

Information for Law Enforcement Executives

This section answers frequently asked questions from law enforcement executives about the Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative, comprehensive tracing, and ATF's firearms enforcement programs.

What is comprehensive crime gun tracing?

This means submitting the serial numbers and related information from all firearms recovered by law enforcement authorities in a given jurisdiction to ATF's National Tracing Center (NTC). Until recently, most cities have submitted gun serial numbers for tracing only when the information is needed to solve a major crime.

What will comprehensive crime gun tracing do for policing and crime reduction in my city?

Firearms used in crime are often obtained through illegal transfers, i.e., firearms traffickers, straw purchasers, corrupt firearms dealers, and fences dealing in stolen firearms. When the NTC compiles comprehensive crime gun trace information, it can furnish information relating to the following questions: 1. What kinds of guns are being used by what kinds of criminals? 2. Who are the individuals selling guns on the streets? 3. Who are the firearms dealers involved? 4. What are the recovery locations? 5. Are the source areas in the city, the State, or from out of State? 6. Where should their resources be concentrated to stem the flow of firearms to their streets? With this information, a department working with ATF can establish an enforcement strategy to reduce juveniles' and criminals' illegal access to guns. Firearms tracing can also lead to improved officer safety, since it can alert officers to crime gun activity in a specific location, or by a particular individual.

Since ATF tracing has been around for a while, why is it being emphasized now?

Gun trafficking enforcement has been locked in a chicken and egg situation for some time. Without adequate crime gun tracing and other criminal intelligence, despite many important individual Federal illegal trafficking cases, it has been difficult to mount effective collabora-

tive Federal, State and local anti-trafficking strategies. At the same time, because of lack of knowledge about how to mount effective cooperative anti-trafficking initiatives, there has been low demand by State and local police agencies for tracing and trace information. Over the last several years, ATF has been attempting to bridge this gap from both directions— increasing the analysis of crime gun traces provided to local jurisdictions, and placing more emphasis on developing collaborative criminal investigation of illegal firearms trafficking.

In general, both Project LEAD, the NTC's firearms trafficking information system, and crime gun analysis, have greatly increased the potential productivity of a strategy for enforcing Federal, State and local laws against illegal gun transfers to juveniles and prohibited persons, especially violent criminals. Project LEAD is being more widely deployed, and is becoming easily accessible by gun task forces throughout the country for law enforcement operations. The NTC's growing capability to provide analyses of crime gun data that allow police agencies to see clearly the number, types, and sources of guns in their jurisdictions, allows for strategy development that was not possible when law enforcement officials relied exclusively on street intelligence.

What is needed to start comprehensive tracing, is it expensive, and will ATF assist?

Tracing is free to the requesting jurisdiction; the NTC will trace any and all crime guns submitted for tracing.

The NTC wants police departments to trace firearms and has developed several methods to make comprehensive tracing more efficient. The NTC works with police departments on establishing the easiest methods for them to trace firearms and provides training. Trace

forms can be filled out manually and faxed, or, in emergencies, trace requests can be made by telephone.

To provide a more efficient way to trace firearms without added paperwork and cost, the NTC has established an electronic trace connection through the National Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (NLETS). When officers check the system for stolen firearms, they can continue to another screen and process a trace request at the same time. This not only saves time but also paperwork, and they are ensured that their information has been received by the NTC. The NLETS tracing screen is available at present in about 19 States, and ATF is working with the NLETS organization to expand the capability. There is no additional cost to the department for the NLETS connection.

To assist larger police departments, the NTC has created an electronic batch download program that can be adapted to submit large numbers of traces from the department's own centralized recordkeeping system. For example, the NTC uses this method with the New York Police Department and Chicago Police Department and has received tens of thousands of traces from them. The NTC supplied the equipment for the downloading, and assisted with the necessary customizing programming. The NTC will also send teams of NTC tracing personnel to help police departments search their firearms vaults for backlogs of firearms that have not been traced.

Funding sources for trace related assistance have included the NTC, the YCGII, and the Department of Justice's Community Oriented Policing Office (COPS Office) "Making Officer Redeployment Effective" (MORE) program.

Does the police department receive responses to trace requests directly, how long does it take, and what information is provided?

