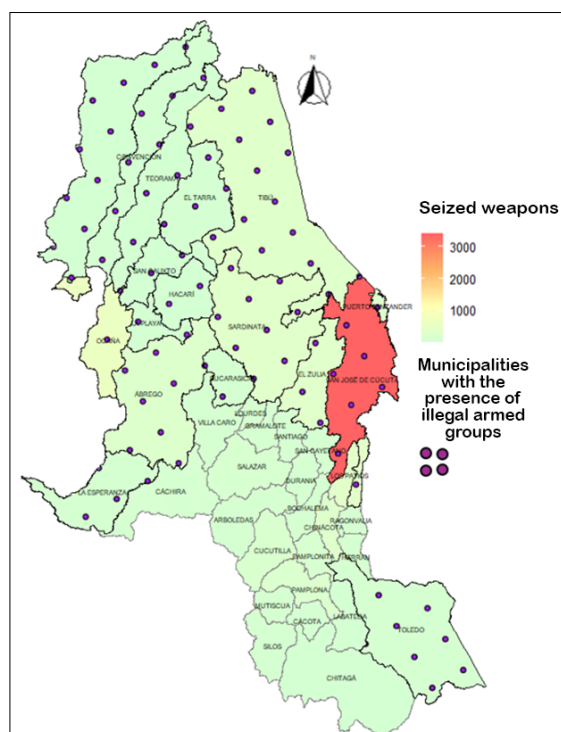
consolidate their logistical and operational capacity in an environment of relative impunity and, as a result, establish safe havens to evade the Colombian armed forces.

Although to a lesser extent than in Venezuela, these practices have also been observed in the Colombian armed forces, where some members have been investigated for selling ammunition and weapons to illegal groups. There have also been reports of cases in which these organizations infiltrate young people to steal equipment assigned to them and their comrades.

Added to this are deficiencies in the control of seized weapons. One of the interviewees highlighted the case of a non-commissioned officer responsible for weapons storage who was investigated due to irregularities in inventory and safekeeping, as registered weapons and ammunition were found that were not physically present in Army depots. The incident raised questions about whether this was a case of illegal arms sales or simply failures in surveillance and storage procedures, although it did highlight shortcomings in the protocols for ensuring the custody and traceability of seized weapons.

As for the geospatial distribution of crime during the years investigated, shown in Figure 3, it can be seen that the epicenter of illegal trafficking in the department is San José de Cúcuta, followed by other international border areas such as Puerto Santander, Tibú and Villa del Rosario, as well as nearby municipalities such as Sardinata, El Zulia and Los Patios, together with Ocaña, the latter bordering the department of Cesar.

Figure 3. Non-administrative seizures of firearms in Norte de Santander by municipality (2015-2022)



Source: created by the authors based on data from the Colombian National Police and early warnings from the Delegada para prevención de riesgos y sistema de alertas tempranas (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2021a, 2021b, 2022)

The General Staff officers interviewed corroborated this pattern and identified the Catatumbo subregion, which includes the municipalities of Tibú and Ocaña, as well as specific areas such as the Bocono neighborhood in Villa del Rosario, the rural areas surrounding Cúcuta—such as San Faustino, highlighted as a strategic storage and distribution point for the EGC—and the municipality of Puerto Santander. Although the interviewees also mentioned the municipality of La Esperanza as a relevant location, it is not reflected as one of the critical points in the seizure statistics.

Quantitative data reveal that during the seven-year study period, there were 1 702 non-administrative seizures. The year with the highest number of seizures was 2015, with a total of 289, while the lowest was recorded in 2020, with 121. Between 2015 and 2019, there was an annual average of 249 seizures, but from 2020 to 2022, this figure decreased to an average of 152. As detailed in Table 3, of the operations carried out in the region by the Colombian government, 74% resulted in the seizure of fewer than five weapons per operation, which indicates a pattern of small-scale trafficking. Interviewees also highlighted this phenomenon, noting that this method makes it difficult for law enforcement to detect and recover weapons, while reducing the risk for illegal groups of losing large quantities of equipment.

