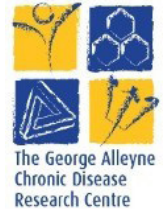


SITUATION UPDATE

June 2024



Dangerous Devices: Privately Made Firearms in the Caribbean

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KEY FINDINGS

- While privately made firearms (PMFs) represent a small proportion of all firearm seizures in the Caribbean region, the threat appears to be growing as police are recovering a range of different types of PMFs.
- Significant seizures of partially finished frames and computer numerical control (CNC)-milled receivers used to assemble firearms have been recorded since April 2023.
- The first reported seizure of 3D-printed firearms in the region occurred in August 2023. Seizures of 3D-printed firearms and components have taken place in at least three countries since, also leading to the dismantlement of workshops and recovery of 3D printers.
- Seizures of so-called 'conversion devices' in several countries underscore the particular threat they pose to public health in the region, given that they can be used to convert semi-automatic pistols and rifles to fully automatic weapons, thus increasing the risk of multiple injuries.
- Few seized PMFs are identified as such in the publicly available reports examined by the Survey, which suggests that efforts are needed to improve the detection, identification, and monitoring of these weapons.
- Death certificates and other public health records currently do not always capture detailed information about the types of firearms used in shootings, including whether they might have been PMFs.

Context

The rate of violent deaths in the Caribbean remains well above the world average. The Small Arms Survey's Global Violent Deaths database finds that the rate of homicides in the region for 2021 is three times higher than the global average. Firearms are used in about half of these homicides, and this proportion reaches 90 per cent in some countries (Fabre et al., 2023, pp. 36–38; Small Arms Survey, n.d.). Trafficking—including of firearm parts used to build PMFs—remains the primary source of small arms seized in the region. Based on available seizure data, handguns are the main type of illicit firearm used by criminals in the Caribbean, although there are growing concerns about the proliferation of rifles, notably in Haiti (Fabre et al., 2023, pp. 67, 70; Jones, 2023).

PMFs in the Caribbean vary widely in sophistication and include crudely made shotguns, modified flare guns, converted alarm handguns, 3D-printed firearms, and PMFs assembled from industrially produced components (Fabre et al., 2023, pp. 87, 91, 95, 105). Given their low cost and the increasingly diverse ways in which key firearm components can be acquired or produced—including through the use of 3D-printing and CNC milling technology—PMFs have the potential to become a significant threat. Moreover, there have been seizures of devices that make it possible to convert semi-automatic pistols and rifles into fully automatic firearms (p. 100). The proliferation of privately made rifles and semi-automatic pistols, combined with the circulation of conversion devices, increases the likelihood that significantly more rounds will be fired during criminal shootings, which may in turn increase the risk of multiple injuries, including among bystanders.

Developments since April 2023

This section reviews developments regarding the proliferation of PMFs in the Caribbean since April

2023. In this Situation Update, the Survey uses the US government's definition of PMFs, which refers to 'a firearm, including a frame or receiver, assembled by a person other than a licensed manufacturer, and not containing a serial number or other identifying marking placed by a licensed manufacturer at the time the firearm was produced' (Office of the US Federal Register, 2022, p. 24664). As most types of PMFs do not include serial numbers and are therefore difficult to trace—at least through conventional methods—they are also often referred to as 'ghost guns'.

Due to detection and reporting issues, it remains difficult to assess the true magnitude of the PMF threat in the region. Indeed, PMFs are rarely identified as such in open sources, and so careful examination of published imagery is often necessary to detect them. This section is based on a review of articles by news outlets and press releases by law enforcement agencies, supplemented by key informant and expert reviews. It begins by providing an overview of seizures of different variants of PMFs in the region from April 2023 to April 2024, before focusing more specifically on 3D-printed firearms and conversion devices.

Overview of PMF seizures since April 2023

PMFs illicitly assembled from partially finished and industrially produced components¹ are circulating in the Caribbean, as highlighted in the 2023 Caribbean Firearms Study, published by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS) and the Small Arms Survey (Fabre et al., 2023, pp. 91, 95). The partially finished components—notably frames for pistols and receivers for rifles—are combined with other factory-built parts to produce a functioning firearm. In order to facilitate their assembly, these components are often packaged and sold as kits that also include the necessary production tools, such as drill bits and jigs. Tutorial videos are also available online (p. 91). While these

¹ These items are variously referred to as 'receiver blanks', 'unfinished receivers', and '80 per cent receivers'.

