

No. 22-1823

**IN THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE FIRST CIRCUIT**

ESTADOS UNIDOS MEXICANOS,
Plaintiff/Appellant,

v.

SMITH & WESSON BRANDS INC. et al,
Defendants/Appellees.

On Appeal from the United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts,
Case No. 1:21-cv-11269-FDS, the Honorable F. Dennis Saylor

**BRIEF OF DISTRICT ATTORNEYS AS AMICI CURIAE
IN SUPPORT OF PLAINTIFF-APPELLANT**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS I

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES II

I. INTEREST OF THE AMICI CURIAE 1

II. INTRODUCTION 2

III. THE COURT SHOULD CONSIDER THE FULL SCOPE OF HARMS
DEFENDANTS’ GUN SALES TO MEXICO ARE CAUSING IN THE
UNITED STATES..... 4

A. The Guns Defendants Sell into Mexico Return to the U.S. and Wreak
Havoc in Amici’s Communities 8

B. Defendants’ Guns in Mexico Facilitate the Flow of Illicit Drugs from
Mexico to the United States 13

1. Defendants’ Guns Are Integral to Mexican Cartels’ Drug
Trafficking14

2. Where There Are Drugs, There Are Guns19

3. The Drugs Mexican Cartels Import With Defendants’ Guns
Cause Acute Harm In Our Communities20

CONCLUSION 23

CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE 24

CONSENT TO FILE 24

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE..... 24

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

	<u>Page(s)</u>
<u>CASES</u>	
<i>Asahi Metal Indus. Co. v. Superior Ct. of Cal.</i> , 480 U.S. 102 (1987).....	5
<i>Env't Def. Fund, Inc. v. Massey</i> , 986 F.2d 528 (D.C. Cir. 1993).....	4, 8
<i>Heins v. Wilhelm Loh Wetzlar Optical Mach. GmbH & Co. KG.</i> , 26 Mass. App. Ct. 14 (1988)	6
<i>Levin v. Harned</i> , 292 F. Supp. 2d 220 (D. Mass. 2003)	6
<i>N.A.A.C.P. v. AcuSport, Inc.</i> , 271 F. Supp. 2d 435 (E.D.N.Y. 2003).....	12
<u>STATUTES</u>	
15 U.S.C. § 7901.....	4

I. INTEREST OF THE AMICI CURIAE

Amici are prosecutors in cities across the nation that are devastated by the violence and crime directly resulting from Defendants' gun sales: Diana Becton, District Attorney, Contra Costa County, California; John Choi, County Attorney, Ramsey County (St. Paul), Minnesota; Laura Conover, County Attorney, Pima County (Tucson), Arizona; Steve Descano, Commonwealth's Attorney, Fairfax County, Virginia; Matt Ellis, District Attorney, Wasco County, Oregon; Ramin Fatehi, Commonwealth's Attorney, City of Norfolk, Virginia; Kimberly M. Foxx, State's Attorney, Cook County (Chicago), Illinois; José Garza, District Attorney, Travis County (Austin), Texas; George Gascón, District Attorney, Los Angeles County, California; Sarah F. George, State's Attorney, Chittenden County (Burlington), Vermont; Joe Gonzales, District Attorney, Bexar County (San Antonio), Texas; Deborah Gonzalez, District Attorney, Western Judicial Circuit (Athens), Georgia; Mark Gonzalez, District Attorney, Nueces County (Corpus Christi), Texas; Melinda Katz, District Attorney, Queens County, New York; Lawrence S. Krasner, District Attorney, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Rebecca Like, Prosecuting Attorney, County of Kaua'i, Hawaii; Beth McCann, District Attorney, 2nd Judicial District (Denver), Colorado; Joseph Platania, Commonwealth's Attorney, City of Charlottesville, Virginia; Marian Ryan, District Attorney, Middlesex County, Massachusetts; Eli Savit, Prosecuting Attorney, Washtenaw

County (Ann Arbor), Michigan; Mike Schmidt, District Attorney, Multnomah County (Portland), Oregon; David Sullivan, District Attorney, Northwestern District, Massachusetts; Matthew Van Houten, District Attorney, Tompkins County, New York; Todd Williams, District Attorney, Buncombe County (Asheville), North Carolina.¹

Amici’s jobs are to protect our cities from crime and violent gangs. As detailed below, amici have an interest in this proceeding because Defendants’ gun sales are resulting in transnational cartel violence and crime that are consuming the resources of our offices, harming the people in our cities, and endangering law enforcement.