Most seizures consisted of the recovery of a single weapon per action. Nonetheless, rocket launchers represent an exception, as in 2016, seven rocket launchers were seized in a single operation in the municipality of Silos, with no similar findings during the years investigated.

Table 3. Frequency of non-administrative seizures of firearms in Norte de Santander (2015-2022)

Type/Quantity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 - 167
Machine gun	10	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Carbine	8	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shotgun	153	79	44	32	35	26	15	9	12	51
Pump-action shotgun	85	35	30	17	13	12	9	11	5	29
Rifle	39	14	9	6	4	5	1	1	1	10
Rocket launcher	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Grenade launcher	6	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pistol	197	58	29	18	16	14	5	7	2	28
Revolver	217	78	42	24	16	13	8	6	8	63
Submachine gun	23	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	738	273	157	98	84	70	39	34	28	181
Percentage	43 %	16 %	9 %	6 %	5 %	4 %	2 %	2 %	2 %	11 %

Source: created by the authors based on data from the Colombian National Police

The most significant seizures resulted from operations in which between 10 and 167 weapons were recovered, representing 11% of total seizures. Nonetheless, these actions accounted for a total of 4 868 weapons, equivalent to 56.27% of the weapons seized (see Table 4). These data align with those reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020b), which highlights the rarity of large seizures, yet their significant impact on the total volume of weapons recovered.

Officials from the Norte de Santander Joint Chiefs of Staff attribute these results to intelligence work that identified clues about locations used to store weapons transported using the “hormiga” method. Among the most notable locations for this type of seizure are small shrines (*huacas*), homes and warehouses.

Examples of these procedures include operations in which 40 rifles, mainly Russian-made AK-47s, were recovered, along with others in which FAL rifles and hand grenades were found. In these cases, the FAL rifles bore markings from former arsenals of the Bolivarian Army of Venezuela. In one specific case, which occurred in the Bocono neighborhood—identified as a collection center for the AK-47 gang—pistols and rifle parts were found hidden in boxes used to transport Crocs-type footwear. In another operation, Task Force Vulcano seized 26 rifles, two grenade launchers, and a machine gun that were stored in a hideout. Most of these actions were directed against the EGC, as part of the state authorities’ efforts to dismantle the logistical structure that this group had been consolidating in its attempt to expand in the region.

Table 4. Distribution of non-administrative seizures of firearms by type in Norte de Santander (2015-2022)

Type of weapon	Quantity	Percentage	Min.	Max.	Average
Machine gun	12	0.14 %	1	2	1
Carbine	21	0.24 %	1	3	2
Shotgun	2 209	25.54 %	1	85	5
Pump-action shotgun	1 070	12.37 %	1	27	4
Rifle	403	4.66 %	1	47	4
Rocket launcher	7	0.08 %	7	7	7
Grenade launcher	10	0.12 %	1	4	1
Pistol	1 428	16.51 %	1	78	4
Revolver	3 455	39.94 %	1	167	7
Submachine gun	35	0.40 %	1	3	1
Total	8 650	100 %	1	167	5