PMFs can vary in quality and functionality, interviews conducted during the course of the Caribbean Firearms Study indicate that these kits allow for the production of durable and properly functioning firearms (p. 92).

Due to the availability of easy-to-follow instructions and materials with which ghost guns can be assembled, such as partially finished frames and receivers, this category of PMFs contributed to a substantial increase in PMF seizures in the United States. According to the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, recoveries of PMFs by law enforcement in the United States increased by 1,083 per cent between 2017 and 2021 (White House, 2024). In 2022, the US government sought to address the issue by expanding the definition of firearms and introducing new marking requirements for firearms components. At the time of writing, however, the legislation was still under review by the US Supreme Court (Chung, 2024).

The region's proximity and extensive commercial trade with the United States means that traffickers can easily conceal these parts and kits in common household items, sometimes in separate packages in order to evade detection (Fabre et al., 2023, pp. 79–87). Data on US seizures of arms shipments bound for the Caribbean suggests that interdictions of illegally exported ghost gun components have levelled off in recent years. Between September 2021 and mid-December 2023, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) seized 81 receivers and frames/kits that were bound for the Caribbean, compared to 165 receivers and kits between 2016 and 2021. The average number of seizures of these items per month therefore increased slightly from 2.4 between 2016 and 2021 to 2.9 between 2021 and 2023.² Available data on seized components does not always make it possible to determine whether they were partially finished or intended to be used to build PMFs. Several recent cases show, however, that PMFs and components for assembling PMFs are being exported to the Caribbean, including the following examples:

- In December 2023, a US national was convicted of trafficking PMFs to the Dominican Republic. He purchased kits at gun shows, assembled them into functioning firearms in his workshop in Rhode Island, and then shipped the weapons to the Caribbean country. Court documents indicated that the trafficker procured and shipped 100 weapons to the Dominican Republic in this manner from 2017 to January 2022 (Henry, 2024).
- That same year, a resident of the US Virgin Islands was sentenced to ten years for manufacturing PMFs from packages of firearm components shipped from Florida and North Carolina (St. Thomas Source, 2023).
- In Trinidad and Tobago, recent suspected PMF seizures have included at least three instances of firearms built from 80 per cent receivers, although it is unclear where these components originated from (TTPS, 2023a; 2023c; 2024d).

Moreover, Jamaican officials revealed that the vast majority of ghost guns seized in their country are assembled using partially finished 'Polymer 80' frames and kits. These privately made pistols are sometimes used together with conversion devices to make them capable of automatic fire. Most rifle frames used to assemble PMFs in Jamaica are also partially finished 80 per cent lower receivers.³

Lower receivers that appeared to have been CNC-milled from blocks of metal have also been seized in the Caribbean. For instance, the police in Trinidad and Tobago successively recovered an initial 91 and then an additional 14 CNC-milled lower receivers for AR-15-pattern rifles in October and November 2023, respectively (CNC3 Trinidad and Tobago, 2023; TTPS, 2023f). CNC-milled receivers were also documented in Haiti (UNSC, 2023, para. 102).

Other PMFs circulating in the region include rudimentary artisanal firearms. Between April 2023 and April 2024, homemade shotguns were seized in at least five countries and territories in the region

² Data shared by US CBP in response to a Small Arms Survey Freedom of Information Act request, 15 December 2023.

³ Online interview with Jamaican law enforcement officials, 24 May 2024.

