

The gun issue in the U.S. and Mexico

“Man walks into police precinct and shoots four policemen.” “Two teenagers die in gang violence tied to drugs.” “Eleven officers shot in 24 hours.” At first glance, these headlines would seem to be referring to incidents in Mexico, as the war between the drug cartels and the government rages on. In reality, these are headlines to stories written about incidents that occurred in the U.S. The irony is that in today’s news, these headlines could easily appear in either country.

The U.S. and Mexico offer an interesting study in the way each government deals with the issue of guns. The right to bear arms is a constitutional right guaranteed to every American citizen. Each U.S. state has its own regulations pertaining to the purchase of firearms and specific licensing requirements. In many states, it is fairly easy to purchase firearms and often only requires showing a driver’s license and passing a quick background check while standing at the gun counter. Ammunition for firearms for nearly every caliber of weapon is easily purchased at sports stores.

Even before the nation was founded, personal firearms have been part of the American culture. Hunters and sportsmen legally purchase millions of firearms every year. According to FBI estimates, there are approximately 200 million firearms privately owned in the U.S. If firearms are counted in the public sector (army, police forces, and public security officials), it is estimated that there would be at least one firearm for every citizen of the U.S. – more than 300 million. Needless to say, the pro-gun lobby is a very strong force in American politics.

As is the case in the U.S., the Mexican Constitution also guarantees its citizens the right to bear arms for their “safety and legitimate defense.” It also states that “federal law shall determine under what requirements and in which places citizens shall be authorized to bear

arms.” It is this key point at which Mexican law differs greatly from that in the U.S. Even though the Mexican Constitution guarantees the right to bear arms, through federal code weapons are severely restricted. The Mexican Defense Industry oversees a complicated process in which prospective private arms bearers have to go to Mexico City to file their application. Firearms above 22-caliber are generally not permitted, unless they are approved for agricultural cooperatives.

In spite of the laws aimed at making personal possession of a firearm extremely difficult, firearms, albeit illegal, are readily available in Mexico. There has long been a steady flow of clandestine firearms purchased in the U.S. that ends up in the hands of Mexican citizens. I have had several friends in Mexico who possessed firearms. These people are not involved in the drug trade or any other illegal activity. Some were businessmen and I even knew one attorney who carried a large caliber pistol for his protection. Most of these people illegally acquired weapons to avoid the bureaucratic process and cost of seeking legal approval. Since the drug war ensued more than three years ago, the demand by drug cartels and organized gangs has greatly increased the flow of illegal guns into Mexico from the U.S.

However different the two approaches to gun laws, each country is continuing to deal with criminal violence involving guns. In Mexico, cartels, gangs and thugs have made a mockery of the government’s official tough stance on possessing high-caliber weapons. It is widely reported throughout Mexico that the drug cartels often have more firepower than the police forces and sometimes even the military. Tens of thousands of Mexicans have been the victims of the drug wars and gang shootings committed with illegal weapons.

In the U.S., Americans are still in shock over the shooting of Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords by what seems to be a mentally disturbed young man who in the same

rampage killed six innocent bystanders. It was reported that the suspect purchased the gun at a sports store and the ammunition at a Wal-Mart – both legally. While crimes committed with illegal weapons remain a major issue in the U.S., crimes committed with legally registered weapons, especially those committed by mentally unstable people, seem to be on the rise. Unlike Mexico where the challenge seems to be intercepting the flow of illegal weapons into the country, the pressing challenge in the U.S. is to limit the access of legal weapons to people who are a danger to society. Undoubtedly, stricter background checks will be a hotly contested issue in the upcoming months.

Despite the different approaches to regulating the possession of firearms in society, the ultimate goal in both countries is finding a way to increase public security. In this sense, maybe our two countries are more alike than different on the gun issue.