

FOREWORD BY ATF DIRECTOR DETTELBACH

Violent crimes committed with firearms continue to plague our communities. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is the only federal law enforcement agency whose sole focus is to protect the public from violent crime. We are on the frontline every day, working shoulder to shoulder with our federal, state, local, territorial, Tribal, and international law enforcement partners to reduce gun violence. But we know ATF cannot successfully address this issue unless we have the best and most current information and apply the most effective tools and research in our efforts. For that reason, it is a great privilege to bring to you Volume IV of the National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA): *Protecting America from Trafficked Firearms: NFCTA Updates, New Analysis, and Policy Recommendations*.

With Volume IV's updated data, we continue to identify trends and patterns in firearm commerce that influence the availability of firearms to criminals. The analysis shows that criminals continue to actively make and use privately made firearms (PMFs). PMFs generally do not contain serial numbers and are obtained without background checks. Between 2017 and 2023, the number of PMFs reported to have been recovered in crimes increased almost 1,600 percent. Nearly 1,700 were associated with homicide-related offenses and more than 4,000 were associated with other violent crimes. Increasingly, these reported recoveries include machinegun conversion devices (MCDs) which are small, easily concealed devices that transform a semi-automatic firearm into an illegal machinegun in seconds. The number of MCDs recovered in crimes increased 784% between 2019 and 2023. The prevalence of untraceable PMFs, including MCDs, is a grave public safety threat and a threat to the lives of law enforcement officers.

This report demonstrates that the various *free* intelligence tools ATF provides to help police catch shooters are more potent and necessary than ever. For instance, it is crucial that cartridge casings and crime guns recovered by law enforcement are *all* submitted to ATF for tracing and ballistic evidence processing. ATF's cutting-edge investigative tools like eTrace and the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) provide invaluable information to assist in solving and preventing firearm-related crimes. Crime gun trace requests from domestic and international law enforcement agencies (LEAs) continue to grow each year, and Volume IV confirms that Federal firearms licensee (FFL) out of business records and multiple sale transaction information are critical resources in the timely completion of traces. Of the nearly 1.3 million trace requests submitted to ATF from 2022 to 2023, 46% were completed using out of business records. The number of crime guns traced to a purchaser that were part of a multiple sale transaction increased 102% from 2017 to 2023. In other words, in just five years, it became twice as common for a multiple firearm sale to include a gun that ended up being part of a crime.

NIBIN is the only national network that allows for the capture and comparison of ballistic evidence. Volume IV's more recent numbers highlight that as of December 2023, approximately 6.5 million pieces of ballistic evidence have been entered into NIBIN generating approximately 1,060,000 leads to shooting investigations. Between 2019 and 2023, 14% of the traced pistols for which ballistic evidence was acquired, were involved in one or more shootings (representing 191,313 shooting events). Most of these crime guns had a first shooting event within three years from their last known purchase, indicating that violent gun offenders were more quickly using firearms diverted from lawful commerce in shootings.

The NFCTA also demonstrates the critical role that background checks play in enhancing public safety. This requirement, passed by Congress in the 1990s, has helped stop millions of firearms sales to felons and other prohibited people, like drug traffickers. In my view, most Americans instinctively understand this, and they strongly support background checks, as they help protect the public and impose only a mild inconvenience to law abiding gun owners. Policymakers should strongly consider these data in deciding whether to increase the use of background checks to help impede the flow of guns to violent criminals, as Congress did in the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. Meanwhile, ATF and our law enforcement partners will seek to do everything in our power to prevent those same criminals from evading the checks that the law already requires.

Not only has Volume IV updated previous NFCTA analyses, but it also provides new insights on firearm commerce and unlawful gun trafficking. This information can assist LEAs to more effectively investigate firearm-related crimes and can inform solutions for recurring gun violence problems. To note just a few:

- As new manufacturing methods and techniques make the manufacturing of firearms more accessible, Volume IV shows a shift in the type of active FFLs over time. Specifically, between 2011 and 2023, the number of active Type 07 FFLs (those that can manufacture and conduct retail sales of firearms) increased nearly 236 percent. Between 2017 and 2023, there was a 100% increase in the number of theft incidents occurring among Type 07 FFLs and a 94% increase in the share of traced crime guns sold by Type 07 FFLs.
- Digging deeper into the data presented in Volume III – *Firearm Trafficking Investigations*, this Volume identifies three significant domestic firearm trafficking pipelines – an East Coast I-95 Pipeline, a Mississippi River region Pipeline, and a Southwest Pipeline. In two of these Pipelines, East Coast I-95 and Mississippi River, the percentage of the traced crime guns used in shootings was significantly higher than the National percentage. Nationally, about 6% of recovered and traced crime guns were associated with at least one shooting. In contrast, in the East Coast I-95 pipeline, 12% of recovered and traced crime guns were associated with at least one shooting, and in the Mississippi River pipeline 13% were associated with at least one shooting. These data suggests that these Pipelines serve as a direct conduit of crime guns to violent criminals in the market states.
- There has been an almost 25% increase in crime gun trace requests from Mexican authorities from 2021 to 2023. Between 2022 and 2023, 36% of the recovered crime guns were traced to a purchaser in the U.S., with more than 76% of the crime guns originating from firearm transfers in Southwest border states. Volume IV’s data shows the seriousness of the issue, as these firearms were not part of lawful exports but rather purchased in the U.S. and subsequently unlawfully trafficked out and recovered in a crime in Mexico. Further, 82% of traced crime guns were recovered in a Mexican state with a dominate cartel presence.
- Volume IV also examines firearms that were either once in the custody of, or owned by, a LEA and later recovered in crimes and traced by ATF. While just over 1% of all crime guns recovered and traced between 2019 and 2023 involved these LEA firearms, more than 14% of these firearms were associated with homicides or other violent crimes. The Department of Justice has recently issued guidance to LEAs on best practices regarding the complete destruction of crime guns where allowed -- guidance echoed by one of Volume IV’s final recommendations.

The NFCTA has been developed by a team of subject matter experts from within ATF and from our law enforcement and academic partners. In each prior volume, the researchers independent of ATF have concluded with policy recommendations to improve ATF's regulatory and enforcement capabilities. We have taken each of these recommendations seriously, and Volume IV documents our progress thus far. I cannot stress enough how strongly ATF believes in the proactive use of data and analytics to combat violent crime.

The NFCTA is an unprecedented collection of data that I have no doubt has and will continue to help law enforcement, prosecutors, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the fight against violent crime. I am incredibly thankful to the NFCTA team, including Joe Allen, Marianna Mitchem, Dale Armstrong, Professor Anthony Braga, and so many others, for their hard work and dedication these past couple years.

More generally, I am immensely grateful and honored to lead ATF in its crucial mission. They are a truly heroic and innovative group of men and women, who often risk everything to save the lives of total strangers. Although admittedly a tad partial, I honestly believe that they are the best of law enforcement and the best of America. I also know that neither ATF nor any law enforcement agency or officer will rest until all communities are safe from gun violence. To all my colleagues here, thank you for your dedication to public service and public safety. Leading you is the greatest honor of my professional life.



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