II. INTRODUCTION

We live in a global economy: labor, production, and consumption transcend our nation’s borders. Crime crosses borders, too—not just into border towns, but across the entire country, through sophisticated criminal networks. It is hardly a surprise, then, that when Defendants export scores of military-style weapons to Mexico, they import human suffering into the United States. Their guns are turned on people in our cities and the law enforcement officers who protect them, and

¹ No person or entity other than amici and their counsel authored this brief in whole or in part. No person or entity other than amici or their counsel contributed money to fund its preparation or submission.

they fuel the tragic loss of life ravaging this country. Defendants' profiteering, in short, is paid for in U.S. blood.

Defendants and Mexican cartels are involved in a deadly exchange: Defendants supply the assault weapons and sniper rifles that Mexican cartels use to manufacture drugs and terrorize Mexican towns; the cartels, in turn, import those drugs and the attendant chaos into the United States. As Plaintiff Estados Unidos Mexicanos (Mexico) pleads in its Complaint, Defendants design and distribute weapons of war with full knowledge that they will be used by cartels in the bloody battle over the lucrative drug trade in the United States.

Our offices have seen firsthand the catastrophic effect that Defendants' conduct has had in our communities: the escalating violence and turf wars fought with Defendants' guns; the destructive effects of narcotics, including fentanyl, that Mexican cartels import in exchange for Defendants' guns; and the violence that inevitably ensues when cartel members, wielding Defendants' guns, protect their trafficking routes. Amici are tasked with protecting our communities from the violence wrought with Defendants' guns as part of the drug trade and from the devastating impact of the drugs themselves.

III. THE COURT SHOULD CONSIDER THE FULL SCOPE OF HARMS DEFENDANTS' GUN SALES TO MEXICO ARE CAUSING IN THE UNITED STATES

The District Court dismissed Mexico's case after holding that the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act (PLCAA) extends to lawsuits brought by a foreign government. (Mem. & Order on Defendants' Motions to Dismiss, ECF No. 163 ("Order") at 20-25.) But its analysis was shortsighted. As the District Court recognized, a key consideration in determining whether to apply PLCAA to a "foreign setting" is "whether the failure [to do so] ... would result in adverse effects within the United States." (Order at 25 n.7 (quoting *Env't Def. Fund, Inc. v. Massey*, 986 F.2d 528, 531 (D.C. Cir. 1993)) (internal quotations and brackets omitted).) PLCAA applied, the court held, because failing to apply it—and thereby allowing "this lawsuit ... to succeed"—would "invite the disassembly and destabilization of other industries and economic sectors ... and constitute an unreasonable burden on interstate and foreign commerce of the United States." (Order at 25 n.7 (quoting 15 U.S.C. § 7901(a)(6)) (internal brackets and quotations omitted).)

What the District Court failed to consider, however, was the vast economic (and noneconomic) burdens PLCAA's application *preserves*. As explained in more detail below, by intentionally flooding Mexico with guns, Defendants cause profound harm in the United States. A common cycle has emerged: Defendants'

guns are purchased in the United States, often with the proceeds from illegal drug sales.² They are then sent to Mexico's deadly cartels, often in exchange for more drugs to fund the next arms deal.³ Once the cartels get their hands on Defendants' guns, they use them to build up their transnational operations and export deadly drugs to the United States.⁴ Because Mexican cartels rely on U.S. street-level gangs to sell their products, guns smuggled over the border frequently boomerang back into amici's communities, where they are used to, among other things, attack law enforcement and rival gangs in our cities' drug wars.

Because Defendants have, for years, intentionally put guns into the hands of Mexican cartels, which have caused substantial and easily foreseeable harm in the United States, it is only fair that Defendants should be held to answer. *See Asahi*

² *See, e.g.*, U.S. Att'y for the C.D. Cal., *Indictment Names Six in Scheme to Provide High-Powered Firearms and Huge Quantities of Ammunition to Mexican Drug Cartel* (Jan. 24, 2022), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/pr/indictment-names-six-scheme-provide-high-powered-firearms-and-huge-quantities>; Beth Warren, *Where Do Mexican Drug Cartels Get Their Guns? Often, the United States*, USA TODAY (Aug. 25, 2021), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/08/25/american-guns-help-arm-mexican-drug-cartels-including-cjng/5586129001/>.

³ *See, e.g.*, U.S. Att'y for the N.D. Cal., *Nineteen South Bay Residents Charged in Alleged Scheme to Funnel Drugs into U.S and Firearms to Mexico* (Feb. 11, 2021), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndca/pr/nineteen-south-bay-residents-charged-alleged-scheme-funnel-drugs-us-and-firearms-mexico>.

⁴ Council on Foreign Rel., *Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels* (Feb. 2021, updated Sept. 7, 2022), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels>; Warren, *supra* note 2.