Table 1 Seizures of homemade firearms in the Caribbean, April 2023–April 2024

| Country | Item seized (as reported) | Date |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Barbados | Pipe gun | January 2024 (Barbados Today, 2024) |
| Dominican Republic | Homemade firearms, including shotguns | September 2023 (<i>El Nuevo Diario</i> , 2023b) |
| St Lucia | Pump-action homemade shotgun | November 2023 (The Voice SLU, 2023) |
| | Homemade shotgun | March 2024 (The Voice SLU, 2024b) |
| St Vincent and the Grenadines | Homemade shotgun | Date unknown (reported in 2024) (Searchlight, 2024) |
| Trinidad and Tobago | Homemade 12-gauge shotgun | May 2023 (TTPS, 2023b) |
| | Homemade shotgun | September 2023 (Newsday Trinidad and Tobago, 2023) |
| | Homemade shotgun | November 2023 (TTPS, 2023g) |
| | Homemade shotgun | November 2023 (TTPS, 2023h) |

(see Table 1). In the Dominican Republic, there have also been seizures of homemade pistols (*El Nuevo Diario*, 2023a). As the quality and reliability of some of these weapons can be poor (Barbados Today, 2024), it is unlikely that criminals will view them as a substitute for factory-produced weapons. Yet the threat posed by these weapons should not be underestimated, as they can be used in crime and therefore potentially contribute to the deterioration of the security environment.

Caribbean authorities have also seized modified flare guns, which are typically stolen from fishermen and then illegally altered to allow them to fire common ammunition such as 9 × 19 mm Luger (Fabre et al., 2023). Since April 2023, modified flare guns have been seized in Antigua and Barbuda (Williams, 2023) and Barbados (Clarke, 2023). Jamaican authorities have also seized small numbers of converted blank-firing alarm handguns (3–4 per year, usually in 9 mm PAK calibre and of Turkish manufacture).⁴

3D-printed firearms

3D-printed firearms are PMFs fabricated through the use of 3D-printing technologies. As 3D printers become cheaper and more advanced and user-friendly, 3D-printed firearms may become attractive

to criminals and other individuals unwilling to take the risk of acquiring illicit firearms in the underground market (Fabre et al., 2023, pp. 97–98). For instance, a key informant from US Immigration and Customs Enforcement explained that criminal groups in Latin America and the Caribbean previously preferred to import factory-built frames and lower receivers for their quality. Today, however, they increasingly produce these components themselves using 3D printers—sometimes to sell the weapons to other criminals. These groups mainly need to import the barrel and trigger group to assemble a functioning firearm (US ICE, 2024).

3D-printed firearms potentially pose considerable challenges to law enforcement, including in terms of their detection, tracing, and investigation. Because such 3D-printed components are sometimes marked with the name of known firearms brands and combined with other industrially built components, law enforcement may not realize they are privately made, and describe them only as non-serialized firearms without indicating whether they are 3D-printed (US ICE, 2024). The latest generation of 3D-printed firearms can be assembled exclusively from 3D-printed components, which further complicates efforts to trace their supply chain (Fabre et al., 2023, p. 98; Schaufelbühl et al., 2024). The chain of custody for 3D-printed firearms is also rather short, as it might only encompass a producer and end

⁴ Online interview with Jamaican law enforcement officials, 24 May 2024.

user, or even just one person if the producer is also the end user (Fabre et al., 2023, p. 98).

Concerns around the possible spread of 3D-printed firearms to the region were realized in August 2023, when a ‘ghost gun lab’ producing 3D-printed firearms for distribution to criminal groups was discovered in Trinidad and Tobago (Hamilton-Davis, 2023). The police recovered, among other items, a 3D printer and 3D-printing software, ammunition, and several 3D-printed firearms and projectiles at the workshop.⁵ In separate incidents, authorities in Trinidad and Tobago have also seized what appears to be a 3D-printed FGC9 (TTPS, 2023c), as well as a 3D-printed Glock lower receiver (TTPS, 2023d).

