
INTRODUCTION

THE GUN BUY-BACK PROGRAM

In August 1999, the Washington DC, Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) organized a public gun buy-back program resulting in the recovery of 2,912 guns. The program took place in the District of Columbia where firearms registration is mandatory and where each year several thousand unregistered guns are recovered in crimes varying from unregistered possession to homicide.

In addition to receiving a fee for the surrendered guns, participants were granted amnesty for any violations associated with their possession of the gun at the time it was relinquished. The program was given the name *OPERATION GUN TIP* and was conducted in two phases spanning a total of seven days.

The first phase took place during a Monday through Friday period, August 9 through 13, 1999. The buy-back was based at one of the Police District Headquarters, the 6th District, in Washington, DC. During this first phase, 602 guns were recovered, a rate of approximately 120 guns per day.

The high volume of participation led to the second phase, which was a city-wide program, decentralized across the District of Columbia at each of the seven district headquarters of the police department. The second phase spanned over two days, August 23 and 24, 1999 and resulted in the recovery of an additional 2,310 guns¹, a rate of approximately 1,155 per day. Combined, the program averaged 415 gun recoveries per day.

The specific features of the first and second phases were the same. A fee of \$100 was paid for each gun turned over to the MPD. Individuals turning in firearms were granted conditional amnesty and were allowed to remain anonymous. The conditional amnesty went to the any violations which might have stemmed from participants' firearm possession. The firearms were generally presumed to be contraband and unlawful, based upon a number of potential violations including possession of an unregistered firearm and/or on possession of a firearm not registered to them. The characteristics of the 2,912 guns were recovered and the manner in which they entered the District where their possession is heavily restricted, are the topics of this study.

¹ Two-thousand three hundred six guns were recovered in the last two days of the program. Four additional guns which were turned the day after the program ended were included, bringing the total gun recoveries for August 23rd and 24th to 2,310 and the total for all recoveries under Operation Gun Tip to 2,912.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The recovery of 2,912 guns during a seven day period is extraordinary and far exceeds the number of firearms that would be taken into custody for crimes through normal police procedures in a given year in most cities, including the District of Columbia¹. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) as an executive agency does not have a position on gun buy-back programs. However, because the unlawful possession of a firearm is a crime (*in the District of Columbia it is a felony*) law enforcement does have a vested interest in the types of guns recovered, their origins, and whether the guns were used to commit other crimes.

Producing a report on this volume of firearms in a short period of time is a considerable undertaking. The processing of several thousand firearms, maintaining chain of custody, examining, and test firing, places a great strain on the police department's resources. The intake, examination and cataloguing alone took seven weeks to complete.

A subsequent period spanning another two weeks was then required to reconcile differences and correct errors which are expected when an inordinately large volume of data utilizes multiple points of data entry. An illustration of the issues faced in reconciling data, would be the multiple entries of a manufacturer's name. If the same manufacturer's name is entered in full for some firearms and abbreviated for others, though all are from the same manufacturer, the system will still see two independent manufacturers.

These processes limited the time available to complete the trace request process, receive the trace results, and examine and evaluate the findings. Because there was insufficient time to complete the trace process on all firearms, some of the analysis in later sections of this report relied on samples smaller than the total number of recoveries. This disparity did not skew the findings or affect any patterns or trends the study identified. As a matter of policy, ATF will not disclose the names of Federally licensed firearms dealers.

Each section of the report includes visual information (*charts/graphs*) to assist in understanding the statistics and terminology. Located at the end of the report is a glossary to provide further assistance in reading this document.

¹ Over the preceding five years, the MPD has had an average recovery rate of firearms associated with crimes of 2,105 per year. The average is based on the totals of 2,599/1994; 2,134/1995; 2,304/1996; 1,741/1997 and 1,749/1998. (*These numbers exclude non-crime firearms taken into custody and the amnesty firearms recovered in the year 1994.*)
