INTRODUCTION

Over the last three years, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) has issued a series of comprehensive reports on firearm commerce, crime gun intelligence, and firearm trafficking as part of its National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA). In April 2021, President Biden and Attorney General Garland launched an administration-wide strategy to reduce rising violent crime in the United States. As part of this strategy, the White House and the Department of Justice (DOJ) directed ATF to produce reports that provided a thorough examination of lawful commerce in firearms, the diversion of firearms into illegal markets, and firearm use in violent crime. In response, ATF assembled a team of subject matter experts and academic scholars. ATF routinely issues a variety of public and law enforcement reports regarding firearm commerce, crime gun traces, and related subjects every year. However, it had been more than 20 years since ATF had undertaken a large-scale joint academic study on these topics that promotes effective gun violence reduction efforts as data-driven, grounded in research evidence, and informed by multidisciplinary perspectives.

This report represents the fourth volume produced by the NFCTA initiative. Volume IV - *Protecting America from Trafficked Firearms: NFCTA Updates, New Analysis, and Policy Recommendations* provides updates to key research findings presented in earlier reports and presents new insights on topics including firearm trafficking along the southwestern border of the U.S. and firearms recovered in crime that were sourced from U.S. law enforcement agencies (LEAs). As with earlier NFCTA reports, ATF has strived to provide information that will help federal, state, and local law enforcement, prosecutors, policymakers, and other stakeholders obtain a better understanding of commerce in firearms, the workings of illegal firearm markets, and how to best address violent gun crime.

Issued in May 2022, Volume I – *Firearms in Commerce* provided a broad overview of firearm commerce in the U.S. An important part of ATF's mission is to prevent the diversion of firearms from legal markets to illegal markets by regulating lawful commerce in firearms. This mission is supported and enhanced by developing a thorough understanding of firearm commerce from the perspective of the general public, firearm owners, and the regulated industry. Volume I covered the period from 2000 to 2020 and presented and analyzed data collected by ATF and other federal agencies related to the manufacture, exportation, and importation of firearms. During the study period, the number of Gun Control Act (GCA) firearms and National Firearms Act (NFA) weapons that were domestically manufactured, exported by U.S. manufacturers, or imported into the U.S. increased by 187%, 240% and 350% respectively. Pistols became the dominant firearm type manufactured and imported into the U.S. over the last decade and annual manufacturing of short-barreled rifles increased by more than 24,000% between 2000 and 2020.

Over the past two decades, the proliferation of privately made firearms (PMFs), also known as "ghost guns", has been a highly significant development affecting lawful firearm commerce and reducing law enforcement's ability to investigate illegal access to firearms. Advances in firearm manufacturing and design, coupled with the online availability of parts and instructions needed to assemble PMFs, have made it easier for prohibited persons to make firearms at home without any records or background checks. It is difficult to know how many PMFs are being made and distributed into commerce due to their lack of identifying makings and the absence of recordkeeping requirements. Volume I analyzed data on the number of suspected PMFs recovered by law enforcement and subsequently traced by ATF. These analyses made it clear that criminals are actively making, using, and distributing PMFs both domestically and internationally. Between 2016 and 2021, the number of suspected PMFs traced by ATF increased by 1,000%. This information was utilized in the development and passage of the 2022 Final Rule 2021R-05F updating the definition of firearm frame or receiver and requiring Federal Firearm Licensees (FFLs) to mark PMFs taken into their inventory with serial numbers so recordkeeping and tracing is possible.

Issued in February 2023, Volume II – *Crime Gun Intelligence and Analysis* examined data related to crime guns recovered by law enforcement during domestic and international investigations. ATF accessed this information pursuant to specific statutory authorities and within the restrictions set by Congress to protect the privacy of lawful firearm owners. Crime gun tracing is an investigative tool that provides critical information to LEAs to assist in solving and preventing firearm-related crimes. Tracing is the systematic process of tracking the movement of a firearm from its first sale by the manufacturer or importer through the distribution chain (wholesaler/retailer) to the last known retail purchaser. Trace request data on more than 1.9 million recovered crime guns were analyzed for the 2017 through 2021 period. ATF was able to determine the purchaser in 77% of the submitted crime gun trace requests. Pistols were the dominant recovered crime gun with 9mm reflecting the most frequent pistol caliber. The analysis revealed that many crime guns had indicators of firearm trafficking including short time-to-crimes (TTCs, reflecting the time between the last known retail purchase and its recovery in a crime), recoveries from a possessor other than the last known purchaser, and interstate movement from states with less restrictive firearm controls to recoveries in states with more restrictive firearm controls.

Volume II, Part V also documented that theft remains a significant avenue through which firearms are illegally diverted from lawful commerce and ownership into criminal hands. Federal regulatory reporting requirements allow ATF to track both theft and recovery data for firearms stolen or lost from FFLs and interstate shipments. National Crime Information Center (NCIC) information maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was used to examine firearm theft from private citizens vehicles, homes, and persons. From 2017 to 2021, there were more than one million firearms reported stolen in the U.S. While more than 95% of stolen guns originated via thefts from private citizens, FFL and commercial shipping thefts remained a direct source of crime guns.

Ballistic data and analysis generated by ATF's National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) have enhanced ATF's capacity to support law enforcement efforts to identify, investigate, and prosecute those who use firearms to commit violent offenses and the traffickers who illegally divert those crime guns to criminals. The number of NIBIN cases increased by 103% from 2017 to 2021. In 2018, ATF began development of the NIBIN Enforcement Support System (NESS), an investigative tool that integrates NIBIN data with local law enforcement shooting and gun recovery case information on one web-based platform. As described in Volume II, Part VI, NESS provides near real-time information on interrelated violent gun crime to law enforcement. NESS includes information that allows the identification of *time-to-first shooting* (TTFS), which is the number of days between a recovered crime gun's last known retail purchase and its first shooting event. Like a short TTC, a TTFS is an indicator of illegal firearm trafficking as it suggests a crime gun was discharged in the commission of a crime shortly after it was purchased. Volume II analyses showed that recovered crime guns that were linked to a shooting had a TTFS that was almost always shorter than TTC. For instance, the median TTFS for pistols was 851 days (or 2.3 years), which was 238 days shorter than the median TTC of 1,089 days (or 2.9 years) for pistols.

