

FOREWORD BY THE DIRECTOR

Every day, more than 100 people are killed by gun violence across the United States, and many more are wounded. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is the lead federal law enforcement agency charged with investigating firearm-related crimes. Through that mission, ATF's topflight investigative workforce has developed unique expertise on illegal firearm trafficking and how it occurs. That is why I am pleased to announce the publication of Volume III of the *National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment: Firearm Trafficking Investigations*. This Volume incorporates input from the most comprehensive ever national survey of the special agents who conduct ATF trafficking investigations. It provides the first in-depth analysis of firearm trafficking investigations in more than two decades.

ATF's strategy to reduce gun violence is two-fold. We use a data-driven approach and strong partnerships: (1) to identify, investigate, and help prosecute the trigger pullers and shot callers who terrorize American communities; and (2) to identify, investigate, and hold accountable those responsible for diverting firearms from lawful commerce into illegal markets, where often they fall into the hands of those same violent criminals. *Both* are fundamental to reducing violent crime.

Firearm trafficking is not a victimless crime. It presents a grave threat to public safety. I cannot stress enough the dangerousness of firearm trafficking and how it impacts our communities. And the data in this Volume supports that claim. Trafficked firearms were used to commit further crimes in almost a quarter of the cases surveyed (2,363) -- of which 265 involved homicides, 222 involved attempted homicides, and 446 involved aggravated assaults. Therefore, understanding *how* firearms flow into illegal markets and into the hands of dangerous people who the law says cannot have them is essential to the fight to reduce violent crime.

ATF is on the front line of that fight, working with our federal, state, local, territorial, and Tribal partners, to combat firearm trafficking, which is the intentional movement of firearms into illegal markets for a criminal purpose. This is a huge endeavor we proudly take on with a relatively small number of ATF Special Agents, currently at just around 2,500, in 25 ATF Field Divisions across the country and at our national Headquarters. For this study, we asked agents doing these investigations on that front line to respond to thousands of surveys on ATF investigations which were initiated between January 1, 2017, and December 31, 2021. This Volume is a comprehensive account of almost 10,000 closed firearm trafficking investigations that occurred during that five-year period.

The goal of a firearm trafficking investigation is both to hold these lawbreakers accountable and to prevent violent crime by stopping the diversion of firearms into illegal markets, where they are often used for criminal purposes. These labor-intensive investigations are increasingly intelligence driven. For instance, during the five-year study period, firearm trafficking investigations were most frequently (nearly 23%) initiated by a referral of intelligence analysis and information from one of ATF's Crime Gun Intelligence Centers (CGIC).

CGICs are law enforcement hubs that focus exclusively on investigating and preventing gun violence in local communities. They bring together, under one roof, the expertise of state and federal investigators, firearms evidence examiners, and intelligence analysts to rapidly collect, analyze, and share information and leads about guns used in violent crimes and to take action to disrupt and dismantle firearm trafficking. ATF operates or supports more than 60 CGICs nationwide.

Building on Volumes I and II, the new data collected and analyzed in Volume III provides more useful insight into how firearms flow into illegal markets. Gun traffickers rely on illegal markets supplied by sources such as straw purchasers, unlicensed dealers, firearm thieves, and corrupt federal firearms licensees (FFLs). But over the course of the last two decades there has been a shift in the types of supply lines, or trafficking channels, used to move these firearms. Investigations involving corrupt FFLs have decreased over the study period with the most frequent channels identified now being illegal, unlicensed firearm dealing by private persons and straw purchasing. Additionally, firearm traffickers are now illegally exploiting venues and media such as gun shows, flea markets, online marketplaces, and social media platforms. And while Privately Made Firearms, or "ghost guns," were not previously considered to be a reliable supply line for firearms traffickers, they are now in the top 10 trafficking channels.

Analyzing the patterns and trends in firearm trafficking helps law enforcement, the public, academics, the media, and policy makers identify the most effective prevention and enforcement strategies. With greater knowledge of the methods and means used by firearm traffickers, we can focus our resources more effectively to achieve a larger public safety impact.

What is trafficked, and who is involved in gun trafficking? During this study period, over half of the firearms trafficked were handguns (nearly 56%), with rifles following in second (nearly 19%). The traffickers who directly or indirectly facilitated the movement of firearms to illegal markets tended to be white (53%), male (84%), and U.S. citizens (95%). The recipients or end users of the trafficked firearms tended to be previously convicted felons (60%) and young adults aged 25 to 34 (48%).

The three most frequently identified violations of federal law in cases during this study included: (1) dealing in firearms without a license, (2) providing false information to an FFL, which is associated with straw purchasing, and (3) possession of a firearm by a convicted felon.

Disrupting firearm trafficking is a collaborative effort that includes not only law enforcement, but also our policy makers. The President and Congress did important work in providing ATF with new tools to combat firearm trafficking by enacting the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) in 2022. The BSCA created for the first time, specific provisions in the Gun Control Act (GCA) criminalizing firearm trafficking and straw purchasing. However, since these provisions did not take effect until after the study period, it is important to note that this report analyzes strategies employed with the less-direct statutory tools available at the time.

I would also be remiss if I did not thank the incredibly dedicated and talented team, both inside ATF and from our law enforcement and academic partners, who helped in this invaluable collection of data to inform and address firearm trafficking. Last, special thanks to the many

federal, state, local, territorial, and Tribal law enforcement agencies and officers who directly participated in the often-dangerous investigations described in Volume III. We commend you, and all law enforcement, for your courage in fighting to reduce violent crime.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. M. Dettelbach". The signature is stylized with thick, bold strokes and is centered on the page.

Steven M. Dettelbach
Director