

**Harris County Sheriff's Office**  
**Local Law Enforcement Crime Gun Intelligence Center**  
**Integration Initiative FY 2022**

The Harris County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) is pleased to submit this application for the Local Law Enforcement Crime Gun Intelligence Center grant. Gun violence is rising precipitously in Harris County, and the community is fearful, frustrated, and on edge. We are requesting \$700,000 over a three-year period to enhance our capability to identify, arrest, and prosecute armed violent offenders in order to reduce violent gun crime levels and keep our community safe. Our project involves hiring two Task Force Officers and one Research Analyst dedicated to combatting firearm-related aggravated assaults.

The primary goal of this project is to develop leads that will identify armed violent offenders for investigation and prosecution in order to reduce crime. We aim to accomplish this through collaboration with ATF, other law enforcement agencies, crime laboratories, prosecuting attorneys, and community groups.

This is Harris County's third and final year as a Public Safety Partnership site. We submitted an unsuccessful application for the CGIC grant last year but have incorporated the peer review comments and sharpened our approach to this year's application. Harris County has never received CGIC funding and our jurisdiction includes two million unincorporated residents who do not live in Houston's city limits. Our project will expand and enhance the existing Houston-area CGIC so that these two million unincorporated individuals are covered by this grant.

As a Public Safety Partnership site, as a Sheriff's Office, as a jurisdiction that has existing partnerships with numerous agencies (see attached letters of support and MOU), and as a

location that suffers from a high volume of shootings and homicides, we meet all of the criteria for priority consideration.

## **Description of the Issue**

Overview: Harris County is a sprawling, densely populated county located in the southeastern part of Texas, encompassing the City of Houston and many other smaller municipalities. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Harris County's population is 4.7 million residents as of July 2021. Harris County is the most populous county in Texas and the third most populous county in the United States.

Harris County is unique among all counties in the nation for having an unincorporated population of nearly two million residents. According to Rice University's Kinder Institute, the population of unincorporated Harris County has risen from 1.0 million in 2000 to 1.5 million in 2010 and to 1.9 million in 2020. Over 80% of the county's growth in population since 2000 has been in the unincorporated areas of the county (source: Harris County Budget Management Department population report). It is estimated that Harris County's unincorporated population will soon exceed the City of Houston's population (Harris County Budget Management Department population report). In fact, if "Unincorporated Harris County" were a city, it would be the fifth most populous city in the United States.

The Harris County Sheriff's Office is the largest sheriff's office in Texas and third largest in the United States, with 4,700 employees, including over 2,200 sworn officers, and is the primary law enforcement agency for the nearly two million unincorporated residents of Harris County. HCSO deputies sometimes respond to crimes that occur inside the City of Houston, but our primary service area is the unincorporated regions of Harris County.

Firearm-Related Violent Crime Data: Harris County has a significant and growing violent crime problem. The following gun crime statistics show crimes involving a firearm during the years 2019 - 2021. The NIBRS (National Incident-Based Reporting System)-coded data (the FBI requires that law enforcement agencies report NIBRS data as opposed to UCR data) provided comes from the Harris County Sheriff’s Crime Analysis & Intelligence Division, and our analysts have utilized multi-faceted queries to identify offenses involving firearms. The complete set of raw data is attached to this application. The data covers the most recent three year period, during which the number of gun-related aggravated assault cases handled by the Harris County Sheriff’s Office rose by an alarming 66%, from 1,350 in 2019 to 2,246 in 2021.

<b>Selected Firearm-Related Offenses</b>				
<b>Offense</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2019-21 % Change</b>
Aggravated Assault (w/gun)	1,350	1,811	2,246	66%
Homicide (w/gun)	92	98	109	18%

*Source: Harris County Sheriff’s Crime Analysis & Intelligence Division using NIBRS-coded data. Note: Non-fatal shootings are not officially tracked by HCSO.*

The attached map plots the location of all gun-related aggravated assaults handled by the Harris County Sheriff’s Office during the period of 2019-2021. The volume of crime in unincorporated Harris County is easily apparent.

Other types of gun-related crime also rose in Harris County over this period, but for this grant we would like to focus our efforts on combating aggravated assaults committed with a firearm. This precipitous rise in gun-related aggravated assaults in Harris County reflects a nationwide trend of increasing violent crime, the origins of which are multi-faceted. In Harris County, the

COVID-19 pandemic caused a backlog in the criminal court system, thereby lengthening the time it takes for an offender to be brought to justice. Another cause of the 66% increase in aggravated assaults with a firearm is the increasing propensity of Harris County criminal court judges to allow violent offenders to bond out of jail while awaiting trial. It is not uncommon for our deputies to arrest an individual for a violent gun crime and to learn that this person had recently bonded out of jail for a similar offense. Finally, advances in medical intervention techniques have resulted in greater victim survival rates, which means fewer homicides but more aggravated assault charges.