Issued in April 2024, Volume III - *Firearms Trafficking Investigations*, surveyed ATF special agents (SAs) on closed firearm trafficking investigations initiated between 2017 and 2021. The analyses revealed that gun traffickers rely on illegal markets supplied by sources such as straw purchasers, unlicensed dealers, firearm thieves, and corrupt FFLs. Relative to the findings of ATF's 2000 *Following the Gun* report, the Volume III analysis revealed a shift in the types of supply lines, or trafficking channels, used to move these firearms over the last two decades. Investigations involving corrupt FFLs decreased over the study period with the most frequent trafficking channels identified now being illegal, unlicensed firearm dealing by private persons and straw purchasing. Additionally, firearm traffickers are now illegally exploiting venues and media such as gun shows, flea markets, online marketplaces, and social media platforms. And

while PMFs were not previously considered to be a reliable supply line for firearm traffickers, they are now in the top ten trafficking channels.

ATF intends that Volume IV - *Protecting America from Trafficked Firearms: NFCTA Updates, New Analysis, and Policy Recommendations*, will spur further study, discussion, and analysis by law enforcement, policymakers, prosecutors, advocates, academics, the media – and most importantly, the American people. ATF collaborates with federal, state, local, territorial, tribal, and international law enforcement partners, to identify, investigate, and refer for prosecution those who use firearms to commit violent offenses. Central to ATF's mission is the use of crime gun intelligence to support law enforcement partners in identifying violent offenders and those who illegally supply them with crime guns.

Volume IV has the following nine parts: Part I – Firearm Commerce Updates and New Analysis, Part II – Firearm Thefts and Losses Updates and New Analysis, Part III – Crime Gun Tracing Updates and New Analysis, Part IV – Firearm Trafficking Investigations, Part V – Privately Made Firearms Updates and New Analysis, Part VI – National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) Updates and New Analysis, Part VII – Firearm Commerce, Crime Guns, and the Southwest Border, Part VIII – Updates to Previous Recommendations, and Part IX – Final Recommendations. As in prior NFCTA volumes, the analyses in this report use data from multiple data sources. The parameters of the data used in the various parts of this Volume are summarized and presented here:

- All firearm manufacturing and exportation data presented in this Volume was obtained from the Annual Firearm Manufacturing and Exportation Report (AFMER) as of July 1, 2024. The data for calendar years 2000 through 2020 differ slightly than what is presented in Volume I, as FFLs submit updated and late AFMER reports for previous years.

- Trace data related to exported firearms are for crime guns recovered between January 1, 2019, and December 31, 2023, and traced by July 1, 2024.

- All firearm imports data presented in this Volume is as of July 1, 2024. The data differs slightly from what is presented in Volume I due to updated and processed importation records.

- All NFA data presented in this Volume is as of July 1, 2024. The data differs slightly from what is presented in Volume I due to updated and processed NFA records.

- The estimated minimum sales volume (ESMV) presented in this Volume differs slightly from Volume I as updated data was received from the FBI.

- All private citizen firearm theft data was provided by the FBI NCIC in November 2024. The data on firearm thefts from private citizens analyzed in this Volume is derived from NCIC gun records, which are updated and corrected as needed. Due to updated records, the data presented in this report will differ slightly from what was presented in Volume II.

- All trace related data for calendar years 2022 and 2023 are from crime guns recovered between January 1, 2022, and December 31, 2023, and traced by July 1, 2024.

- This Volume also provides new analyses that were not presented in previous Volumes. Due to updated and newly entered traces, previously reported trace data from 2019-2021 will differ slightly from what was presented in Volume II. In sections with new analyses, the trace data is generally based on crime guns recovered between January 1, 2019, and December 31, 2023, and traced by July 1, 2024.

ATF Firearms Trace Data Disclaimer

Firearm traces are designed to assist law enforcement authorities in conducting investigations by tracking the sale and possession of specific firearms. Law enforcement agencies may request firearms traces for any investigative reason, and those reasons are not necessarily reported to the federal government. Not all firearms used in crime are traced and not all firearms traced are used in crime.

Firearms selected for tracing are not chosen for purposes of determining which types, makes or models of firearms are used for illicit purposes. The firearms selected do not constitute a random sample and should not be considered representative of the larger universe of all firearms used by criminals, or any subset of that universe. Firearms are normally traced to the first retail seller, and sources reported for firearms traced do not necessarily represent the sources or methods by which firearms in general are acquired for use in crime.

ATF Firearm Trace and Ballistic Data Limitations

The data analyzed in this report represent crime guns and crime gun evidence recovered by LEAs between 2017 and 2023 that were submitted to ATF for tracing (Firearms Tracing System (FTS)) and/or processed for ballistic evidence (NIBIN). Firearm tracing and ballistic imaging policies and practices vary across LEAs. For those jurisdictions with comprehensive firearm tracing and ballistic imaging policies in place, crime gun trace data and ballistic imaging data can be considered representative samples of the population of guns used by offenders in those jurisdictions. As such, the analytic results presented in this report are limited to this sample of recovered crime guns and crime gun evidence and are not necessarily representative of all crime guns used by offenders in the U.S. or in other countries during the study period.