Source: created by the authors based on data from the Colombian National Police

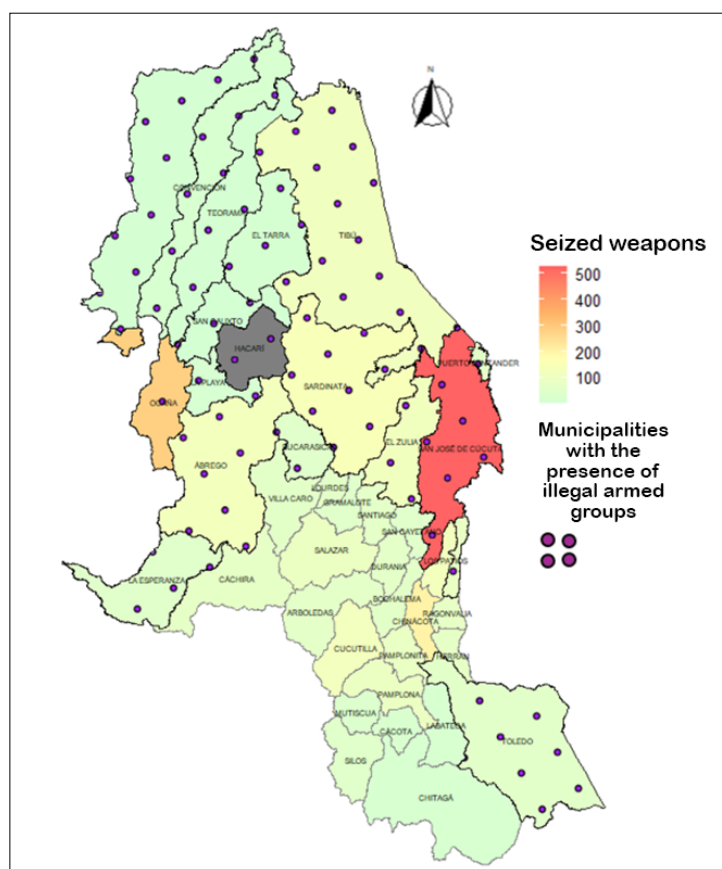
As shown in Table 4, the pattern of weapons seized in the region differs significantly from that recorded at the continental level, mainly because revolvers are the most commonly seized type of weapon, followed by shotguns. This contrasts with the findings of the United Nations report, which indicates that the majority of seizures correspond to pistols (52%), followed by revolvers (24%) and shotguns (14%) (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020b).

This pattern can be explained by the ease and low cost associated with acquiring non-short firearms (such as shotguns and revolvers). For example, FAL rifles with Venezuelan army markings were offered at a low price, around 500 000 Colombian pesos. In addition, in both rural and urban areas, many families own shotguns as a means of protection or a symbol of power, in a context marked by the presence of various armed and criminal groups throughout the department. Added to this are the family ties that

some rural residents have with members of armed groups. All of this facilitates access to weapons with capabilities greater than those of pistols.

Former members of the General Staff of the 30th Brigade of the National Army and the Vulcano Task Force emphasize that this widespread access to weapons has contributed to high rates of homicides involving firearms (see Table 2). Violence is not only fueled by illegal groups, but also by the heavily armed civilian population. This creates situations in which everyday conflicts, such as altercations between intoxicated individuals, end up being resolved through the use of weapons, predominantly revolvers. In geospatial terms, this is reflected in a more homogeneous distribution of data on shotguns and pump-action shotguns (see Figure 4) compared to other types of weapons.

Figure 4. Non-administrative seizures of shotguns in Norte de Santander by municipality (2015-2022)



Source: created by the authors based on data from the Colombian National Police and early warnings from the Delegada para prevención de riesgos y sistema de alertas tempranas (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2021a, 2021b, 2022)

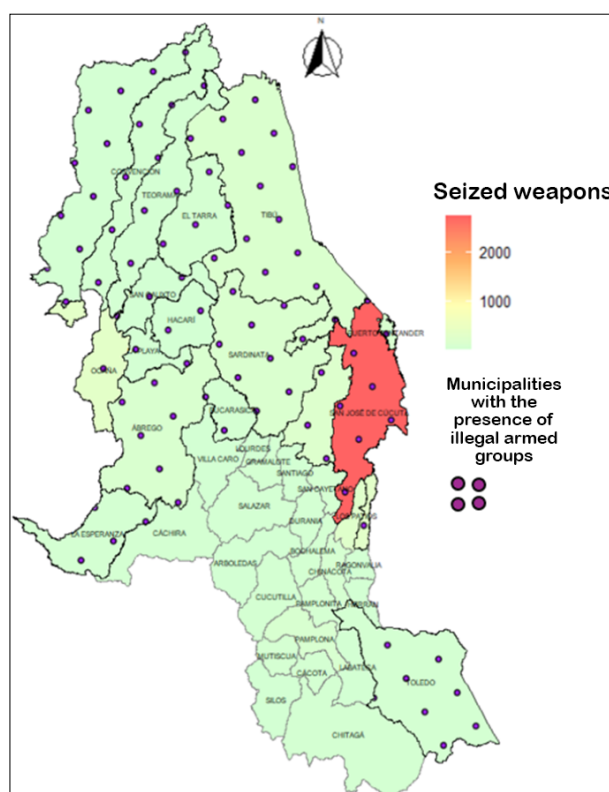
As for weapons associated with common crime, that is, pistols and revolvers, they accounted for 56.45% of seizures, with their spatial distribution primarily concentrated in the regional capital (see Figure 5). This pattern is not only due to the involvement of illegal groups such as the ELN, FARC dissidents and EGC strongholds, but also

