



## The Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative

# Crime Gun Trace Analysis Reports: The Illegal Youth Firearms Markets in **17 Communities**

Department of the Treasury  
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms





DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY  
WASHINGTON, DC 20226

UNDER SECRETARY

**MEMORANDUM FOR SECRETARY RUBIN**

**FROM:** Raymond W. Kelly  
Under Secretary (Enforcement)

**SUBJECT:** Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative

Attached are reports prepared by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) for the 17 communities participating in the Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative. They fulfill three goals by:

- (1) Documenting how juveniles and youth illegally obtain firearms;
- (2) Enabling Federal and local enforcement agencies to assess the illegal firearms problem in their communities and develop strategies to combat it;
- (3) Reporting on greatly increased ATF tracing of firearms recovered by enforcement agencies.

The following are among the reports' findings about firearms recovered by enforcement agencies:

- Firearms rapidly diverted from first retail sales at federally licensed gun dealers to an illegal market account for at least a quarter of the firearms that police recover from juveniles and youth.
- One out of ten firearms recovered by police is from a juvenile (17 and under). When youth (ages 18-24) are included, the number changes to four out of 10.
- In 15 of the 17 sites, the majority or the single largest supply of the crime guns successfully traced comes from retail sources *within* the State. Jersey City and Washington, DC, are the only sites where the largest single source of successfully traced crime guns is outside of their State or borders.
- Seven out of ten crime guns recovered from adults are handguns. For juveniles and youth, the number is eight out of 10.
- Half of all crime guns recovered by police are semiautomatic pistols, which are also the preferred weapons for juvenile and youthful offenders (60 percent).
- While thousands of different kinds of firearms are available, crime guns are concentrated among a relatively small number of makes and calibers in each city.
- Preliminary research shows that a high percentage of crime guns with obliterated serial numbers were originally purchased as part of a multiple sale by a federally licensed gun dealer and then illegally trafficked.

During the course of the initiative, trace requests from the 17 sites nearly doubled over the same period the previous year, from 20,000 to more than 37,000 requests. Trace information is stored in the National Tracing Center's illegal firearms trafficking information system, Project LEAD, which enforcement officials use in the identification of illegal traffickers. By expanding the volume of tracing, participants in the initiative not only provided data needed to identify community patterns, but have added significantly to the investigative information available to make cases against illegal traffickers.

We are confident that these reports will enable local enforcement officials, working with State and Federal authorities, to better protect our young and the public by preventing the illegal trafficking of firearms to those who would use them to commit violent crime.

# ATF CRIME GUN TRACE ANALYSIS REPORT

## Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative

### Introduction

The Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative is a 17-city demonstration project aimed at reducing youth firearms violence. Officials from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), police chiefs, local prosecutors, and U.S. attorneys are developing information about illegal trafficking of firearms to young people and new methods of reducing the illegal supply of firearms to them. The initiative was developed by ATF and its National Tracing Center, funded by the Department of the Treasury's Office of Enforcement and the National Institute of Justice, and announced by President Clinton on July 8, 1996.

### Purposes of This Report

Since July 1996, participants have tested a new method of developing and providing information about the illegal sources of firearms to youth. Federal and local enforcement officials in each jurisdiction voluntarily agreed to submit information on all recovered crime guns to ATF's National Tracing Center. ATF developed the tools to analyze the information. ATF is publishing this report of its analyses for the following purposes:

**To provide new information about illegal firearms activity by community.** These reports provide an overall view of firearms associated with illegal possession or activity in a jurisdiction. They identify the types of firearms that enforcement agencies most frequently recover, the types of crimes with which these weapons are associated, the time it takes for firearms to move from a federally licensed firearms dealer to recovery by enforcement officials, and the source States of these firearms. This is the first time ATF has developed and published standardized reports on recovered crime guns.

**To identify differences in adult, juvenile, and youth illegal firearms activity.** These reports analyze firearms recoveries by age group, with a focus on young people. The information establishes whether patterns of crime gun acquisition differ by age group. While ATF has previously collected information from enforcement agencies on firearms recovered from juveniles from across the country, this is the first time ATF has been able to provide age-based analysis by local jurisdiction. This analysis provides enforcement officials with a new and important tool for reducing illegal juvenile and youth access to firearms.

**To expand access to firearms-related enforcement information.** These reports share ATF firearms-related enforcement information with other enforcement agencies. The reports thereby provide a new, common foundation for collaboration among ATF, the offices of the U.S. attorney, and local police and prosecutors, as well as other agencies concerned with youth violence. Using this information, police departments and local prosecutors may choose to modify resources devoted to firearms trafficking interdiction, and local task forces may choose to pursue firearms trafficking cases in Federal or State courts.

**To initiate community, State, and national reporting on firearms trafficking.** These reports provide a model for standardized, annual ATF reports on firearms recoveries at the city, State, and national level. State and national reports using firearms recovery information provided by every jurisdiction allow regional and national patterns to be identified.