After a firearm is submitted to be traced, the trace report containing the results of the trace is returned to the requester. A routine firearm trace takes nine to 13 business days, when the trace can be completed. Urgent traces, which must adhere to certain criteria, are completed

within 24 hours. Criteria for an urgent trace include: assaults, bank robbery, kidnapping, murder/suicide, rape/sex crimes, terrorist act or threat, undercover investigation, necessity to hold a suspect in custody, or issuance of a search warrant.

Trace results contain information about the FFL who came in contact with the firearm, i.e., manufacturer, wholesaler, retailer, as well as information about the individual who first purchased the firearm. A firearms trace acts as an avenue to obtain additional investigative leads which may tie the suspect to other crimes otherwise unknown if the gun had not been traced.

ATF would like to emphasize that the appearance of an FFL or a first purchaser in association with a crime gun or in association with multiple crime guns in no way suggests that either the FFL or first purchaser has committed criminal acts. Rather, such information may provide a starting point for further and more detailed investigations.

Does the police department have access to Project LEAD?

Project LEAD, ATF's automated illegal firearms trafficking information system, produces investigative leads based on analysis of nationwide and regional crime gun trace information, and identifies patterns in crime gun recoveries. Project LEAD can pinpoint repeat sources of crime guns to particular age groups or locations. Queries to Project LEAD, must be made through an ATF field division office. The value of Project LEAD depends on law enforcement agencies tracing crime guns comprehensively. ATF field divisions have a designated Project LEAD Coordinator who is instructed to work closely with local law enforcement and provide them with data related to their firearms trafficking trends and patterns. ATF is working to install on-line Project LEAD capability in all ATF field offices by April, 1999. This will make Project LEAD readily available to local task forces. Currently, the NTC is developing a Geographic Information System to analyze crime gun recoveries that will be integrated with Project LEAD and be available to local jurisdictions.

Do all crime gun traces result in identification of purchasers, and if not, why submit all recovered firearms for tracing?

Most crime gun traces result in useful information. Comprehensive community tracing allows the NTC to report back uniform statistics regarding the kinds of guns associated with particular types of offenders in reporting jurisdictions. Trace requests that result in identifying a FFL can reveal concentrations of crime guns flowing from particular dealers, and provide information on the source State of that firearm, thus helping local law enforcement officials understand whether crime guns they recover have crossed State lines. Trace requests that result in the identification of first purchasers are obviously even more useful for trafficking investigations.

How will comprehensive crime gun tracing help reduce the juvenile gun problem?

One of the surprising findings of both last year's and this year's YCGII Report is that a large proportion of crime guns recovered from juveniles, and adult felons, are quite new and most likely deliberately and illegally trafficked. This year's YCGII Report also confirms last year's finding that many crime guns were first sold at retail in-state. The long held presumption that guns used in crimes were all borrowed from home, stolen, and old, or new guns that were trafficked across State lines, appears to be incorrect. Comprehensive crime gun tracing and trace analysis can support both trafficking investigations aimed at these sources of newer firearms and the deployment of traditional criminal investigation techniques (debriefings,

confidential informants, turning of arrestees, etc.) aimed at sources of new and older firearms. Because juveniles have less access to the firearms market than adults, a strategy that targets their illegal supply can be especially productive.

How do comprehensive tracing and an illegal trafficking enforcement strategy relate to a strategy of deterring and incarcerating persons illegally possessing, carrying, or using firearms?

ATF enforces Federal firearms laws, and assists State and local law enforcement authorities in enforcing their gun laws. At the Federal level, ATF believes that a balance between attacking the illegal supply of firearms to prohibited persons, including juveniles and adult felons, and deterring and incarcerating armed violent offenders, is necessary to reducing violent crime. ATF's comprehensive tracing and trace analysis are part of the Boston Gun Project/Ceasefire and numerous other violence reduction and law enforcement strategies. Local law enforcement authorities are actively searching to find the best mix of local enforcement operations. ATF is providing new assistance to that effort by working to institute comprehensive tracing capabilities in communities and using trace analysis to support investigations. These tools are providing new opportunities to attack the illegal gun market, which often has been ignored because it was viewed as impervious to law enforcement efforts. Nevertheless, it is critical to focus both on the illegal sources and on the illegal users of firearms in order to reduce violence in a community.