Metal Indus. Co. v. Superior Ct. of Cal., 480 U.S. 102, 112 (1987) (O’Connor, J., plurality op.) (“placement of a product into the stream of commerce” combined with “[a]dditional conduct of the defendant” may indicate an intent or purpose to serve the market in the forum State); *see also Heins v. Wilhelm Loh Wetzlar Optical Mach. GmbH & Co. KG.*, 26 Mass. App. Ct. 14, 22 (1988); *Levin v. Harned*, 292 F. Supp. 2d 220, 229 (D. Mass. 2003). Any argument to the contrary is belied by decades of evidence establishing that Defendants intended for their military-style weapons to be bought and sold by members of the Mexican cartels, which would in turn bring violence and drugs back into each district in the United States.

It is well documented that Mexican cartels are among American gun manufacturers’ best customers. Defendants have known this for years, as thousands of their guns flow into Mexico *on a daily basis*.⁵ It is also well documented that, for years, gun manufacturers—including Defendants, who overwhelmingly dominate that market—have made more guns than there are people in this country.⁶

⁵ David Gagne, *2,000 Illegal Weapons Cross US-Mexico Border Per Day: Report*, INSIGHT CRIME (Jan. 22, 2015), <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/2000-illegal-weapons-cross-us-mexico-border-every-day/>; *see* Gabriela Martinez, *The Flow of Guns from the U.S. to Mexico Is Getting Lost in the Border Debate*, PBS (July 2, 2019), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/the-flow-of-guns-from-the-u-s-to-mexico-is-getting-lost-in-the-border-debate>.

⁶ Christopher Ingraham, *There Are More Guns Than People in The United States, According to a New Study of Global Firearm Ownership*, WASH. POST (June 19, 2018), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/06/19/there-are->

One study calculates that *nearly half* of all U.S. gun shops, stocked with Defendants' guns, depend on illegal sales to Mexico to stay in business.⁷ Indeed, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives reports that firearms are trafficked to Mexico from almost every state, including Alaska.⁸ On this score, the Court can make only one plausible inference: that Defendants are intimately familiar with the incredible (and incredibly expensive) harms their guns cause both in Mexico and the United States.

Defendants should be held accountable. They sell their guns in Massachusetts (as well as districts across the country) knowing and intending that those guns will illegally make their way to Mexico and into the hands of international gangsters. Once there, Defendants' guns are used to ensure that a flood of drugs and violence makes it back into the United States. Defendants have not merely ignored this problem—they fuel it by manufacturing and marketing military-style guns that they know and intend cartels will use.

[more-guns-than-people-in-the-united-states-according-to-a-new-study-of-global-firearm-ownership/](#).

⁷ Topher McDougal et. al., *The Way of the Gun: Estimating Firearms Traffic Across the U.S.-Mexico Border*, at 2 (Mar. 2013), https://catcher.sandiego.edu/items/peacestudies/way_of_the_gun.pdf.

⁸ Conrad Wilson, *Federal Prosecutors Seek Prison Sentence for Man Who Trafficked Oregon Guns to Mexican Drug Cartel*, OPB (Dec. 6, 2021), <https://www.opb.org/article/2021/12/06/federal-prosecutors-seek-sentence-for-man-who-trafficked-oregon-guns-to-mexican-drug-cartel/>.

Defendants' actions are devastating amici's communities, as well as communities across the country. They should not be protected by PLCAA on the ground that PLCAA's application protects the United States from "adverse effects." (Order at 25 n.7 (quoting *Massey*, 986 F.2d at 531).) Here, just the opposite is true.

A. The Guns Defendants Sell into Mexico Return to the U.S. and Wreak Havoc in Amici's Communities

Substantial evidence compiled by reporters, non-governmental organizations, and law enforcement demonstrates that transnational cartels use Defendants' guns, which are funneled from the United States to Mexico and then back to the United States again, to further their illicit operations throughout the United States. Arrests from Massachusetts and amici's districts are illustrative. For example, in April 2021, an individual with ties to the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) was arrested in Holyoke, Massachusetts, and found in possession of hundreds of grams of the deadly drug fentanyl as well as multiple weapons of war, including an AR-15 assault rifle and handguns equipped with laser sights and capable of carrying large-caliber ammunition.⁹ Just a month earlier, eight

⁹ U.S. Att'y for the D. Mass, *Holyoke Man Arrested for Fentanyl Conspiracy* (Apr. 9, 2021), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/holyoke-man-arrested-fentanyl-conspiracy>.

individuals with “direct ties to a Mexican cartel” were arrested in Boston and found in possession of hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of fentanyl.¹⁰

