General Findings:
Local Illegal Firearms Markets

These General Findings are based on trace information from the participating jurisdictions. These include 22 of the 67 cities in the United States with a population of 250,000 or larger, and five smaller jurisdictions. This is the largest collection of comprehensive, community-based information available on recovered crime guns. The National Tracing Center is not providing tables that aggregate and summarize all the information provided in Part II for each individual community. This is because, notwithstanding the large number of traces, the 27 communities combined may not comprise a statistical sample for purposes of national analysis. Nevertheless, some useful conclusions can be drawn.
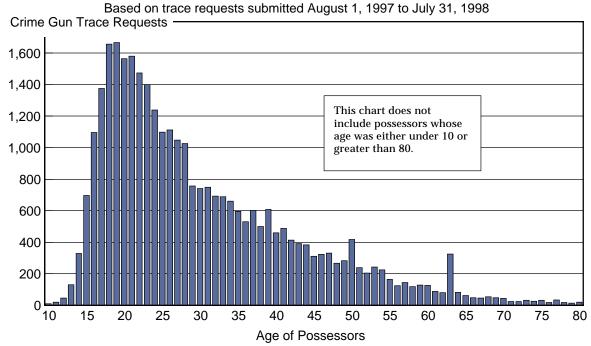
Crime guns recovered from juveniles (ages 17 and under) account for 11.3 percent of the crime guns submitted to the National Tracing Center.* (Here, as in all other findings where the age of possessors is noted, counts and percentages can be calculated only for those trace requests submitted with possessor age information.) Figure 1 shows that the number of crime guns increases from about 300 for juveniles aged 14 to about 1300

for individuals aged 17. Crime guns were recovered more frequently from individuals aged 16 and 17 than from individuals of any age older than 26.

Crime guns recovered from youth (ages 18 to 24) constitute 32.4 percent of all trace requests. There are more crime guns recovered from this seven-year age grouping than any other seven-year age group-

* Figures of recoveries by age group sum to 99.9 percent due to rounding. A discussion of rounding is included in the Technical Notes at the end of Part II.

Figure 1

Age of Crime Gun Possessors
Based on trace requests submitted August 1, 1997 to July 31, 1998

This chart does not include possessors whose age was either under 10 or greater than 80.

ing in the juvenile or adult categories. Figure 1 shows that across all age groups, the most frequent age of crime gun possession is 19. The second most frequent age is 18.

Crime guns recovered from adults (ages 25 and over) constitute 56.3 percent of all trace requests. While the broad age range included in the adult category (from ages 25 to 96 years), in contrast to the juvenile (17 years and younger) and youth (18 to 24 years) categories, essentially ensured this result, at no age older than 31 were more crime guns recovered than from 15 year olds, and more crime guns were received from 14 year olds than from any age older than 50.
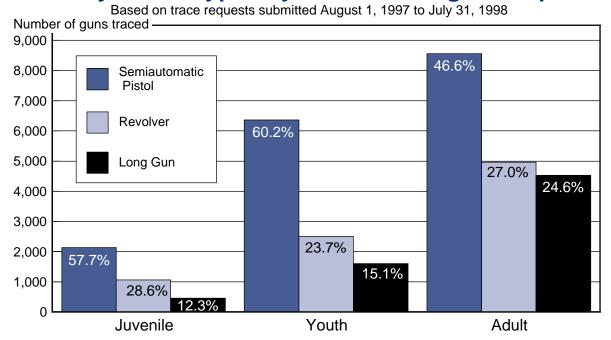
8.1 of every ten crime guns traced were handguns. Handguns were the most prevalent type of crime guns recovered across all age groups.

Of handguns, semiautomatic pistols clearly predominate, making up the top category of guns recovered in each city, and 52 percent of all trace requests. Semiautomatic pistols were more prevalent in the juvenile (57.7 percent) and youth (60.2 percent) age groups than among the adults (46.6 percent).

Revolvers made up 27.6 percent of total crime gun trace requests.

Long guns, including shotguns and rifles, accounted for 18.8 percent of total trace requests. While handguns were still the majority of adult crime guns, rifles and shotguns combined (24.6 percent) were about as prevalent among adults as revolvers (27 percent).

Figure 2

Major Gun Types by Possessor Age Group

Based on trace requests submitted August 1, 1997 to July 31, 1998

While findings about the types of firearms recovered are similar across sites, there are also some city-specific variations. Atlanta and Houston had the largest percentage of semiautomatic pistols. Detroit had the largest percentage of revolvers, though semi-automatic pistols still dominated crime gun trace requests from that city. The prevalence of long guns was higher in San Antonio, Minneapolis, Salinas, and Milwaukee than in other cities.

