

Methods of Illegal Transfer of Firearms to Juveniles and Other Prohibited Persons

Since 1996, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) has made the prevention of illegal firearms trafficking an operational priority, in combination with deterring and incarcerating armed criminals. During that time, in cooperation with State and local authorities, ATF has been developing a more precise picture of the structure of the illegal firearms market that supplies unauthorized juveniles, criminals and other prohibited persons.

Common view: two methods. The common view had been that there are two primary sources of illegally supplied firearms— old guns that are stolen and new guns that are trafficked. Further, a common view had been that trafficking occurs in large volume and primarily across state lines, and that, by contrast, theft of firearms is virtually always committed by individual juveniles and felons to acquire illegal firearms for their own personal use.

Revised view: multiple sources. Through crime gun tracing, trace analysis, and investigative work, ATF has learned that this picture is oversimplified. ATF has found that there are multiple illegal sources of firearms that law enforcement must address. Successful targeting of illegal firearms markets requires a combination of crime gun tracing, trace analysis, and more traditional criminal intelligence (confidential informants, debriefing arrestees, cooperating offenders, conditioned plea bargains, etc.). Effective local, State and Federal efforts to disrupt illegal firearms markets must recognize the complexity of illegal firearms trafficking, and formulate combined strategies to address its discrete components. These components encompass:

1. Trafficking in *new* firearms, interstate and intrastate, including by —

- Licensed firearm dealers, including pawn-brokers
- Large scale straw purchasers or straw purchasing rings
- Small scale straw purchasers, e.g. buying one or a few guns

2. Trafficking in *used* firearms, interstate and intrastate, including by —

- Licensed firearm dealers, including pawn-brokers
- Large scale straw purchasers or straw purchasing rings
- Small scale straw purchasers, e.g. buying one or a few guns
- Private sellers, including non-Federal firearms licensee sellers at gun shows and flea markets, or through want ads, gun

magazines, the Internet, and personal associations

- Bartering and trading within criminal networks

3. Trafficking in new and used *stolen* firearms, involving —

- Licensed gun dealer theft, including pawn-broker theft
- Organized fencing of stolen guns
- Common carrier theft
- Household and automobile theft
- Bartering and trading within criminal networks
- Manufacturer theft

4. *Not* trafficking —

- Individual thefts by adult and juvenile criminals for their own purposes