

Update: Comprehensive Community Crime Gun Tracing

This section of the Report describes the progress made in comprehensive crime gun tracing during the past year.

Crime gun tracing as a basis for developing and sharing illegal gun market information and collaborating on trafficking investigations is a recent law enforcement innovation. It requires close cooperation between ATF and other Federal, State and local law enforcement authorities that recover crime guns and submit trace requests. This year, ATF's goals were to improve the infrastructure for comprehensive tracing, analysis, and delivery of trace information at ATF's National Tracing Center (NTC); to assist in maintaining and improving tracing capability in the original 17 Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative (YCGII) communities; and to extend comprehensive tracing to police agencies in an additional 10 cities.

Number of Crime Guns Being Traced Continues to Increase. Law enforcement officials in the 27 participating cities submitted approximately 76,260 crime gun trace requests between August 1, 1997 and July 31, 1998. This represents 39 percent of the total number of crime gun trace requests submitted to the National Tracing Center during this period. The 10 new YCGII cities submitted 37,393 trace requests, 67 percent more than this group of communities submitted during the same period the previous year.

Reengineering at the National Tracing Center (NTC) to Handle Increased Tracing Volume and Speed Up Tracing. To handle the increased volume of trace requests from the 27 participating YCGII sites, and from other jurisdictions around the nation, the NTC in 1998 reengineered its Firearms Tracing System. The new system allows police departments to submit trace requests by electronic download from their records systems or through the National Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (NLETS) directly into ATF's tracing system. It also allows ATF to prepare customized trace analysis for particular jurisdictions. Reengineering the system took most of the past year. The new system can process more traces faster. A police department can expect a trace response in 9 to 13 business days, with urgent traces handled within hours or even minutes. As compared with trace response time during the last YCGII tracing period, this represents an almost 50 percent improvement in response time.

Communities Tracing Comprehensively. Police departments that join the YCGII make a commitment to trace all crime guns recovered in their jurisdictions. While the NTC cannot determine definitively whether all recovered crime guns are being traced, an evaluation can be made based on the number of trace requests, the tracing infrastructure in the law enforcement agencies, and on information obtained from local officials. On this basis, the NTC determined that during the study period, 23 of the 27 cities were tracing comprehensively. Four cities, Bridgeport, Houston, Los Angeles, and Seattle, either started late, or traced comprehensively during part of the year, due to staffing or computer issues, and are now either tracing all recovered crime guns or, with ATF's assistance, developing the systems to do so. ATF is continuing to work with all participating law enforcement agencies to increase the completeness of trace information provided.

More Police Departments Developing Electronic Batch Tracing Capability. The direct electronic transfer of trace requests is more accurate and cost-effective for both ATF and police departments, and makes tracing a large volume of crime guns manageable. Therefore, ATF in 1998 began providing technical assistance to police departments that have made a commitment to comprehensive tracing for the YCGII. The Department of Justice has also provided funding to support this effort. The NTC contacted each participating department to evaluate how their computer systems could most cost-effectively support electronic tracing. In many participating city police departments,

The Purpose of Comprehensive Community Crime Gun Tracing. By identifying the last licensed seller, and last unlicensed purchaser of record of a firearm used in a crime, ATF, with the assistance of licensed firearms manufacturers and sellers, may be able to undertake investigations to determine who transferred the crime weapon illegally to the juvenile, or the adult criminal from whom law enforcement officials recovered it. This knowledge allows Federal, State, and local law enforcement officials to investigate, arrest, and prosecute gun traffickers responsible for illegal transfers. Comprehensive tracing maximizes the number of investigative leads available for trafficking investigators. When established, comprehensive crime gun tracing enables ATF and other enforcement agency officials to determine regional and national patterns of illegal gun trafficking, allowing for more effective law enforcement operations.

