



The Strategic Use of Crime Gun Tracing and Its Relation to NIBIN

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*Identify and Target Shooters and Their Sources of Crime Guns for immediate disruption and/or prosecution of violent criminals.
- ATF NIBIN Mission Statement*

Introduction and Background

Just as the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) allows law enforcement to link a recovered crime gun to cartridge cases recovered from seemingly unrelated crime scenes, gun tracing can link traced crime guns to other recovered crime guns, whether it was recovered by the same police department or another law enforcement agency. When combined with NIBIN intelligence,¹ the origin of the firearm and its potential relationship to other crime guns provide a more complete picture of the firearm's history. Additional victims, witnesses, suspects, and even previously unidentified crimes and coconspirators are frequently identified using this process. Absent investigative happenstance, recovered crime guns that share common origins will rarely be connected unless they are traced.

A key factor that makes NIBIN and tracing such powerful tools is that a disproportionate number of shootings are committed by a limited number of violent offenders. Many of these offenders are prohibited persons² or juvenile offenders who cannot lawfully obtain or possess a handgun. They are left with a limited number of alternatives to acquire a firearm. Coercing or paying a friend or relative to purchase a firearm for them in a "straw purchase," stealing firearms, or obtaining a firearm from traffickers³ are all common methods of illegally obtaining firearms that tracing can uncover.

Firearm Trace Process

To effectively utilize crime gun tracing, officers who recover firearms must provide all data associated with a crime gun recovery. This data is captured by completing the ATF National Tracing Center Trace Request form and includes the following where available:

- A full and accurate description of the firearm
- Possessor of the firearm
- Any criminal associates who were with the possessor
- Crime(s) associated with the firearm's recovery
- Recovery location
- Date of recovery

¹ The shootings in which a firearm is known to have been used.

² Defined under Title 18 U.S.C. § 922(g) as convicted felons, persons subject to restraining orders, or persons previously convicted for domestic violence.

³ Persons who divert firearms out of lawful commerce and into the hands of criminals.

The *ATF National Tracing Center* follows the trail of a firearm through commerce, beginning with the firearm's domestic manufacturer or importer and ending with the first retail purchase of the firearm from a federally licensed firearms dealer. The trace identifies the date of sale, the retail dealer who made the sale, and the identity of the purchaser. In addition, the trace also calculates the "time to crime," measured in days, as the time between the sale of the firearm and the recovery date. Time to crime is often used as an indicator of trafficking because the more rapidly a firearm moves from sale to recovery by police, the greater the suspicion the firearm was purchased with the intention of diverting it for criminal use. In 2016, more than 2,500 firearms were recovered in Georgia with a time to crime of less than one year, and over a third of those had a time to crime of less than 3 months.⁴

Many departments have worked with ATF to develop a firearm form⁵ that both serves as a property form for the department and captures all of the information needed to complete a trace request in eTrace. Most major police departments, including all of those who are partners in a Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC), utilize *ATF's eTrace*, a web-based firearms trace request submission system that allows police departments to submit trace requests, monitor the progress of their traces, retrieve trace results, and make queries of their trace data. Each police department can grant officers access to eTrace, allowing investigators to proactively utilize trace results in their investigations.

Referral Lists

Referral lists are a key component of the ATF's eTrace system. They are linked to each trace result and list all prior traces submitted by any law enforcement agency in which the purchaser or the possessor appeared in any role (purchaser, possessor, or associate), as well as lists of prior traces associated with the same retail dealer and/or recovery location. If the same police department submitted the prior traces, they can be viewed immediately in eTrace. If they were submitted by another agency, the trace number and point of contact information for that department are provided. By linking to firearm recoveries in other investigations, a more complete picture of both the purchaser and the possessor emerge, expanding the number of potential witnesses, victims, and associates.

For example, multiple traces associated with the same purchaser can be indicative of straw purchasing or other forms of trafficking, particularly when also associated with multiple sales⁶ and short times to crime. However, it can also indicate that the purchaser was actually a victim of a burglary or other theft during which their firearms were stolen. This is important because often persons whose firearms are stolen cannot provide law enforcement with accurate descriptions or serial numbers for the stolen firearms, which enter the illicit firearm market undocumented and undetectable. In these situations, tracing may provide leads in the burglary or theft investigation.

Tracing Resources

National Tracing Center Fact Sheet

ATF's Police Officer's Guide to Recovered Firearms

ATF Firearms Tracing Guide

For example: A trace reveals that a recovered firearm with a time to crime of less than six months was purchased from a rural retail dealer in another state. The referral lists reveal that although the purchaser is not associated with any other traces, the retailer is associated with three other traces — one from the police department in the municipality where the gun store is located, and the other two from officers in your jurisdiction in seemingly unrelated recoveries. An examination of these traces in eTrace reveals that all three recovered firearms were purchased by different individuals, but are the same make, model, and caliber. All three had short times to crime. Closer examination of the transactions reveals that all three were multiple purchases of handguns. As there is nothing else linking the three traces together, it is unlikely that the common origins of these three firearms and leads revealing potential firearms trafficking would be uncovered without the association revealed by the referral list.

⁴ See www.atf.gov/resource-center/data-statistics

⁵ See a sample firearm recovery form developed by the NRTAC based on the Denver Police Department's form: https://crimegunintelcenters.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/FINAL-PF_CGIC_Firearm-Recovery_Form.pdf

⁶ The purchase of two or more handguns by the same person on the same day or within five consecutive business days from the same retail dealer.