In 2023, authorities in St Lucia seized a 3D-printed semi-automatic firearm and a 3D printer.⁶ Two 3D-printed firearms were also recovered in Antigua and Barbuda (Morgan, 2023). Similarly, there have also been a limited number of seizures of 3D-printed rifle receivers in Jamaica, but these appear to have been trafficked from abroad. To date, there have not been any reports of seizures of local workshops or equipment used to produce 3D-printed firearms in Jamaica.⁷ While the number of documented cases of 3D-printed firearms remains limited, these incidents may represent only the tip of the iceberg as law enforcement techniques to detect such illicit manufacture are still emerging, and are not yet applied consistently.⁸

While some CARICOM member states have acknowledged that 3D-printed firearms are a threat to national security, only a few have adopted regulatory measures to curb their proliferation. St Vincent and the Grenadines, for example, is implementing new legislation that provides for stricter penalties for several offences, including the 3D-printing of firearms (Loop Caribbean News, 2024). Similarly, Jamaica passed the Firearms (Prohibition, Restriction and Regulation) Act in November 2022, which provides for an expansion of the definition

of ‘firearms’ to include 3D-printed weapons, and prohibits the possession of digital blueprints of firearms and components with the intent to manufacture 3D firearms (Jamaica, 2022).

Conversion devices

Conversion devices include items referred to as ‘automatic switches’, ‘selector switches’, ‘Glock switches’, and ‘auto sears’. They are simple and easy-to-install accessories that convert semi-automatic handguns and rifles into fully automatic weapons (Fabre et al., 2023, p. 99). As such they make the weapon at hand more dangerous, as automatic fire may result in more injuries, including to bystanders.⁹ Conversion devices also undermine firearms regulations that restrict civilian ownership of machine guns (p. 100). Conversion devices do not look like firearms or their main parts and are therefore difficult for untrained custom officials to detect. In fact, these devices have been sold online as household items such as coat hangers (p. 100). Reported cases therefore probably only capture a tiny percentage of illicit conversion devices circulating in the Caribbean.

As reported in the Caribbean Firearms Study, the authorities of Trinidad and Tobago seized at least 57 conversion devices in 2020 and 2021 (Fabre et al., 2023, p. 100). Table 2 provides additional examples of conversion devices reportedly seized between April 2023 and April 2024. While most seizures occurred in Trinidad and Tobago, seizures of such devices have also reportedly occurred in St Lucia and the US Virgin Islands. These cases primarily concern the conversion of handguns, especially pistols manufactured by Glock, which is the most frequently reported firearm brand associated with conversion devices in the source documents reviewed for this Situation Update (see Table 2). Jamaican officials also report a steady increase in seizures of conversion devices, mostly

⁵ Correspondence with CARICOM IMPACS, November 2023; Hamilton-Davis (2023).

⁶ Confidential interview with a law enforcement official, St Lucia, 23 April 2024.

⁷ Online interview with Jamaican law enforcement officials, 24 May 2024.

⁸ For an overview, see Schroeder et al. (2023, pp. 11–14).

⁹ The City of Chicago documented a series of shooting incidents involving converted Glock pistols that caused casualties among bystanders. These concerns led the City of Chicago to file a complaint against Glock Inc. over the convertibility of its handguns through the use of such conversion devices. See City of Chicago (2024, pp. 4–5, 22–25).

Table 2 Selected media reports of seizures of conversion devices in the Caribbean, April 2023–April 2024

| Country | Description from article text and/or accompanying photos | Date |
|---------------------|---|---|
| St Lucia | Glock 19 9 mm pistol (with a selector switch) | December 2023 (<i>St. Lucia Times</i> , 2023) |
| | 9 mm pistol with an automatic fire selector switch | March 2024 (<i>St. Lucia Times</i> , 2024) |
| | Glock pistol equipped with an automatic sear | March 2024 (Gaillard, 2024) |
| Trinidad and Tobago | Glock pistol (conversion device visible in picture) | August 2023 (TTPS, 2023e) |
| | Pistol (conversion device visible in picture) | August 2023 (TTPS, 2023d) |
| | Glock pistol (conversion device visible in picture) | November 2023 (TTPS, 2023i) |
| | 9 mm pistol (conversion device visible in picture) | November 2023 (TTPS, 2023j) |
| | Gun (conversion device visible in picture) | January 2024 (CNC3 Trinidad and Tobago, 2024) ¹⁰ |
| | Glock pistol with no selector (conversion device visible in picture) | February 2024 (TTPS, 2024b) |
| | Glock 26 pistol (conversion device visible in picture) | February 2024 (TTPS, 2024c) |
| US Virgin Islands | 'Ghost gun' with 'a switch that converts the trigger to automatically fire' | October 2023 (Carlson, 2023) |

installed on Glock-pattern handguns. In about three to four out of ten such seizures, the converted firearms were found to be tied to murder cases. In Jamaica, there have also been seizures of so-called 'invisible switches' that are not visible from the outside of the firearm; however, these particular devices remain quite rare and are not a growing trend.¹¹