to criminal organizations such as Tren de Aragua and local gangs in Cúcuta and its surroundings, such as the AK-47s. These organizations have acted in a symbiotic relationship with the aforementioned groups, in which the “small groups” pay a kind of franchise fee to operate in territories controlled by larger structures such as the ELN, allowing them to move drugs, people and weapons across the border.

The interviewees emphasize that, within the department, the ideological conditions of the illegal armed groups were not the central factor in their disputes; rather, economic logic prevailed. These groups maintained relative peace as long as the other illegal actors respected their routes, territories and franchisees. When this did not happen, confrontations arose to secure control of illegal activities, turning the urban center of Cúcuta into a breeding ground for violence and contract killings, as this was the place where these actors settled their scores.

Furthermore, as already noted, Cúcuta also serves as a hub for the use of these weapons in criminal activities. In this urban area, the low cost of weapons and the public's acceptance of their use, both for self-defense and for committing theft and extortion, further exacerbate the situation.

Figure 5. Non-administrative seizures of handguns in Norte de Santander by municipality (2015-2022)



Source: created by the authors based on data from the Colombian National Police and early warnings from the Delegada para prevención de riesgos y sistema de alertas tempranas (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2021a, 2021b, 2022)

In the case of long weapons—that is, machine guns, carbines, rifles, rocket launchers, grenade launchers and submachine guns—which directly fuel the Colombian armed conflict, a total of 488 units were seized during the seven years of the study, representing 5.64% of the regional total. Of these, 82.58% fall into the “rifles” category, according to the police classification.

Interviewees pointed out that modern, higher-capacity weapons are restricted to use and importation by large illegal armed groups, such as FARC dissidents, the ELN and the EGC. These groups control the arsenals and do not allow criminal gangs to access this type of weaponry. They use the economic power derived from drug trafficking and other illegal activities to acquire high-caliber weapons. This modernization of arsenals is carried out with weapons that primarily arrive via Central America and the Caribbean, with their point of origin being North America.

One of the main points of connection for this type of weaponry was the state of Zulia, specifically the municipality of Machiques, where armed groups such as FARC dissidents maintained camps that facilitated the distribution of weapons from Venezuela to Colombia. In many cases, these weapons were transported back and forth across the border, depending on the operational needs of the armed groups. Sometimes “special” shipments were sent, depending on the quantity required and available, as was the case with a batch of more than 250 rifles discovered in the waters of La Guajira. Due to the aforementioned laxity of the Venezuelan government, the geographical distribution of seizures of this type of weaponry (see Figure 6) is concentrated in municipalities near the region’s international border.

This illegal equipment not only affected public safety but was also used in multiple attacks against law enforcement, including bombings and shootings. Among the most notable cases are the attacks on the Cúcuta airport and the presidential helicopter in 2021.

Various methods were used to transport weapons illegally. Long weapons, such as rifles, were commonly dismantled and smuggled hidden in everyday items. In the case of small weapons, such as revolvers and pistols, minors were used, as military personnel were not authorized to confiscate them. The means of transport included people on foot, pack animals, motorcycles and off-road trucks, mainly in the summer, as during this season the trails were more accessible for trafficking weapons and other illegal items.

Similarly, it should be noted that residents, both in the department and in neighboring Venezuelan states, frequently collaborated in the transport of these goods, whether for remuneration, coercion or because members of illegal groups resided in these municipalities and had their families in these geographical areas, which facilitated their participation.