On the other side of the country, federal agents in the South Bay area of California arrested 19 individuals with ties to the Sinaloa Cartel’s drug and firearm trafficking operations in February 2021.¹¹ These individuals were in possession of 16 military-style guns, which were purchased in the United States and combined with grenade launchers that had been transported to California from Mexico.¹² Also in 2021, federal agents in San Diego arrested dozens of individuals with ties to the Sinaloa Cartel, and seized from them 90 firearms.¹³ In 2021 alone, agents seized more than 100 guns from Mexican cartel operatives in California—and these are only the guns recovered from individuals who got caught. The likelihood that any of these guns were purchased in Mexico is extremely low, as there is only one gun shop in all of Mexico, and it requires months of background checks before a

¹⁰ U.S. Att’y for the D. Mass, *Eight Charged with Conspiring to Distribute Fentanyl and Cocaine and Money Laundering Conspiracy* (Mar. 24, 2021), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/eight-charged-conspiring-distribute-fentanyl-and-cocaine-and-money-laundering-conspiracy>.

¹¹ U.S. Att’y for the N.D. Cal., *supra* note 3.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ U.S. Att’y for the S.D. Cal., *Sixty Defendants Charged in Nationwide Takedown of Sinaloa Cartel Methamphetamine Network* (June 29, 2021), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdca/pr/sixty-defendants-charged-nationwide-takedown-sinaloa-cartel-methamphetamine-network>.

customer can purchase a firearm.¹⁴ That lone gun shop sells, on average, 38 firearms each day; by contrast, approximately 580 U.S. firearms are smuggled into Mexico daily.¹⁵

In 2021, Oregon prosecutors charged individuals with links to CJNG with purchasing approximately 150 weapons—including Barrett sniper rifles, grenades, and belt-fed machine guns—from shops in the Portland and Salem areas, stripping them of their serial numbers, and sending them to their cartel bosses in Mexico.¹⁶ These are not isolated incidents—law-enforcement agents have been regularly seizing firearms during the arrests of cartel members for more than a decade.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Mexico Has Just One Gun Shop, Yet Is Awash in US Firearms*, CRIME REPORT (May 24, 2018), <https://thecrimereport.org/2018/05/24/mexico-has-just-one-gun-shop-yet-is-awash-in-us-firearms/>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Wilson, *supra* note 8.

¹⁷ *See, e.g.*, Att’y Gen. of Cal., *Brown Announces 16 Indictments, 550 Pound Drug Seizure Following Infiltration of Sinaloa Cartel* (Aug. 26, 2009) (state law enforcement agents in Imperial County arrested 16 members of the Sinaloa Cartel who were in possession of 9 firearms), <https://oag.ca.gov/news/press-releases/brown-announces-16-indictments-550-pound-drug-seizure-following-infiltration>; Michael Isikoff, *U.S.: Gun Raids Show Cartels at Work in Arizona*, NBC NEWS (Jan. 25, 2011), <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna41257218> (twenty arrests made in Arizona of individuals attempting to smuggle hundreds of assault rifles into Mexico); DEA & FBI Joint Intelligence Report, *Cartels and Gangs in Chicago*, at 7 (May 2017), <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2018-07/DIR-013-17%20Cartel%20and%20Gangs%20in%20Chicago%20-%20Unclassified.pdf> (federal and state officers arresting dozens of individuals in Chicago with connections to the Sinaloa Cartel in possession of heroin, cocaine, millions of dollars, and firearms); U.S. Att’y for the S.D. Tex., *Three Charged in Conspiracy to Purchase \$500,000 in Weapons for Cartel* (July 29, 2021),

As Defendants’ military-style guns proliferate in amici’s communities and across the country, so too do deadly shootings. According to the Gun Violence Archive, there were more than 20,000 gun deaths (not including suicides) in the United States in 2021, which represents the highest number in years.¹⁸ In San Francisco alone, by even the most conservative estimate, homicides were up more than 16% in 2021 as compared to the previous year,¹⁹ and most of these homicides were committed on neighborhood blocks and in parks.²⁰ As stated by a local law-enforcement officer working in California’s “Emerald Triangle” (comprising Mendocino, Humboldt, and Trinity Counties), officers are responding to calls regarding “people in gunfights on a regular basis,” much of which is linked to Mexican cartels’ illicit operations.²¹ Fueled by easy access to guns, at least nine

<https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdtx/pr/three-charged-conspiracy-purchase-500000-weapons-cartel>.

¹⁸ Gun Violence Archive, *Number of Deaths in 2021*, <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/number-of-gun-deaths?year=2021> (last visited January 31, 2021).

¹⁹ S.F. Police Dep’t, *Crime Dashboard*, <https://www.sanfranciscopolice.org/stay-safe/crime-data/crime-dashboard> (last visited January 31, 2021).

²⁰ Abené Clayton, *Inside the San Francisco Bay Area’s Pandemic Murder Surge: “No One Knows This Pain But Us,”* GUARDIAN (Sept. 28, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/sep/28/san-francisco-bay-area-gun-violence-murders-2020>.