The data makes it clear that firearm-related aggravated assaults are a serious and growing concern in our community. While the crime statistics provide a high-level, 30,000 foot view of the problem, it is important to remember that each aggravated assault represents a life-changing experience for the individuals involved. Stories of aggravated assaults, road rage incidents, and shootings headline the local news. Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo was quoted by the Houston Chronicle on January 28, 2022 as saying, “Gun violence is out of control and weapons of war have no place on our streets.” In April 2022, State Senator John Whitmire stated, “It is unbelievable to sit and watch the evening news and see people being pistol-whipped at the retail store and the tire store . . . It’s impacting every element of society.” Adding 2 Task Force Officers and 1 Analyst will increase our capability to reduce firearm-related aggravated assaults and to protect our community.

## **Project Design and Implementation**

Background: Our project aims to curtail the overall number of violent gun crimes in Harris County, especially aggravated assaults, through a targeted and coordinated approach that involves enhancing and expanding the Houston-area Crime Gun Intelligence Center. The Crime Gun

Intelligence Center (CGIC) model combines all available information on crime guns and shootings to identify and disrupt the shooting cycle. By promoting collaboration between law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies at the local, state, and federal levels, crime gun evidence is collected, analyzed, and processed through NIBIN (the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network). NIBIN is the only national network that allows for the capture and comparison of ballistic evidence to aid in solving and preventing violent crimes involving firearms. As a vital resource to a violent crime reduction strategy, NIBIN provides investigators with the ability to compare their ballistic evidence against evidence from other violent crimes on a local, regional, and national level, thus generating investigative links that would rarely be revealed absent the technology. Timely processing of crime guns and recovered cartridge cases can generate actionable investigative leads, resulting in the arrest and prosecution of offenders.

The Harris County Sheriff's Office is already an active participant in the ATF Crime Gun Strike Force. The Strike Force is dedicated to the intelligence-driven targeting of violent offenders and the timely follow up of crime gun intelligence leads through well-established protocols. These protocols focus on violent crime and include the full range of crime gun intelligence tools, such as ballistic evidence and crime gun processing, timely lead generation, eTrace, and robust and effective intelligence. The Strike Force provides proactive, intelligence-based identification of violent criminal offenders in Harris County. This inter-agency partnership ultimately results in generating greater evidence towards solving gun crime and removing crime guns and violent offenders from the streets.

The ATF Crime Gun Strike Force consists of ATF, FBI, Homeland Security Investigations, and US Postal Inspection Service Special Agents; as well as Task Force Officers from the Houston Police Department, the Harris County Sheriff's Office, and the Pasadena Police Department; plus

ATF Investigative Analysts, ATF Intelligence Research Specialists, NIBIN Contractors, an explosives detection SEEK K-9 and handler, two Assistant District Attorneys, three Assistant United States Attorneys, the Houston Forensic Science Center, and the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences. The partnership between these agencies was formalized by a Memorandum of Understanding in March 2019 (see attached MOU).

The ATF Crime Gun Strike Force meets weekly at the ATF's Houston Field Office to discuss gun crime violence. The coordination between participating agencies promotes a unified working environment and ensures that efforts are not duplicated. Participants in these meetings are able to review, discuss, and exchange case details in an open forum where common jurisdictional boundaries and obstacles are removed for the good of the initiative. The law enforcement agencies work closely with the District Attorney's Office and the U.S. Attorney's Office to arrest and prosecute gun offenders.

Steps Taken by HCSO to Reduce Gun Crime: Currently the Sheriff's Office has one Deputy Investigator/Task Force Officer who works collaboratively with the ATF Crime Gun Strike Force and is detailed to the local ATF field office. We strive to ensure that all NIBIN leads are followed up on, which includes working with our partners in other agencies to make sure the nexus between their cases and ours is properly vetted. Our patrol division has a written policy that requires all fired cartridge cases be picked up from crime scenes, drive-by shootings, celebratory gunfire incidents, and any other calls for service in which there is an ejected shell case. These cartridge cases are promptly brought to the Sheriff's crime lab and submitted for NIBIN testing.

In February 2020 the Harris County Sheriff's Office, in partnership with ATF, purchased our own BrassTRAX computer (through grant funding from the Texas Office of the Governor) to process cartridge cases recovered from shooting scenes. This machine is located in our Crime

Laboratory and is staffed by certified NIBIN technicians who have been trained in image acquisition protocols. The Sheriff's Crime Scene Unit received NIBIN accreditation by ANAB (the American National Standards Institute [ANSI] National Accreditation Board) in September 2020. Our Crime Laboratory accepts cartridge cases from all types of shooting incidents. NIBIN analysis is performed at no fee, and we have policies and procedures in place to minimize latent print and DNA demands on routine submittals.