According to key informants, in a few instances conversion devices seized in Jamaica were acquired from websites based in the United States, but in most cases it was not possible to determine their origins.¹² Other sources explain that it is often easier to source these accessories from other countries. Some devices seized in the region are reportedly purchased online and shipped from China (US ICE, 2024).

Policy implications

New data reviewed in this Situation Update shows that while PMFs probably still account for a minority of firearm seizures in the Caribbean, the rapid

evolution of techniques for producing these weapons has led to the circulation of a broad range of PMFs in the region. Since the Survey and CARICOM IMPACS published their regional report on illicit firearms in the Caribbean in April 2023, three trends have been particularly noteworthy: the significant seizures of privately made pistols, rifles, and their parts—including partially finished frames and lower receivers produced with CNC milling machines; the dismantlement of the first 3D-printed firearm workshops and equipment in the region; and the continued proliferation of conversion devices (see Images 1–3). Data limitations—including a general lack of awareness and training among law enforcement, customs officials, and the media—suggest the scale of these trends may be even more significant than publicly reported.

As argued in the Caribbean Firearms Study, the decentralized community of amateur gunsmiths involved in advancing techniques for the production of PMFs is continuously refining its methods to quickly adapt to and circumvent new firearm-related

¹⁰ See also TTPS (2024a).

¹¹ Online interview with Jamaican law enforcement officials, 24 May 2024.

¹² Online interview with Jamaican law enforcement officials, 24 May 2024.

Images 1–3 CNC-milled receivers, a 3D-printed firearm, and a pistol equipped with a conversion device seized by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service in 2023



Source: TTPS (2023c; 2023e; 2023f)

restrictions. This situation calls for improving regional capacities for ‘accurately and consistently identifying ghost guns, 3D-printed firearms, and other PMFs’, including through the provision of up-to-date weapons identification training to relevant agencies (Fabre et al., 2023, p. 90). It is also critical to ensure that information on the latest PMF-related trends is shared regularly with authorities from throughout the Caribbean so that appropriate prevention and mitigation measures can be put in place in a timely manner. The development of region-wide firearm-related crime intelligence capabilities—for instance, through the recently created CARICOM Crime Gun Intelligence Unit¹³—can help detect and track emerging types of illicit firearms.

Tackling the trends noted above is not only a matter of law enforcement; PMFs also risk affecting Caribbean societies in broader ways. The proliferation of components used for assembling privately made firearms, and of conversion devices that enable handguns and rifles to shoot in automatic mode, may provide criminals with more diverse ways of acquiring reliable semi- and fully automatic weapons, which would put both law enforcement officers and wider communities at greater risk. Investigative media reports suggest that pistols converted to automatic fire are already in high demand among local gangs in countries such as

Trinidad and Tobago (*Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, 2023). The emergence of 3D-printed firearms adds a layer of complexity to these challenges, as 3D printers are becoming cheaper, have many legitimate purposes, and are generally not restricted to any particular age group.

The further proliferation of PMFs may therefore increase the regional availability of semi-automatic and fully automatic weapons, which can also have significant public health implications. Fully automatic weapons are more difficult to handle and aim, and consequently their use may result in more deaths and injuries among the intended targets and bystanders.¹⁴ In St Lucia, for instance, during a shooting incident in Vieux Fort on Independence Day (22 February 2024), six people sustained gunshot wounds, three of whom died from their injuries (The Voice SLU, 2024a). According to the authorities, a firearm equipped with a conversion device was used in this attack.¹⁵

Focus group discussions revealed little awareness among participating public health practitioners about the threat of PMFs. Nevertheless, one participant noted a general increase in the victimization of young children as bystanders in their country.¹⁶ Doctors from the Bahamas and Jamaica separately observed a trend towards the increasing use of firearms with an intent to kill, resulting in a higher

¹³ For more information, see CARICOM (2024).