²¹ Beth Warren, *Marijuana Wars: Violent Mexican Drug Cartels Turn Northern California into ‘The Wild West,’* USA TODAY (Dec. 19, 2021), <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2021/12/19/mexican-drug-cartels-move-in-on-californias-shadow-marijuana-industry/8960873002/>.

major cities broke their previous annual homicide records in 2021: Austin, Texas; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Indianapolis, Indiana; Louisville, Kentucky; Columbus, Ohio; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Tucson, Arizona; Rochester, New York; and Portland, Oregon.²²

Defendants are well aware of the prevalence of guns used to commit crimes and the disastrous effects on amici's communities. For decades, they (and the general public) have known that Defendants' guns far too easily fall into the wrong hands. As Judge Jack Weinstein explained in 2003, "guns move quickly from the legal to the illegal market; 13% were recovered [in connection with criminal investigations] within one year of their sale, and 30% were recovered within 3 years of their first sale." *N.A.A.C.P. v. AcuSport, Inc.*, 271 F. Supp. 2d 435, 522 (E.D.N.Y. 2003). And, as Mexico observes in its Complaint, Defendants' executives have for decades noted the ease with which their guns become "black market" firearms. (Compl. ¶ 87.) Yet, Defendants have taken no steps to prevent these harms to our communities, and amici are forced to divert much of their limited resources to combatting gun violence.

²² Priya Krishnakumar et. al., *Fueled by Gun Violence, Cities Across the US Are Breaking All-Time Homicide Records This Year*, CNN (Dec. 12, 2021), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/12/us/homicides-major-cities-increase-end-of-year-2021/index.html>.

What better illustration to prove this point than the instant case? Mexico has one gun store and issues fewer than 50 permits per year. They are *Defendants'* guns that end up in Mexico in dangerous criminals' hands and then make their way *back up* to amici's communities, where they are used to inflict untold violence. Defendants have made it clear that without Court intervention, they will continue to sell their guns, which they know will illegally pour into Mexico and then percolate back up to our communities. Thus, the scourge of gun violence will continue. Absent the relief Mexico seeks here, amici's costly efforts to curb this problem cannot succeed in the face of the relentless flow of firearms from the Defendants to the cartels.

B. Defendants' Guns in Mexico Facilitate the Flow of Illicit Drugs from Mexico to the United States

The cartels' drug trade, which is of great concern in U.S. cities, is directly facilitated by Defendants' guns. Cartels use Defendants' guns to attack law enforcement in Mexico and in the United States, protect their contraband and cash, and maintain control of distribution territories in the United States. As a result, drugs flow north via the same illicit networks that cartels use to send guns south.²³

²³ U.S. Att'y for the N.D. Cal., *supra* note 3; Kevin Sieff & Nick Miroff, *The Sniper Rifles Flowing to Mexican Cartels Show a Decade of U.S. Failure*, WASH. POST (Nov. 19, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/world/mexico-losing-control/mexico-drug-cartels-sniper-rifles-us-gun-policy/> (“Traffickers bring the guns southward along the same routes they use to move drugs north.”).

As the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of California put it, “[t]he two-way flow of drug shipments heading north [to the United States] and firearms, including assault weapons, sniper rifles and grenade launchers, heading south [to Mexico] is a *potently* dangerous situation.”²⁴

1. Defendants’ Guns Are Integral to Mexican Cartels’ Drug Trafficking

Mexican cartels are the leading suppliers of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, and other illicit narcotics to the U.S.²⁵ Approximately 90-94% of the heroin consumed in the United States comes from Mexico, and approximately 90 % of cocaine trafficked to the United States comes through the Mexico/Central America corridor.²⁶ Mexican cartels have also taken over the highly lucrative business of producing fentanyl and distributing it into the United States.²⁷ After a Chinese crackdown in 2019, the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG have

²⁴ U.S. Att’y for the N.D. Cal., *supra* note 3 (emphasis added).

²⁵ Council on Foreign Rel., *supra* note 4.

²⁶ Adam Isaacson, *Four Common Misconceptions About U.S.-bound Drug Flows Through Mexico and Central America*, WOLA (June 20, 2017), <https://www.wola.org/analysis/four-common-misconceptions-u-s-bound-drug-flows-mexico-central-america/>.