Our Crime Laboratory is able to image NIBIN cases in less than 4 hours by minimizing administrative time in our evidence intake process. We have never had a backlog in the imaging of cartridge cases since receiving the BrassTRAX machine in 2020. The HCSO NIBIN system is connected to the ATF NIBIN National Correlation and Training Center (NNCTC), which allows for the capture, comparison, and correlation of ballistic evidence, thus increasing the ability to provide HCSO with critical gun crime leads in a timely fashion. NIBIN hits are communicated by NNCTC via email to a distribution list that includes HCSO Sergeant Jay Wheeler. Sgt. Wheeler functions as the hub to ensure that all relevant parties are promptly notified and that follow-up investigations occur. Our feedback loop also includes discussion of results at the weekly meeting of the ATF Crime Gun Strike Force. When investigators are ready to file charges, they work closely with the District Attorney's Office to review evidence. NIBIN success stories are communicated to the NIBIN site by the ATF Crime Gun Strike Force.

Firearms recovered by the Sheriff's Office are brought to the accredited Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences (IFS) Firearms Lab or to the ATF for test fire analysis, while cartridge cases are brought to our accredited Crime Scene Unit for imaging with our BrassTRAX machine and submission into NIBIN. Several Harris County Sheriff's Office criminal investigators and clerks, as well as firearms examiners and clerks with the IFS Firearms Lab, have ATF eTrace

Accounts. An eTrace is performed by the IFS Firearms Lab on the weapons submitted to the lab. Once testing is completed, the firearms lab report is forwarded via e-mail to the HCSO Homicide Unit clerk. The eTrace is retrieved from the ATF Database, attached to the firearms lab report, and saved as an electronic file to the original offense report. As a matter of practice, the Homicide Unit attaches the Firearms Lab Report and eTrace to all HCSO Offense Reports. The Homicide Unit conducts follow-up investigations of suspected murder weapons.

Last year we began using the ShotSpotter gunshot detection system in high-crime zones. When responding to ShotSpotter alerts, deputies are required to canvas the location to collect fired cartridge cases. If no evidence is found, we have the option of utilizing an explosives detection canine to search for cartridge cases. Since April 2021, ShotSpotter has generated 427 incident reports, imaging approximately 2,761 fired cartridge cases in NIBIN, which produced 135 leads.

Project Plan: While the Harris County Sheriff's Office is actively implementing best practices in our efforts to reduce gun crime, *our biggest challenge is a shortage of manpower.* Our current TFO is responsible for coordination of NIBIN leads and analysis of crime guns for all of unincorporated Harris County. Grant funds will enable us to increase our commitment to the Houston CGIC and enhance safety in our community by hiring two additional Task Force Officers to work collaboratively with the ATF Crime Gun Strike Force. These TFO's will help to further the mission of the Crime Gun Strike Force by investigating NIBIN leads quickly, developing intelligence, and building criminal cases. A particular area of emphasis for these two TFO's will be to reduce Harris County's alarming increase in aggravated assaults by focusing resources on this problem. The TFO's will investigate gun crimes through a correlation review of ballistic evidence via NIBIN, by interviewing witnesses, interrogating suspects, filing charges, and testifying in court. The TFO's will be dedicated to this grant and will work closely with our



partner agencies on the Crime Gun Strike Force. We estimate that the addition of two TFO's will result in a 35% increase in the number of criminal charges filed and a reduction in the number of gun-related aggravated assaults to pre-pandemic levels.

In addition to hiring two Task Force Officers, we will allocate 20% of grant funds, equating to \$140,000, to the District Attorney's Office for a Criminal Research Analyst position to support the work of prosecutors who handle violent gun crime cases. The Analyst will provide analytical support, prepare intelligence summaries, help to determine links between criminals and crimes, and coordinate with partner agencies on the ATF Crime Gun Strike Force.

We look forward to launching GunStat, which targets known violent offenders who live or offend in crime hot spots. GunStat meetings should include parole and probation departments, with a focus on individuals under supervision in connection with gun crimes. We are prepared to implement GunStat with training provided by BJA.

We will also enhance our efforts by focusing on the community. The Harris County Sheriff's Office commits to coordinating with the USAO team and Houston Crime Stoppers to support this initiative through community meetings and events that will incorporate the goals of the CGIC by promoting the importance of gun safety to all communities within Harris County. This will include public education on topics such as the safe storage of firearms and reducing theft from vehicles. The Sheriff's Office has already created a training program for local law enforcement personnel and prosecutors regarding the processing of cartridge cases and firearms.

We understand that we will be responsible for providing deliverables at the conclusion of this grant. Please see the attached timeline for a description of our plan regarding each deliverable.