Crime guns are concentrated among a relatively few makes and calibers of fire-arms, particularly for crime guns recovered from juveniles and youth. The top 10 most frequently traced types of crime guns, by manufacturer and caliber, represent a disproportionately large share of the total number of recovered firearms. Overall, the top 10 crime guns by manufacturer, type and caliber account for 24.6 percent of trace requests. Guns recovered from juveniles are slightly more concentrated, with the top 10 types of recovered firearms making up 28.3 percent of trace requests. The proportion of crime guns represented by the top 10 most frequently traced firearms diminishes slightly with increased possessor age, until it reaches a level of 23.1 percent among adult traces. The particular mix of firearms that dominates among crime guns changes from city to city, and is an important attribute of city-specific illegal firearms markets.

In general, the State in which the community is located is the largest single source of its traced crime guns. (A source State can only be identified in cases where a trace results in the identification of an FFL or retail purchaser.) In 21 of the 27 sites, the State itself supplies a *majority* of traced crime guns. In an additional four of the 27—Boston, Detroit, New York, and St. Louis— the State supplied a *plurality*. (A plurality indicates the State itself supplies more crime guns than any other single source State, while the com-

bination of all other States supplies more than half of the traced crime guns.) Jersey City was the only city in which the State itself was not the leading source State. Only 14 percent of traced crime guns recovered in Jersey City were first sold at retail in New Jersey. Crime guns recovered in Washington, D.C., which severely limits retail firearms sales, were from outside of the city.

Many recovered firearms are rapidly diverted from first retail sales at Federally licensed gun dealers to an illegal market that supplies juveniles, youth, and adults. This is indicated by the proportion of guns recovered by law enforcement officials that are new, that is, bought less than three years before recovery by enforcement officials. Experienced trafficking investigators have found that recovery of crime guns within three years is a significant trafficking indicator. New guns in juvenile or criminal hands signal direct diversion, by illegal firearms trafficking— for instance through straw purchases or off the book sales by corrupt FFLs. Of the crime guns submitted for tracing, ATF estimates that new crime guns comprise between 25 percent and 36 percent of the firearms recovered from juveniles, between 32 percent and 49 percent of the firearms recovered from youth, and between 27 percent and 40 percent of the firearms recovered from adults. (The method for arriving at these estimates is explained in the Technical Notes included at the end of Part II.)

The obliteration of firearm serial numbers is now a measurable as well as a significant problem. For the first time, reports of crime guns with obliterated serial numbers have been included for each participating city. Both the obliteration of a serial number and the possession of a firearm with an obliterated serial number are Federal crimes. The recovery of a firearm with an obliterated serial number is also an indicator of illegal

firearms trafficking, since the intentional obliteration of a serial number is intended to make it difficult for law enforcement officials to identify the last licensed seller and first unlicensed purchaser of the firearm.
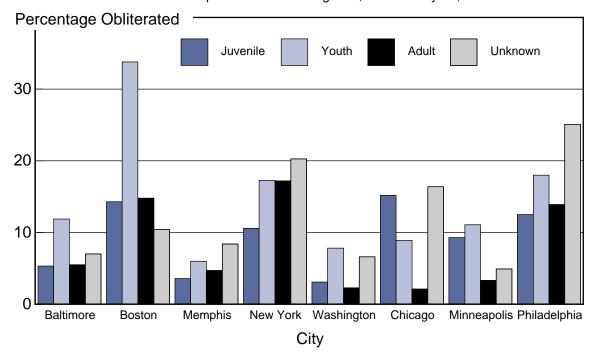
For eight cities where complete data are available, an average of 11.4 percent of handguns traced as crime guns have obliterated serial numbers. ATF has begun to work closely with police departments to encourage them to restore the serial numbers on and submit trace requests for all of these guns. Only partial reporting of crime guns with obliterated serial numbers was possible due to the newness of this initiative. Reporting is comprehensive for eight cities: Chicago, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Memphis, Washington, New York, Baltimore, and Boston. Preliminary analysis for these cities indicates that handguns traced with obliterated serial numbers are disproportionately semiautomatic pistols in the relatively high-powered 9mm and .380 calibers.

Figure 3

Percentage of Semiautomatic Pistols with Obliterated Serial Numbers by Age Group for Selected Cities

Based on trace requests submitted August 1, 1997 to July 31, 1998