Figure 6. Non-administrative seizures of long firearms in Norte de Santander by municipality (2015-2022)

recruitment capacity, and access modern weaponry, such as .50-caliber Barrett rifles, obtained through exchange for cocaine. Despite this, the EGC, which did not have a strong presence in the area and attempted to establish itself in the department, failed to consolidate due to military actions.

In turn, according to those interviewed, the peace process revealed flaws in the organization's inadequate management of its operational bases. This was because the government focused its efforts on negotiating with the visible leaders, without effectively addressing the operational and economic complexity of the middle ranks, who for years obtained large profits through illegal activities such as drug trafficking and mining. Accustomed to handling large sums of money and exercising territorial control, demobilization was not an attractive option for them, which encouraged the proliferation of dissidents and the incursion of other armed actors in the region, regardless of their political leanings.

Furthermore, the process failed to eliminate the strategic weapons reserves that the FARC hid in caches in both Colombia and Venezuela. Despite operations such as those carried out by the Vulcano Task Force, which led to the seizure of significant quantities of weapons and ammunition diverted from Colombian state arsenals, many caches remained hidden. These weapons, coupled with corruption among former collaborators, contributed to the reorganization and expansion of criminal groups in the region, which needed greater firepower to compete with other illegal groups and with the state for territorial control.

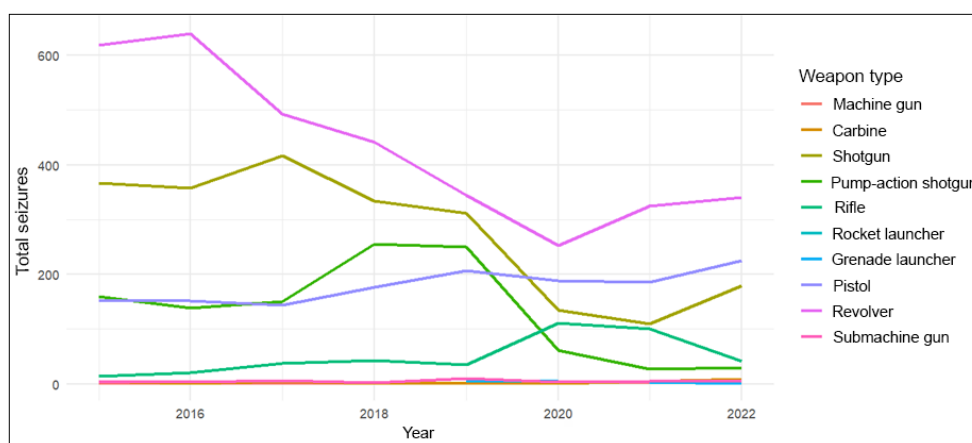
While isolation measures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic remained in place, illegal activities in Norte de Santander, including arms trafficking, did not stop; on the contrary, drug and *pate grillo* oil trafficking increased. This was due to reduced state control in rural areas, as well as increased economic needs on both sides of the border. One of the interviewees attributed this situation to the fact that, in rural areas—and to a lesser extent in urban areas—the population did not believe in the health measures, thinking that consuming *moringa* would protect them from the virus. As a result, individuals involved in illegal businesses continued their activities. Additionally, the restrictions primarily affected primary and secondary roads, while tertiary routes and informal roads remained outside state control, allowing illicit activities to continue.

For their part, officers from the General Staff noted that, in addition to the operations carried out in the region to seize weapons, the Colombian State engaged in confrontations with armed groups, during which equipment was recovered, albeit in smaller quantities than in the planned operations. Likewise, multipurpose and sporadic checkpoints and control posts were established on key roads during weekends, which are considered the busiest times in the department. Rewards were also offered for information, a strategy considered by one of the interviewees to be the most effective, as it encouraged people close to the armed groups to report weapons movements. The information was primarily provided by deserters or individuals motivated by economic benefits.

Between 2019 and 2022, Operation Plan Muralla was implemented, coordinating actions among the army, the Police, the Governor's Office and the Mayor's Office of Cúcuta. This operation involved blocking trails with the assistance of heavy machinery, as well as establishing permanent controls through patrols and the presence of military and police personnel. The strategy yielded significant results, especially in the fight against small arms and small-scale drug trafficking.

