

## General Findings: Comprehensive, Community-Based Crime Gun Tracing

The 17 participating sites jointly tested the feasibility and utility of an enforcement policy of submitting all recovered crime guns in a community to the National Tracing Center (NTC) for tracing. Based on this experience, ATF reaches the following conclusions:

**Comprehensive, community-based crime gun tracing is achievable.** Trace requests from the 17 sites during the 10-month period nearly doubled over the same period the previous year, from approximately 20,000 trace requests to more than 37,000 trace requests. Tracing volume in all of the sites increased. Police departments in all of the sites had official policies requiring tracing of all recovered crime guns for all or part of the project period. Eight of the communities reported that they had a general tracing policy before the initiative began. One site, Jersey City, was part of a state-wide agreement by enforcement officials and prosecutors to trace all crime guns. One State, Virginia, mandates tracing of all firearms recovered by State and local enforcement agencies. Sixteen of the seventeen participating police departments continue to have a written or stated policy of tracing all recovered firearms.

**Technical improvements in local and State tracing capability increase crime gun tracing levels, efficiency, and accuracy.** Working with local and State enforcement officials, ATF has tested three methods of facilitating comprehensive crime gun tracing. The methods vary according to the jurisdiction's volume of recovered firearms, recordkeeping procedures, and level of computerization. Costs of such technical assistance are low and the benefits high, both for the police departments and ATF. Because of technical improvements, for instance, New York City's requests for traces jumped to close to 13,000 crime guns during the 10-month project period, from fewer than 4,000 crime guns during the same time period the previous year. San Antonio's tracing rate increased 500 percent, to close to 2,000 crime gun traces during the project period from fewer than 400 traces during the same period the previous year.

**Comprehensive crime gun tracing achieves its primary purpose: to increase the number of investigative leads to illegal traffickers derived from NTC tracing.** The *primary* purposes of NTC crime gun tracing are to assist in solving individual gun crimes and to increase the amount of investigative information about illegal gun trafficking available to enforcement agencies. Crime gun trace information is added to the NTC's Project LEAD. This information system aggregates crime gun trace information from enforcement agencies throughout the Nation, and identifies links among those traces. For instance, Project LEAD could link a crime gun that enforcement officials in Inglewood, California, submit for tracing with a crime gun that enforcement officials in Jersey City, New Jersey, submit for tracing by showing that both were sold by the same Federal firearms licensee or purchased by the same individual. By nearly doubling the volume of trace requests from the 17 communities, ATF and local and State enforcement agencies have significantly increased the amount of trace information in Project LEAD and the number of investigative leads available to enforcement agencies throughout the country.

**As demonstrated by these reports, comprehensive crime gun tracing can also be used to assist enforcement agencies by identifying major crime gun patterns in a community.** By simply submitting trace requests on all recovered firearms, enforcement officials can check for patterns and trends on crime guns in their community. When the NTC can successfully trace these crime guns, additional strategic and investigative information is available.

**Refinement of tracing guidelines and practices will result in greater consistency in trace analysis reporting.** While participants have followed or are following comprehensive tracing policies, tracing procedures vary. For instance, practices may differ for tracing firearms that have obliterated serial numbers, are recovered by school authorities, are found without identified possessors or are known to be stolen, or are antique. In addition, there are variations in how the exact location of where the firearm was recovered is reported. For this reason, a few crime guns recovered in nearby jurisdictions may have been included in reports from some of the 17 sites. Finally, during this special initiative, enforcement agencies may have submitted all available firearms rather than only firearms recovered after the initiative began. Trace levels can be expected to stabilize if technical improvements are made and as the NTC refines tracing guidelines.

**Faster NTC trace completion time benefits enforcement agencies.** The faster a crime gun trace can be completed, the sooner the trace information can be entered into the Project LEAD illegal trafficking information system and the sooner it can be used by enforcement officials in investigations of illegal traffickers. The NTC presently completes trace requests in an average of 9 days. Crime gun-related investigations would benefit from faster completion times. Two factors affect completion time: NTC resources and the speed with which Federal firearms licensees make records available. The firearms industry has recently pledged to assist the NTC in speeding up crime gun tracing by making more records accessible electronically.

**Increasing the number and percentage of successful NTC traces benefits enforcement agencies.** The NTC successfully completed approximately 37 percent of the traces requested during this project. Reasons for lack of successful NTC tracing include lack of needed information about the firearm in trace requests (23 percent), lack of Federal firearms licensee records (7 percent), and legal and resource limitations on tracing older firearms (33 percent). Not all trace analyses depend on successfully completing trace requests. However, the benefits of crime gun tracing for enforcement agencies are maximized if traces are successfully completed. Many of the reasons preventing successful NTC tracing can and should be addressed.

**Training in crime gun tracing benefits enforcement agencies.** Working together, police departments and ATF fulfilled their goal of tracing all recovered crime guns, with a minimum of training. However, some sites were more successful than others in submitting the full amount of crime gun-related data that can be used in Project LEAD and in trace analyses. In particular, a few sites provided insufficient possessor date of birth information to provide reliable analysis by age category. Most importantly, 23 percent of the trace requests overall were submitted with insufficient firearms information to successfully complete the traces. This reflects several factors, including that some police departments' internal firearms-related procedures are more conducive than others to comprehensive crime gun tracing. Training in crime gun tracing and a collaborative effort between the NTC and State and local enforcement agencies are needed to improve the level of information provided in trace requests.