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Similarly, multiple traces associated with the same possessor can lead investigators to identify other crimes, witnesses, codefendants, and criminal associates in other firearm-related investigations. This can be particularly helpful when these investigations are in other jurisdictions.

Crime Gun Intelligence: eTrace and NIBIN™ Together

When information from eTrace and NIBIN are combined, a different picture emerges than when the information is viewed individually. ATF

For example: A firearm is recovered and, when entered in NIBIN, is ballistically linked to a homicide that occurred five years earlier. A trace of the firearm reveals that a woman purchased it at a local dealer two days prior to the homicide. The purchaser is not associated with any other traces. While neither the NIBIN link nor the trace viewed individually seem to merit follow up (the homicide took place so long ago and the firearm is not linked to any other shootings), when viewed together they suggest that the purchaser likely purchased the firearm for the shooter. The purchaser may likely be a potential witness in an unsolved homicide, as well as a straw purchaser.

recently established that a firearm with a NIBIN lead is justification for an urgent trace, further emphasizing the relevance of viewing the information together.⁷

When used together, eTrace and NIBIN can alter the significance of time to crime. In the case cited above, the traditional measure of time to crime — date of purchase to date of recovery by law enforcement — is five years. However, NIBIN reveals that the “true time to crime” — as measured from the date of purchase to the first shooting linked by NIBIN — is only two days. This type of analysis can quickly lead investigators to pursue investigative leads that may not have appeared viable without the complete picture provided by both eTrace and NIBIN combined.

Tracing Studies

In addition to using both eTrace and NIBIN for individual cases, there can be great value in looking at the aggregate data in NIBIN-sensitive trace studies. Trace studies examine trace data for a specific location over a specific period. ATF publishes annual reports summarizing trace data for each of the 50 states. The reports reflect crime gun trends and firearm trafficking patterns for the firearms traced in each state, summarizing the total number of firearms traced, firearm types (pistol, revolver, rifle), time to crime, and the top 15 source states for firearms recovered in that state. The reports also provide a high-level overview of the types of insights aggregate trace data can provide.

Click [here](#) to view U.S. and international ATF firearms trace data from 2013–2017.

Click [here](#) to view 2017 U.S. ATF firearms trace data by state.

Comparing the figures between different states reveals staggering differences in trafficking patterns and sources of recovered crime guns. Although almost every state is its own number one source state, there are still great variances among states. For example, in the 2017 Firearms Trace Data report for New Jersey, only 468 of the 2,591 firearms for which a source state could be identified were initially sold in New Jersey, while Virginia and Pennsylvania accounted for 658 combined. In contrast, of California’s 27,051 firearms where a source state was identified, 17,397 originated in California. Although these reports are valuable in identifying major trafficking patterns and emerging trends, care should be taken in making inferences, since not all crime guns are traced (indeed, some jurisdictions do not trace firearms) and the purpose of tracing is to assist law enforcement, not to collect a statistically random sample of all crime guns.

More detailed trace studies can be done to drill down and look at multiple factors simultaneously by analyzing the trace data behind the numbers. Trace studies can be accomplished by working with ATF to get trace data for guns recovered in a specific jurisdiction and traced during a specific period of time (12–36 months is recommended) in a spreadsheet format where it can be manipulated (filtered and sorted) and analyzed.

⁷ Urgent traces are given top priority by ATF’s National Tracing Center and results are usually provided within 24 hours.



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By adding additional data to indicate which traces have NIBIN links (hits or leads), the difference between all crime guns recovered and those with NIBIN links can be seen. Commonalities or similar origins can be identified for firearms used in shootings, and priority can be given to trafficking leads where there is a NIBIN link associated with one or more firearms suspected of having been trafficked. If the goal is to identify illegal sources of crime guns, wouldn't it be wise to start with the sources of the guns known to be used in shootings?

The Importance of Documentation

Every solution brings with it its own set of challenges that can be mitigated and even eliminated if they are recognized and addressed up front. ATF states that the number one reason traces cannot be completed is not lost records or out-of-business dealers, but the recovering officer's failure to accurately or completely describe the firearm — a skill that is rarely taught and far more complex than usually acknowledged.

In the case of a foreign manufactured firearm, the trace begins with the domestic importer of the firearm. A firearm cannot be traced without the import information, yet it is frequently omitted on trace submissions. While the manufacturer's name is usually very prominent, an importer's mark, which is frequently placed on the firearm using abbreviations⁸, is often overlooked. For example, the marking for Kraft Gun Group, Falls Church, Virginia (a fictional entity), might merely appear as "KGG FC VA" in a small font. Similarly, revolvers chambered for .38 S&W (as opposed to .38 Special) are often misidentified as having been manufactured by Smith and Wesson. These errors can be overcome with training, and the benefits of accurately describing a firearm extend well beyond tracing, all the way into the courtroom.

In order for investigators to begin focusing on and prioritizing cases involving the violent criminal misuse of firearms they will need to learn about firearms and the benefits of firearms tracing. They will also need to be trained on exploiting the eTrace system. When adopting this new technology, it is vital for police departments to develop a strategy for how the technology will be used to enhance investigations and how appropriate personnel will be trained to apply it.

⁸ See ATF's guidance on proper firearm identification for tracing: <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/properly-identify-firearm-purpose-tracing>



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CRIME GUN INTELLIGENCE CENTERS

CONNECTING THE DOTS

A project of the National Resource and Technical Assistance Center for Improving Law Enforcement Investigations