Nonetheless, as noted, military forces faced significant obstacles in addressing this crime more effectively (see Figure 7). One of the main obstacles was the lack of cooperation from the Venezuelan government, which, unlike other borders such as Panama's, did not maintain efficient coordination between the military and intelligence forces of both countries. This situation was further compounded by a lack of human and economic resources in the area, which was exacerbated by a decline in intelligence investment that began in 2020. This reduction, together with the constant influx of migrants and residents from Venezuela, exceeded the operational capacity of Colombian entities.

Figure 7. Timeline of weapons seized in Norte de Santander (2015-2022)



Source: created by the authors based on data from the Colombian National Police

This context gave rise to a complex scenario, exacerbated by the constant threat of attacks by illegal armed groups against critical infrastructure, the civilian population and state entities. As a result, the border was considered a secondary issue, and arms trafficking was not a priority on the institutional agenda. Although Colombia has signed international agreements and treaties against illegal weapons trafficking and carries out operations that are perceived as successful by the military high command, these strategies lack priority and proper structuring, rendering them insufficient. The interviewees agree that, during the closure of the Colombian-Venezuelan border (2015-2022), no structured and effective campaigns for the voluntary surrender of weapons were developed in Norte de Santander. The only reference they recall with a certain degree of success, despite the challenges mentioned, is the peace process.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight the complexity of illegal arms trafficking in Norte de Santander and its capacity to coordinate different illegal dynamics. In particular, it demonstrates how interactions between criminal and rebel governance are strengthened based on perceptions of the armed groups' purposes. On the one hand, it could be interpreted that actors such as the EGC and the ELN subordinate criminality to ideolo-

gical and political ends; on the other hand, it could be understood that these organizations have displaced their ideological motivations to prioritize economic interests and establish relationships of mutual subjugation with various criminal structures. In both cases, the evidence obtained is consistent with the arguments presented by Lessing and Willis (2019) and Alda Mejías (2021) regarding how illegal armed groups exploit state vacuums to consolidate their territorial and economic power.

The trails are clear evidence of this, given their intensive use both for illicit activities, such as arms trafficking, and for the daily passage of citizens. This situation reinforces the narrative of divided sovereignty, fueled by the normalization of armed presence and the quest for territorial control by these groups, as also observed in Espinel-Rubio et al. (2021). Furthermore, these unofficial crossings not only facilitated the continuation of arms trafficking but also strengthened the logistical networks of illegal actors, reinforcing the thesis that the lack of border control and weak state presence are structural factors that perpetuate insecurity in the region.

Illegal arms trafficking, as one of the main drivers sustaining illegal armed groups—both for its role in protecting illegal economic activities, especially drug trafficking, and for its market value—was not affected by the border closure. This occurred in a context where the FARC left a power vacuum that was not filled by the State, allowing other illegal actors to compete for territorial control and associated revenues. This process included strengthening relations with sectors of the Venezuelan National Guard and Armed Forces, which acted as facilitators of arms trafficking, validating Trejo and Ley's (2020) arguments about the influence of corruption on criminal governance. At the same time, in the Colombian context, although on a smaller scale, irregularities were detected in the custody of seized weapons, which, in addition to evidencing possible corrupt practices, reflect deficiencies in institutional management during the period analyzed.

Arms trafficking behavior followed a pattern of “tráfico hormiga,” consistent with the global trend observed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020b). In addition, the geographical concentration of seizures, together with the interviewees' references to the importance of Cúcuta's peripheral neighborhoods, positions the city as an epicenter of cross-border trafficking and links it to the increase in armed violence.

From a structural perspective, profound interactions between inequality, insecurity and violence can be identified. The proliferation of weapons in rural areas is a response to a combination of state absence and the need for self-protection in contexts of high insecurity, which perpetuates cycles of violence and normalizes the use of weapons as a legitimate mechanism for resolving conflicts, a trend also highlighted by Moncada (2020).