²⁷ Unlike heroin, which requires acres of land to grow poppies and several months of cultivation, fentanyl requires a small workforce and infrastructure to set up a laboratory. A 2019 DEA report estimated that a fentanyl pill costs only \$1 to produce but can be resold in the U.S. for at least 10 times as much. Audrey Travère & Jules Giraudat, *Revealed: How Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel Has Created a Global Network to Rule the Fentanyl Trade*, GUARDIAN (Dec. 8, 2020),

increased their control over the export of the drug to the United States.²⁸ Once Mexican traffickers smuggle wholesale shipments of drugs into the United States, their U.S. affiliates and street gangs manage retail-level distribution in cities throughout the country.²⁹

The guns Defendants are sending into Mexico are critical to these operations. Mexican cartels use Defendants' weapons to carry out murders in Mexico and here. They have fought turf wars over this profitable business in every major city in the United States—using the guns supplied by Defendants. According to law enforcement reports, Mexican cartels have formed relationships with U.S.-based street gangs and prison gangs, using them to smuggle guns to the cartels, serve as retail-level drug distributors, collect illicit proceeds, and act as enforcers.³⁰ These deepening associations between Mexican cartels and U.S. gangs have sparked a rash of gun violence on the streets of amici's communities. For example,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/08/mexico-cartel-project-synthetic-opioid-fentanyl-drugs>.

²⁸ See Steven Dudley et. al., *Mexico's Role in the Deadly Rise of Fentanyl*, at 4 (Feb. 11, 2019),

https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/fentanyl_insight_crime_final_19-02-11.pdf.

²⁹ Travère & Giraudat, *supra* note 27.

³⁰ Nat'l Drug Intel. Ctr., *National-Level Gang-Drug Trafficking Organization Connections* (Apr. 2008),

<https://www.justice.gov/archive/ndic/pubs27/27612/national.htm#foot6>.

San Antonio, Texas, serves as a “major hub for drugs coming into the country,” which are then re-distributed nationwide by a network of street level gangs.³¹ The cartels’ influence has led to an eruption of gun violence on the city’s east side, with rival gangs fighting over who gets to sell drugs where.³² Experts estimate that drugs are related to approximately to 65-70% of all the violent crime committed in San Antonio.³³

To obtain a foothold in Northern California, Mexican cartels have relied on connections with Sureño gangs based out of Southern California. The historic tension between Sureños and Norteños has caused bloodshed, including a January 2011 incident in San Jose where gang members working for a Mexican drug trafficking organization stormed a downtown nightclub over a drug debt. The ensuing shootout between rival gangs killed three people.³⁴

³¹ Max Massey, *Drugs, Cartels, and Gangs Continue to Be a Problem in Bexar County, Sheriff Salazar Says*, KSAT (Nov. 2021), <https://www.ksat.com/news/local/2021/11/21/drugs-cartels-and-gangs-continue-to-be-a-problem-in-bexar-county-sheriff-salazar-says/>.

³² Jessie Degollado, *DEA: Cartels at Root of San Antonio's East Side Violence*, KSAT (Dec. 2017), <https://www.ksat.com/news/2017/12/22/dea-cartels-at-root-of-san-antonios-east-side-violence/>.

³³ Yami Virgin, *DEA: Most Violent Crimes Committed By Gangs in SA*, FOX SAN ANTONIO (Feb. 4, 2020), <https://foxsanantonio.com/news/yami-investigates/most-violent-crimes-committed-by-gangs-in-sa>.

³⁴ Att’y Gen. of Cal., *California and the Fight Against Transnational Organized Crime* (Mar. 2014), https://oag.ca.gov/sites/all/files/agweb/pdfs/toc/report_2014.pdf.

In Chicago, the ties between Mexican cartels and street level gangs have exacerbated gun violence concerns. Chicago-based gangs such as the Gangster Disciples, the Vice Lords, and the Latin Kings receive shipments of drugs from Mexican cartels and fight for territory for local drug sales.³⁵ Handguns are the weapon of choice for gang members, but they have also been known to set up ambushes using assault rifles capable of piercing police body armor, including at funerals of rival gang members.³⁶ In 2016, Chicago's homicides jumped more than 50 % from the previous year. Most were gang-related and perpetrated with guns.³⁷

Cities in North Carolina, including Charlotte, have seen an increase in gang violence related to the Sinaloa, CJNG, and Beltrán Leyva cartels.³⁸ In a particularly shocking recent example, a North Carolina teacher and basketball coach was killed in a shootout after trying to rob the home of a Mexican drug cartel member.³⁹

³⁵ Jeremy Kryt, *How Mexican Cartels Prey on Chicago's Chaos*, DAILY BEAST (July 2017), <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-mexican-cartels-prey-on-chicagos-chaos>.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ Catherine Welch, *Do Drug Cartels Operate in North Carolina? In Wake of Deadly Shooting, We Ask an Expert*, WFAE 90.7 (Apr. 2021), <https://www.wfae.org/local-news/2021-04-15/do-drug-cartels-operate-in-north-carolina-in-wake-of-chaotic-shooting-we-ask-an-expert>.