ATF emphasizes that the appearance of a Federal firearms licensee (FFL) or a first unlicensed purchaser of record in association with a crime gun or in association with multiple crime guns in no way suggests that either the FFL or the first purchaser has committed criminal acts. Rather, such information may provide a starting point for further and more detailed investigation.

not all crime-gun and criminal-incident information is available in an automated format for comprehensive tracing purposes. It was also found that each department possessed a different degree of automation capability, which prompted the design of an electronic tracing program that was unique for each city. ATF expects 21 of 27 cities to be using some form of batch electronic trace submission system in 1999. Of the 27 participating police departments, 9 are now electronically transmitting crime gun trace requests to the NTC. The electronic trace file transmission is being

accomplished either through a direct dial-up connection from the police department or via the local ATF Office Network. Chicago, Cincinnati, Birmingham, San Antonio and Houston were among the cities that started electronic tracing this year. ATF will continue to work with police departments to expand batch downloading capacity to other cities throughout the country. ATF's goal is to establish electronic tracing support for all law enforcement agencies with significant numbers of crime gun recoveries.

National Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (NLETS). NLETS is the telecommunications system used by law enforcement for communications involving investigative information. For smaller departments, NLETS provides a good tracing solution, and it can supplement centralized electronic tracing systems in large departments. All 50 States are equipped with NLETS, with access to the system and system design handled by a State coordinator. In 10 YCGII cities, formatted tracing screens have been installed to allow the police department to trace firearms using this system and receive an immediate trace identification number from the NTC in response. ATF is continuing to work with NLETS Board of Directors and State representatives to provide automated means for law enforcement agencies with access to NLETS to trace firearms.

Training in Firearms Tracing and Illegal Trafficking Investigation. ATF provided training and technical assistance to ATF field offices and to local law enforcement officials in the recovery of crime guns, information required to initiate a trace, how to submit a trace request, and how to use comprehensive trace information to develop investigative leads for firearms trafficking cases. Due to the important role of firearms trafficking investigations in the reduction of violent crime, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, in a program funded by the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance, provides training at the NTC for police departments that want to start comprehensive crime gun tracing and trafficking enforcement programs. Several YCGII cities have taken advantage of this program to receive additional training.

Partnerships With The Firearms Industry.

ATF and a number of Federal firearms licensees have formed working partnerships to facilitate the tracing of crime guns. Toward this end, ATF developed a standardized automated system called Access 2000. The system allows the NTC to query an FFL and print a crime gun's history based on the serial number, both speeding up the trace process and reducing industry trace-related costs. ATF is currently using this or similar computerized systems to obtain needed crime gun trace information from RSR Wholesale, Harrington and Richardson, Smith and Wesson, and Davidson Wholesale. Other firearms industry members have expressed an interest in acquiring the hardware and software needed to use Access 2000.

New Emphasis on Restoring and Reporting Obliterated Serial Numbers.

ATF over the past year has increased efforts to work with police departments and law enforcement laboratories to restore the obliterated serial numbers on crime guns. When obliterated serial numbers are restored or even partially restored, the information provides a firearms trafficking investigative lead that can be pursued. Taken as a group, crime guns with obliterated serial numbers are a major resource for identifying firearms trafficking trends and patterns. To develop local coordinated enforcement efforts to trace and proactively target leads derived from recovered crime guns with obliterated serial numbers, ATF began an effort to educate State and local investigators and firearms examiners on the importance of restoring obliterated serial numbers and tracing those firearms, in three day sessions of instructional and hands-on training. The first schools were held in Gary, Indiana; Nashville, Tennessee; and Albuquerque, New Mexico. ATF has been working closely with several YCGII cities—Chicago, Memphis, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Boston—to assist them in restoring obliterated serial numbers and comprehensive tracing of these weapons. Due to improved information in several cities, each Part II YCGII report now includes tables on crime gun recoveries with

ATF To Expand Availability of Project LEAD. Project LEAD is ATF's trafficking information system that supports enforcement operations. Trace information is entered in the system, which identifies patterns in crime gun sales and purchases, providing investigative leads to potential illegal traffickers. Project LEAD currently is periodically supplied to selected ATF offices on disks. During 1998, the NTC, in connection with its overall redesign, also reengineered Project LEAD to allow on-line analysis of all traces currently in the system by all ATF offices. ATF expects to complete this process in April 1999. On-line access will make Project LEAD more useful to special agents and local violence reduction task forces. Project LEAD has also been programmed to allow agents to search for sellers and purchasers specifically involved with crime guns recovered from juveniles and youth.

obliterated serial numbers. However information is considered complete for only 8 cities.