Conclusions

Illegal arms trafficking in the department of Norte de Santander during the border closure period (2015-2022) reveals a complex reality that persisted despite government efforts to curb this illicit activity. This persistence can be explained by a series of interrelated factors, including border geography, institutional corruption, state weakness, adverse economic conditions, social acceptance of illegality and power dynamics

among illegal armed groups. These variables facilitated the use of alternative routes—known as *trochas*—as essential channels for arms trafficking, which prevented any impact on illicit activities, even after the official closure of the border between Colombia and Venezuela.

The adaptability of illegal armed groups, such as the ELN and FARC dissidents, has been a key factor in the continuation of this crime in the region. These actors have been able to capitalize on gaps in state control and corruption within sectors of the Venezuelan armed forces. The persistence of illegal arms trafficking has exacerbated insecurity, as easy access to weapons by both civilians and criminal structures contributes to the perpetuation of a cycle of violence and crime.

Illegal arms trafficking is concentrated mainly in the regional capital, San José de Cúcuta, as well as in other border municipalities such as Puerto Santander and Tibú. The use of “tráfico hormiga” has been a key strategy, as it makes detection and seizure by law enforcement agencies more difficult. The findings also show that the main weapons seized were revolvers and shotguns, which contrasts with continental patterns and reflects the specificity of the arms market in the region.

The limited response by the Colombian government, attributable to the internal armed conflict that forces institutional resources to be distributed across multiple fronts, has relegated border control to the background. In this context, arms trafficking has been treated as a secondary issue, receiving less attention than other problems. Despite the strategies implemented, such as Operation Plan Muralla, efforts have been insufficient to counteract this phenomenon.

These results highlight the need for a comprehensive and coordinated strategy that combines actions at the national and international levels, with a structural approach, to effectively address the problem of illegal arms trafficking in Norte de Santander.

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Jorge Alonso Isaza Quebrada

Colombian. PhD in Philosophy in Management from Commonwealth Open University. Lecturer-researcher, coordinator of the postgraduate program in security management, Universidad Militar Nueva Granada. Research lines: strategy and security, transnational threats and multidimensional security. Recent publication: Páez, P. N., Isaza, J. & Zamora, L. A. (2014, January-June). Los países del tercer mundo frente a la crisis europea. *Revista Facultad de Ciencias Económicas*, 22(1), 215-230. <https://doi.org/10.18359/rfce.648>

Carlos Augusto Paez Murillo

Colombian. PhD in Systems Engineering (Organizational Management) from the Instituto Politécnico Nacional (Mexico). Researcher at the Military Sciences Group of the Escuela Militar de Cadetes "General José María Córdova". Research lines: process development, security systems and national defense. Recent publication: Páez Murillo, C. A., Cabrera Albornoz, L. A., Rojas Guevara, J. U. & Sarmiento Páez, D. M. (2024, May-August). Desafíos de seguridad ciudadana para el desarrollo urbano sostenible del Metro de Bogotá. *Revista Logos Ciencia & Tecnología*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.22335/rlct.v16i2.1960>

William Pachón Muñoz

Colombian. PhD candidate in political studies at the Universidad Externado de Colombia. Research professor in the Risk Management, Safety and Occupational Health Program at the Faculty of International Relations, Strategy and Security, Universidad Militar Nueva Granada. Research lines: strategy and security. Recent publication: Cabrera Albornoz, L. A., Pachón Muñoz, W., Bravo Delgado M. F. & Goyeneche Vanegas, A. (2024). *¿Al fin sin minas? Perspectivas sobre la recuperación socioeconómica de las comunidades de San Francisco y San Carlos, Antioquia (Colombia) 2000-2022*. Neogranadina.

William Andrés Sanabria Álvarez

Colombian. Master's degree in international relations and business from the Universidad Militar Nueva Granada. Academic researcher at the Universidad Militar Nueva Granada. Research lines: multidimensional security and state marketing. Recent publication: Páez Murillo, C. A., Cabrera Albornoz, L. A. & Sanabria Álvarez W. A. (2024). Criminalidad en localidades de la Primera Línea del Metro de Bogotá del 2018 a 2023. *Revista Criminalidad*, 66(3), 45-63. <https://doi.org/10.47741/17943108.661>