¹⁴ For a discussion on the impacts of shooting incidents involving conversion devices in the United States, see City of Chicago (2024, pp. 4–5, 22–25).

¹⁵ Confidential interview with a law enforcement official, St Lucia, 23 April 2024.

¹⁶ The participating practitioners noted that it is generally not possible to ascertain definitively whether automatic weapons or PMFs were used based only on a review of the patients’ injuries. Online focus group discussions facilitated by the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) and the Small Arms Survey with medical practitioners from Aruba, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Grenada, Montserrat, and Trinidad and Tobago, 27 March and 8–9 April 2024.

number of ‘deaths upon arrival’ with multiple injuries at hospitals.¹⁷ Attributing these trends to the proliferation of PMFs specifically would require access to additional data on the types of weapons and ammunition used in shootings from forensic pathologists and experts. This information is not, however, readily accessible or systematically collected. Seizure data, death certificates, and other public health records currently do not always capture detailed information about the types of firearms used in shootings, including whether they might have been PMFs or converted.¹⁸ It will therefore be crucial to improve the level of detail of firearm-related data captured by seizure databases as well as mortality and injury surveillance systems moving forward to better monitor and assess the public health impact of emerging firearm-related threats.

Despite data limitations, evolving injury patterns are illustrative of how the use of semi- and fully automatic weapons in crime—which the proliferation of PMFs risks exacerbating—might impact victims and communities. While the public health sector in the Caribbean generally possesses the required facilities and surgeons to provide appropriate care to patients with firearm injuries,¹⁹ an increase in the number of individuals presenting to the emergency department with serious wounds has the potential to overstretch the healthcare system. This is especially worrying for the smaller islands where few doctors are available in emergency rooms at a given time. Indeed, operating on a patient with multiple firearm injuries can occupy a surgeon for hours, causing long delays for other patients requiring other types of urgent care.²⁰ The threat of PMFs and conversion devices in the Caribbean should therefore not be taken lightly, and Caribbean governments need to be well prepared to prevent and mitigate its manifestations. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

| | |
|----------------|--|
| CARICOM | Caribbean Community |
| CARPHA | Caribbean Public Health Agency |
| CBP | US Customs and Border Protection |
| CNC | Computer numerical control |
| IMPACS | Implementation Agency for Crime and Security |
| PMF | Privately made firearm |

17 Online focus group discussion with doctors from the Bahamas and Jamaica, 30 April 2024.

18 Online interview with Jamaican law enforcement officials, 24 May 2024.

19 Online focus group discussions facilitated by CARPHA with medical practitioners from Aruba, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Grenada, Montserrat, and Trinidad and Tobago, online, 27 March and 8–9 April 2024.

20 Interview with a public health expert, St Lucia, 25 April 2024.

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About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is a centre for applied knowledge dedicated to preventing and reducing illicit small arms proliferation and armed violence. The Survey informs policy and practice through a combination of data, evidence-based knowledge, authoritative resources and tools, and tailored expert advice and training, and by bringing together practitioners and policymakers.

The Survey is an associated programme of the Geneva Graduate Institute, located in Switzerland, and has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, law, economics, development studies, sociology, criminology, and database and programme management. It collaborates with a network of researchers, practitioners, partner institutions, non-governmental organizations, and governments in more than 50 countries.

The Survey's activities and outputs are made possible through core support as well as project funding. A full list of current donors and projects can be accessed via the Small Arms Survey website. For more information, please visit: www.smallarmssurvey.org.

About the Pathway to Policy project

The project 'Pathway to Policy: Integrating Security and Public Health Responses to Firearms Trafficking and Violence in the Caribbean' aims to improve the quality and availability of relevant data and analysis on matters related to firearms proliferation and misuse in the Caribbean. Building on partnerships with leading regional institutions, the project engages with regional security, public health, and research stakeholders through knowledge sharing and policy prioritization. The Small Arms Survey is partnering with the Caribbean Community Implementation Agency for Crime and Security, the Caribbean Public Health Agency, and the George Alleyne Chronic Disease Centre at the University of the West Indies on this project.

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