

Trafficking

The term “firearm trafficking” refers to the illegal diversion of legally-owned guns from lawful commerce into unlawful commerce. Because all crime guns initially start out as legal products, the term “trafficking” has a different meaning than it does when used in connection with the manufacture or sale of illegal products, such as unlawful drugs.

In June of 2000, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) published a comprehensive report of firearm trafficking in the United States. That report, [*Following the Gun: Enforcing Federal Laws Against Firearms Traffickers*](#), analyzed 1,530 trafficking investigations during the period July 1996 through December 1998. The investigations involved a total of 84,128 diverted firearms.

ATF found that firearm traffickers use a variety of channels to divert firearms from the lawful to the unlawful market. The most frequently used channels include:

- **Corrupt dealers.** Federally licensed firearms dealers were associated with the largest number of diverted guns (over 40,000), even though they were involved in less than 10 percent of the investigations. The violations included transfers to prohibited purchasers, failure to keep required records, making false entries in record books and conducting out-of-state transfers.
- **Gun shows.** Gun shows involved the second highest number of diverted firearms (26,000). The investigations involved both licensed and unlicensed sellers. ATF found that the “access to anonymous sales and large numbers of secondhand firearms makes gun shows attractive to criminals.”
- **Straw purchasers.** A “straw purchaser” is a person who buys firearms on behalf of a convicted felon, juvenile or other prohibited purchaser. ATF found that straw purchasing was the most common channel in trafficking investigations. Although the average number of firearms trafficked per straw purchase investigation was relatively small, nearly 26,000 firearms were associated with these investigations.
- **Unlicensed sellers.** Unlicensed sellers (i.e., persons other than federally licensed dealers) were involved in about one-fifth of the trafficking investigations and associated with nearly 23,000 diverted guns. Unlicensed sellers included those who knowingly sold firearms from their personal collection to criminals, as well as interstate gun runners who sold firearms to gangs and drug organizations.
- **Firearms theft.** Firearms stolen from dealers, residences and common carriers were involved in over one-quarter of the investigations and were associated with over 9,000 trafficked firearms.

The ATF report also found that gun traffickers play a critical role in violent crime. Over half of the investigations involved firearms known to have been used in subsequent criminal investigations, including investigations of homicide, robbery and assault. Approximately 45 percent of the trafficking investigations involved convicted felons.

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