³⁹ Wilson Wong, *Teacher Killed in 'Old Western Shootout' After Trying to Rob Mexican Drug Cartel, Authorities Say*, NBC NEWS (Apr. 2021), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/teacher-killed-old-western-shootout-after-trying-rob-mexican-drug-n1264151>.

Additionally, proceeds made through street-level drug sales are often used to purchase Defendants' guns to then ship them down to Mexico. For example, in January 2022, law enforcement agents arrested six individuals who had conspired to ship assault rifles, machine gun parts and accessories, and hundreds of thousands of rounds of assault rifle ammunition to Mexico.⁴⁰ These weapons were purchased using proceeds from illegal narcotics sales.⁴¹ Transnational cartels sell drugs on amici's streets so that they can afford more of Defendants' guns.

As the DEA has noted, "as long as illicit drugs remain in high demand in America, street-level drug sales will continue to rank among the top criminal activities conducted by street gangs, who are lured by the prospect of the huge financial gains."⁴² Moreover, "the violence associated with drug trafficking that is visited on communities around the country will only increase as street, prison, and outlaw motorcycle gangs clash viciously in their quest to control the largest and most lucrative territories."⁴³ Defendants, whose guns are used by Mexican cartels

⁴⁰ U.S. Att'y for the C.D. of Cal., *supra* note 2.

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² DEA, *2019 National Drug Threat Assessment* (Dec. 2019), https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2020-01/2019-NDTA-final-01-14-2020_Low_Web-DIR-007-20_2019.pdf.

⁴³ *Id.*

and their U.S. gang counterparts to advance their drug trade, profit directly from this bloodshed.

2. Where There Are Drugs, There Are Guns

At each significant drug-related arrest involving transnational cartels operating in the United States, numerous guns (including military-style weapons) are recovered. For example, in October, the Mexican Army and the National Guard raided a drug lab set up in an ostensibly middle-class home in Culiacán, the capital of northwest Sinaloa.⁴⁴ In the home, troops seized 118 kilograms of fentanyl in what is being heralded as the largest seizure of pure fentanyl in history.⁴⁵ In tandem with the Mexican raid, U.S. federal agents arrested 17 individuals in Missouri, Arizona, and California, and recovered 50 firearms in connection with the arrests.⁴⁶

In March 2020, the DEA announced the results of Project Python, a multilateral interagency operation encompassing all global investigations and related disruption activities targeting CJNG.⁴⁷ Project Python resulted in 600

⁴⁴ Parker Asman, *What Does Massive Fentanyl Seizure Say About US-Mexico Security Relations?* INSIGHT CRIME (Nov. 2021), <https://insightcrime.org/news/massive-seizure-fentanyl-us-mexico-security/>.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ U.S. Att’y for the E.D. Mo., *Agents Arrest 17 People in Large-Scale Multi-State Drug Trafficking Ring Involving Fentanyl, Heroin, Crystal Methamphetamine and Firearms*, (Oct. 25, 2021), <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edmo/pr/agents-arrest-17-people-large-scale-multi-state-drug-trafficking-ring-involving>.

⁴⁷ U.S. Dep’t of Just., *DEA-Led Operation Nets More Than 600 Arrests Targeting Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (Mar. 11, 2020),

arrests and 350 indictments throughout the United States, including in California, Texas, Illinois, and New Jersey, and seizures of more than 15,000 kilos of meth and nearly \$20 million in illicit funds.⁴⁸ Of course, multiple firearms, including military-style weapons, were recovered at the arrest sites, including 18 firearms in San Diego alone.⁴⁹

3. The Drugs Mexican Cartels Import With Defendants' Guns Cause Acute Harm In Our Communities

Easy access to Defendants' guns has allowed Mexican cartels to realize their ultimate goal: becoming primary distributors of the opioids that are decimating amici's communities. In the United States, Customs and Border Protection estimates that seizures of fentanyl at the southern border have increased by 456% from 2018 to 2021.⁵⁰ Amici have seen increases in seizures in their own

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/dea-led-operation-nets-more-600-arrests-targeting-c-rtel-jalisco-nueva-generaci-n>.

⁴⁸ *Id.*; see also Nina Golgowski, *Feds Arrest over 600 Alleged Mexican Cartel Members Across U.S.*, HUFFINGTON POST (Mar. 2020),

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/project-python-dea-drug-cartel-arrests_n_5e6a3494c5b6bd8156f29013.

⁴⁹ *DEA's 'Project Python' Nets 130 Arrests in San Diego and Imperial Counties, Plus 3K+ Pounds of Meth*, NBC SAN DIEGO (Mar. 11, 2020),

<https://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/photos-deas-project-python-nets-130-arrests-in-san-diego-and-imperial-counties-plus-3k-pounds-of-meth/2283454/>; Erik Avancier, *Guns, Drugs, Stolen Property Seized in Federal Raid on WestSide*, NEWS4JAX (Mar. 11, 2020), <https://www.news4jax.com/news/2020/03/11/guns-drugs-stolen-property-seized-in-federal-raid-on-westside/>.