**To enable enforcement officials to focus their resources where they are likely to have the greatest impact on illegal trafficking to juveniles and violent youth gang members, as well as adult criminals.** Specific investigative information about the illegal sources of crime guns can be obtained by a variety of

methods, including Project LEAD, ATF's computerized illegal firearms information trafficking system, debriefing armed arrestees, and other street sources. These reports do not provide additional investigative information (such as the identities of federally licensed gun dealers or retail purchasers repeatedly associated with new crime guns). Rather, they provide analyses that can be useful in deciding how best to focus investigative resources to reduce the illegal firearms supply used in violent crime.

***Strategic targeting of illegal sources of juvenile and youth crime guns.*** Information about the percentages of a jurisdiction's crime guns recovered from juveniles, youth, and adults allows investigative priorities to be established and assessed. For instance, enforcement officials may choose to use Project LEAD to look for federally licensed gun dealers and first purchasers linked with crime gun traces associated with juveniles and youth.

***Strategic targeting of illegal sources of certain crime guns.*** Enforcement officials also can draw on the reports to develop other enforce-

ment strategies. Federal investigators already look for high volume traffickers operating across jurisdictional lines, whether interstate or intrastate, and use Project LEAD to investigate the illegal sources of guns used in violent crimes. Drawing on these reports, Federal and local officials can jointly decide to use Project LEAD and other investigative tools to target the illegal sources of various groups of crime guns: firearms with obliterated serial numbers; firearms most often used by juveniles and youth in violent crimes; illegally trafficked firearms most popular among juveniles, violent youth, and violent gangs; firearms with short "time-to-crime" rates, which are likely to have been deliberately trafficked; and firearms originating in-State or firearms originating out of State.

***Optimum, balanced local enforcement strategy.*** By combining a focus on high volume traffickers with targeted trafficking enforcement efforts using trace analyses and information about local conditions, enforcement officials can work toward the optimum strategy for reducing local illegal access to firearms, especially by juveniles and violent gang members.

## What This Report Contains

**Information about *crime guns*.** A *crime gun* is defined, for purpose of firearms tracing, as any firearm that is illegally possessed, used in a crime, or suspected by enforcement officials of being used in a crime. Report E shows the crime types most frequently associated with crime gun trace requests.

**Comprehensive crime gun trace data by community.** The report presents information about how many crime guns were submitted for tracing. Participants in the Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative voluntarily agreed to trace *all* crime guns recovered in their jurisdiction. Police departments are not required by Federal law to maintain or supply crime gun recovery information and have not historically submitted all crime guns for tracing. Lack of comprehensive tracing has precluded certain kinds of crime gun analyses since there may not have been enough crime gun trace requests from particular jurisdictions to identify community-wide patterns. The voluntary tracing agreement under this initiative was intended to overcome this problem.

**Information from *National Tracing Center traces*.** The information in this report is derived from data contained in requests for crime gun traces that enforcement agencies submitted to ATF's National Tracing Center (NTC) and from the results of traces that the NTC conducts. An *NTC trace* uses records maintained and made available by the firearms industry to identify the history of a firearm's ownership. A *successful NTC trace* describes firearm ownership from the manufacturer or importer through the wholesaler to the first known retail dealer. Depending on the investigative circumstances, the NTC trace may also identify the first retail purchaser, and sometimes even subsequent purchasers. Because of the structure of Federal firearms regulation and recordkeeping requirements, however, it is generally not possible for the NTC to trace a crime gun beyond its first retail sale using firearms industry records. To further trace a crime gun's path, ATF must conduct an *investigative trace*, in which special agents investigate

the subsequent chain of possession. Investigative traces are extremely resource intensive and are generally conducted only where there is a specific investigative need.

**Analyses of *requests for crime gun traces*.**

The report contains certain analyses that are based on the information contained in *requests* for crime gun traces. These analyses do not depend on the NTC successfully completing the traces. Information available for all crime guns submitted for tracing, whether or not the crime gun is successfully traced by the NTC, includes the number of recovered crime guns in a community, the type of firearm (e.g., revolver, rifle), and its manufacturer and caliber.

**Analyses of *successful NTC traces*.** The report also contains certain analyses that are based on the results of *successful NTC traces*. Information available only for crime guns successfully traced by the NTC includes the time it takes for a crime gun to move from its last known retail sale to recovery by enforcement officials, and the State in which the crime gun was sold.

**Analysis of *incomplete traces*.** The report shows the number of successful NTC traces and explains why the NTC closed the remaining traces without a successful NTC trace. This information is intended to assist in increasing the number of successful NTC traces.

**Analyses by *adult, youth, and juvenile age categories*.** The report generally presents information in four age categories: adults (25 and over); youth (ages 18 through 24); juvenile (17 and under); and all age categories combined.

**Crime gun trace information for a *10-month period*.** The patterns depicted in this report are based on crime guns for which trace requests were submitted to the NTC during the period of July 1, 1996, through April 30, 1997. The NTC provided project training in August and September 1996; project tracing then began in all sites. Early trace requests may not include as complete information as later traces.