## **Capabilities and Competencies**

Collaborative Team Structure: The lead agency for this effort is the Harris County Sheriff's Office. The Crime Gun Intelligence Center grant is a top priority for HCSO, and our command staff is fully aligned with and supportive of this project. The command staff is informed on a weekly basis of violent crime statistics and NIBIN successes. The Harris County Sheriff is Ed Gonzalez, and he has served in this role since 2017. A letter of support from Sheriff Gonzalez for this grant project is attached to this application.

The direct responsibility for managing this grant would rest with HCSO's Violent Crimes Unit. Lieutenant Matthew Ferguson is the commander of the Violent Crimes Unit, and he will oversee this grant and serve as the project director and central point of contact. Lieutenant Ferguson has 25 years of experience in law enforcement and has managed the Violent Crimes Unit since 2020. Sergeant Jay Wheeler is a supervisor in the Violent Crimes Unit and works closely with the ATF Crime Gun Strike Force. He will serve as the project manager for this grant, handling its day to day operation. Sergeant Wheeler has been in law enforcement for 15 years and moved into his role with the Crime Gun Strike Force in 2020. The two Task Force Officers to be hired under this grant will be experienced deputies, and they will report to Sergeant Wheeler. Resumes for Lieutenant Ferguson and Sergeant Wheeler are attached.

The Sheriff's Crime Laboratory is led by Lieutenant Ben Katrib, and he oversees a highly trained team of investigators and NIBIN-certified technicians. The Sheriff's BrassTRAX computer is located in the Crime Laboratory. As noted earlier, this lab has received full NIBIN accreditation by ANAB (ANSI National Accreditation Board).

The Harris County District Attorney is Kim Ogg, and her office is an active participant in the ATF Crime Gun Strike Force. District Attorney Ogg will hire a Criminal Research Analyst to support the prosecutors who handle gun crime cases. The United States Attorney's Office for the

Southern District of Texas is led by Jennifer Lowery, and the Sheriff's Office collaborates with her office on the Crime Gun Strike Force.

The Houston office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is led by Special Agent in Charge, Fred Milanowski. The Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences operates the accredited Firearms Identification Laboratory, and the Manager for this crime lab is Jennifer Turner. Please see the multiple attached letters of support from our partner agencies.

Harris County in general, and the Harris County Sheriff's Office in particular, are very experienced in grant administration. The Sheriff's Office currently manages over 60 active grants worth approximately \$30 million. The Sheriff's Grants Management Office, comprised of 4 grant professionals, will assist Lieutenant Ferguson in the administration of this grant. In addition, the Harris County Auditor's Office employs a team of 10 grant accountants who will handle the financial aspects of this grant, including establishing internal controls, ensuring that funds are not commingled, duties are segregated, and financial reports are submitted on time. Finally, the Harris County Purchasing Department will make sure any procurement of goods and services is in accordance with applicable laws.

### **Plan for Collecting the Data**

We understand that if selected for grant funding we will be responsible for submitting regular performance reports that describe the results achieved by this project. We have carefully reviewed the CGIC performance measures questions (as found online) and are prepared to collect all required data. Most of the required data elements are already being tracked by our Violent Crimes Unit, and, in the case of the few items that are not currently being measured, we are ready to start doing so.

In Harris County, crime data is electronically entered into our report management system, Superion, on a daily basis. The Harris County Sheriff's Office has department policies and standard operating procedures that specify the time frame in which information must be entered into the system, and deputies are subject to disciplinary action for failure to enter information within the required time frame. This helps ensure that information is entered in a timely manner for administrative and performance review purposes.

The HCSO Crime Lab keeps records on all NIBIN entries and leads generated, including ShotSpotter-related NIBIN entries and leads. The HCSO Homicide Unit maintains statistics regarding eTrace activity. Sergeant Wheeler of our Violent Crimes Unit works closely with the ATF Crime Gun Strike Force and will gather data on crime guns and CGIC investigations. Sergeant Wheeler will be responsible for performance reporting under this grant, including collecting the needed data and tracking program outcomes. Support will be provided by a team of data analysts within the Sheriff's Crime Analysis and Intelligence Division. The Sheriff's Grants Management Office will also assist with completing the grant's required performance reports and will make sure the reports are submitted on time.

We anticipate that the addition of two TFO's and a Criminal Research Analyst will ultimately lead to a reduction of firearm-related aggravated assaults in our community. The information gathered during the course of this grant will be used by Lieutenant Ferguson and Sergeant Wheeler to guide and evaluate the implementation of the program and to make appropriate course corrections and adjustments. This will enable investigators to quickly identify suspects involved in NIBIN-linked shootings, establish connections between seemingly unrelated crimes, build criminal cases against gun violence perpetrators, and reduce the incidents of aggravated assault in Harris County.