⁵⁰ U.S. Customs and Border Prot., *Drug Seizure Statistics* (Jan. 2022),

<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/drug-seizure-statistics>.

communities, too. In December 2021, for example, Arizona-based federal and local law enforcement agents made a record seizure of almost 1.7 million fentanyl pills and 10 kilograms of fentanyl powder in a single investigation.⁵¹ In October 2021, drug enforcement agents seized more than 9,000 fentanyl-laced pills and two kilograms of pure fentanyl in the Atlanta area in one day alone.⁵²

The fentanyl trafficked by Mexican cartels, has contributed to the devastating effects synthetic opioids are having on amici's communities. Since 1999, the rate of drug overdoses in the United States has nearly quadrupled.⁵³ From April 2020 through March 2021, there were nearly 97,000 drug overdose deaths in the United States, 75% of which involved an opioid. In the same 12-month period the year before, 73,000 overdose deaths were reported, with 71% involving an opioid.⁵⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this issue, as people have struggled with isolation, economic precarity, and lack of access to

⁵¹ Jodie Underwood, *Record Fentanyl Seizure by DEA Phoenix, Scottsdale Police & the Arizona Attorney General's Office as DEA Announces Nationwide Public Safety Surge* (Dec. 2021), <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2021/12/17/record-fentanyl-seizure-dea-phoenix-scottsdale-police-arizona-attorney>.

⁵² Rob DiRienzo, *'Historic' amount of pills laced with fentanyl seized in Atlanta metro area* FOX5 ATLANTA (Oct. 2021), <https://www.fox5atlanta.com/news/feds-seize-historic-amount-of-fake-pills-laced-with-fentanyl-in-atlanta-metro-area>.

⁵³ Ctrs. for Disease Control & Prevention, *Understanding the Epidemic* (Mar. 2021), <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/epidemic.html>.

⁵⁴ Ctrs. for Disease Control & Prevention, *Vital Statistics Rapid Release, Provisional Drug Overdose Death Count* (Jan. 12, 2022), <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm#dashboard>.

services. As COVID-19 ravaged the county, the drug epidemic quietly took more lives. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 100,000 Americans died of drug overdoses during the 12 months following the COVID-19 lockdowns, the most overdose deaths ever recorded in one year.⁵⁵

The devastating consequences of this crisis for amici's communities goes beyond overdoses. Open-air drug markets and public drug use "are major contributors to the trauma, insecurity, and frustration experienced by many of those who spend time" in communities struck by the opioid epidemic.⁵⁶

It is undisputed that the flow of illegal drugs from Mexico to the United States is built on the back of the cartels' possession of Defendants' guns. To contain the disastrous impact that the prevalence of these deadly drugs has had in amici's communities, we must confront Defendants' complicity in arming the drug syndicates responsible for them.

⁵⁵ Ctrs. for Disease Control & Prevention, *Drug Overdose Deaths in the U.S. Top 100,000 Annually* (Nov. 2021), https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2021/20211117.htm.

⁵⁶ *A Report from the San Francisco Street-Level Drug Dealing Task Force* (Jun. 2021), [https://oewd.org/sites/default/files/SF%20Street-Level%20Drug%20Dealing%20Task%20Force%20Report%20\(June%2030%202021\).pdf](https://oewd.org/sites/default/files/SF%20Street-Level%20Drug%20Dealing%20Task%20Force%20Report%20(June%2030%202021).pdf).

CONCLUSION

When you put assault weapons into commerce, they will kill people. This is all the more true when you arm violent criminal gangs that operate across borders. Defendants have known this for a long time. They just don't care. As the people who confront this truth on a daily basis, amici urge the Court not to turn away from it. The Court should find that PLCAA does not apply in this case.

Dated: March 21, 2023

Respectfully submitted,
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CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE

Pursuant to Fed. R. App. P. 32(a)(7)(C) and First Circuit Rule 32(g)(1), the attached amicus brief is proportionately spaced, has a typeface of 14 points or more and contains 4801 words.

Dated: March 21, 2023

By: /s/ Ellen V. Leonida
Ellen V. Leonida

CONSENT TO FILE

Pursuant to Fed. R. App. P. 29(a)(2), all parties have consented to the filing of this brief.

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Ellen V. Leonida, certify that this document, filed through the ECF system, shall be electronically sent to all registered participants as identified on the Notice of Electronic Filing.

Dated: March 21, 2023

By: /s/ Ellen V. Leonida
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