# General Findings From the Participating Communities

This section presents general findings based on experience in all 17 participating communities. These 17 communities may not comprise a valid sample for purposes of national analysis. However, this is the largest collection of community-based information yet available on recovered crime guns.

## List of Participating Communities

The communities participating in this initiative, and on which the findings are based, are:

Atlanta, Georgia  
Baltimore, Maryland  
Birmingham, Alabama  
Boston, Massachusetts  
Bridgeport, Connecticut  
Cleveland, Ohio  
Inglewood, California  
Jersey City, New Jersey  
Memphis, Tennessee  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
New York, New York  
Richmond, Virginia  
St. Louis, Missouri  
Salinas, California  
San Antonio, Texas  
Seattle, Washington  
Washington, DC

This section is divided into two parts: (1) comprehensive community-based crime gun tracing and (2) local illegal firearms markets. These findings are intended to give enforcement officials in each community a wider perspective on its use of crime gun tracing and on its violent firearms crime and trafficking problems, particularly as they involve juveniles and youth.



## 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.



## General Findings: Local Illegal Firearms Markets

This section summarizes enforcement findings and conclusions based on crime gun trace information from the 17 participating communities. The category “adult” includes ages 25 and over, “youth” includes ages 18 to 24, and “juvenile” includes ages 17 and under.\*

**Adult crime guns predominate.** Most crime guns are recovered from adults. While youth firearms crime remains a special priority because of high rates of youth violence, adult firearms crime still predominates. In the largest city among the participants, New York, where almost 13,000 crime guns were submitted for tracing, juveniles under age 18 account for 11 percent of the crime guns, youth ages 18 to 24 account for 34 percent, and adults age 25 and over account for 55 percent. Only in Bridgeport does the adult crime gun category not constitute a plurality.

**Juvenile crime guns are a significant percentage of the total.** One out of ten crime guns is recovered from a juvenile. Juvenile crime gun trace requests accounted for at least 10 percent of the total traces requested, with three exceptions, Cleveland (6 percent), Milwaukee (8 percent), and Richmond (9 percent). The percentage of juvenile crime guns submitted for tracing was over 20 percent in two cities: Seattle and Memphis.

**Juvenile and youth crime guns comprise almost half of the total.** Juvenile and youth crime guns combined account for 45 percent of the crime guns requested for tracing, while adult crime guns account for 55 percent of the total.

**Handguns predominate.** Eight out of ten crime guns traced are handguns. Handguns include semiautomatic pistols, revolvers, and derringers. In all sites, handguns are the largest category of firearms recovered by enforcement agencies. The percentage of crime guns accounted for by handguns recovered from all age groups ranged from 63 percent in Salinas, to 98 percent in Atlanta.

**A disproportionate number of juvenile and youth crime guns are handguns.** Juvenile and youth crime guns are more likely than adult crime guns to be handguns. Eight out of ten

juvenile and youth crime guns traced are handguns, whereas seven out of 10 adult crime guns are handguns. Of the crime guns recovered from *juveniles*, the percentage that are handguns ranges from 73 percent in Salinas to more than 90 percent in five cities: Cleveland, New York City, Seattle, Richmond, and Boston. Of the crime guns recovered from *youth*, the percentage that are handguns ranges from 67 percent in San Antonio to more than 90 percent in three cities: Washington, DC, Memphis, and New York City. Of the crime guns recovered from *adults*, the lowest percentage of handguns is in Seattle and Memphis, 56 percent. Handguns account for between 80 and 90 percent of the adult crime guns in four cities.

**Semiautomatic handguns predominate.** Semiautomatic handguns are more common crime guns than revolvers. Semiautomatic handguns range from a high of 67 percent of crime guns in Atlanta, to a low of 39 percent in St. Louis. Revolvers supplied no more than 41 percent of crime guns in any site. Half of all the crime guns recovered are semiautomatics.

**A disproportionate number of juvenile and youth crime guns are semiautomatic handguns.** In each site, juveniles and youth are more likely to be associated with semiautomatic handguns than are adults. Semiautomatic handguns accounted for a high of 66 percent of the *juvenile* crime guns in Boston, to a low of 47 percent of the juvenile crime guns in Baltimore and Birmingham. Semiautomatic handguns accounted for a high of 71 percent of the *youth* crime guns in Memphis, to a low of 46 percent of the youth crime guns in Salinas. Semiautomatic handguns accounted for a high of 54 percent of the *adult* crime guns in New York City and Washington, D.C. to a low of 35 percent of the adult crime guns in Birmingham and Milwaukee. Overall, 47 percent of the adult crime guns are semiautomatics. Semiautomatics constitute 61 percent of the youth crime guns and 58 percent of the juvenile crime guns.

\* Not all sites were considered for each of the findings below. Where the number of cases was insufficient for the particular finding, the site was excluded. A technical note with further explanation is available from ATF.