Institutionalizing Trace Analysis. Crime gun trace analysis is an increasingly valuable tool for law enforcement. To support this mission, ATF has established the Crime Gun Analysis Branch (CGAB) at the NTC. This organization is dedicated to assisting field investigations involving crime guns and crime gun trafficking. The CGAB supports all of the 27 YCGII cities and prepares this Report.

Analysis of Crime Guns Associated With Multiple Sales. The requirement that Federal firearms licensees record multiple sales of handguns is a significant investigative tool for illegal trafficking investigations. All crime gun trace requests involving handguns are checked to determine whether the firearm was first sold in a multiple sale. As reported last year, ATF has learned that crime guns later found with obliterated serial numbers are frequently purchased in multiple sales. This year ATF

conducted an assessment of the multiple sales reporting system. As a result of that assessment, ATF changed the multiple sales reporting procedure to simplify and reduce the paperwork burden on FFLs. The new reporting procedure is clearer, quicker, and more accessible to State and local law enforcement, making it a better investigative tool. The NTC anticipates that the new reporting system will facilitate crime gun tracing and analysis.

Improved Out-of-Business Records Collection. Crime gun traces begin with a check of out-of-business records, so that manufacturers are not contacted unless necessary. Over the past year, the NTC has made a concerted effort to ensure that its out-of-business records were complete, recognizing that many FFLs did not renew their licenses following changes made in licensing procedures by the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. As a consequence of that effort, 41,000 out-of-business FFLs submitted records to the NTC between August 1997 and August 1998.

Increasing the Number of Traces That Identify an FFL and a First Retail Transaction. The NTC is continually improving its ability to diagnose the reasons for missing crime gun trace information— to learn what type of crime gun information is most consistently missing or inaccurately reported, and to determine whether the failure to match serial numbers is due to obliteration, faulty recording, incorrect FFL records, or data mismanagement. This effort is reflected in Table F of this Report, which has been refined and broken into two parts, Table F1 and F2, to more clearly pinpoint problems in the process so that they can be addressed.

For trace requests where the NTC initiated a trace, the NTC identified FFLs for 66.8 percent

of the crime guns and identified purchasers for 59.9 percent of the crime guns. For crime guns recovered from adults, FFLs were identified for 69.5 percent and purchasers were identified for 61.8 percent; for crime guns recovered from youth, FFLs were identified for 70.6 percent and purchasers were identified for 63.6 percent; and, for crime guns recovered from juveniles, FFLs were identified for 63.2 percent and purchasers were identified for 56.2 percent. The primary reasons that purchasers were not identified where a trace was initiated were: first, inaccurate or incomplete firearm serial numbers, including obliterated serial numbers (11.3 percent); second, inaccurate or incomplete identification of the firearm importer (7.1 percent); third, missing or incomplete FFL records (4 percent); and fourth, inaccurate or incomplete name of the manufacturer (3.4 percent).

For about a third of trace requests, the NTC did not initiate a trace, for one of three reasons. Firearms predating the enactment of the 1968 Gun Control Act are generally untraceable. Moreover, during the period covered in this report, the NTC's policy was not to trace firearms manufactured before 1990, unless specifically requested by a law enforcement management official, due to resource considerations. Nonetheless, because the NTC checks all crime gun serial numbers against the FFL out-of-business records, a significant number of pre-1990 traces were still completed and entered into the Firearms Tracing System and Project LEAD. In addition, the NTC does not trace weapons unless they meet the definition of firearm under the Gun Control Act of 1968. Weapons not meeting the definition include, for instance, air guns, certain antique firearms, and BB guns.