



The Gun Trafficking Crisis Is Fueling Violent Crime

By Eugenio Weigend June 16, 2022

Gun trafficking—the movement of guns from legal to illegal streams of commerce, which occurs both within states and across state lines—is a major problem in the United States. Indeed, trafficked firearms are increasingly turning up at crime scenes and, as a result, are a major driver of violent crime.

To learn more, read the accompanying column:

[“The United States Must Address Its Gun Trafficking Crisis”](#)

This fact sheet provides both data that point to the growing problem of gun trafficking and policy solutions for elected leaders to consider as they work to combat the crisis.

Gun trafficking from states with weaker gun laws drives violent crime in states with stronger gun laws

- According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), more than 600,000 crime guns that were traced from 2010 to 2020 originated from a different state than the one in which they were recovered.¹
- From 2016 to 2020, 75 percent of crime guns recovered across state lines originated from states with no background check laws.²
- ATF data show that 79 percent of crime guns recovered in the state of New York during 2019 and 81 percent of guns recovered during 2020 originated from out of state.³
- Nearly two-thirds of crime guns recovered in Chicago come from out of state.⁴
- More than two-thirds of crime guns recovered in Baltimore come from out of state.⁵

Key data indicate gun trafficking is getting worse

- The number of out-of-state crime guns recovered in New York rose nearly 10 percent from 2010 to 2020.
- There has recently been a rise in short time-to-crime guns (STCGs), firearms that are purchased and used to perpetrate a crime within a relatively short period of time—usually within six months or less:
 - From 2019 to 2020, guns that had a “time to crime” of six months or less rose by 90 percent, while the number of guns with a time to crime of a year or more rose by only 1 percent.⁶

Licensed rogue gun dealers contribute to gun trafficking and violent crime but are rarely held accountable

- An analysis of 2,000 gun dealer inspections that reported violations from 2015 to 2017 found that more than half of the dealers sold firearms without a proper background check:
 - Of these, more than 200 gun dealers sold firearms to individuals who acknowledged that they were prohibited by law to purchase a firearm.⁷
 - Only 3 percent of these licensed dealers had their licenses revoked.⁸

Elected leaders can take several actions now to address gun trafficking

- Congress must confirm President Joe Biden’s nomination for ATF director, as the agency has not had a permanent director since 2015.
- Congress must pass bills to repeal the Tiahrt Amendment, a series of policy riders that prevent the release of gun crime tracing data.⁹
- Background checks should be required for all gun sales, including those that occur at gun shows:
 - ATF has identified gun shows as a common channel for trafficking.¹⁰
- Stronger security requirements should be imposed for licensed gun dealers to prevent theft:
 - An ATF report indicated that 97,000 firearms were reported as missing from federal firearm licensees (FFLs) from 2012 to 2021.¹¹
 - From 2012 to 2019, 17,000 recovered crime guns were reported as stolen or missing from licensed gun dealers.¹²
- Gun owners should be required to report their lost or stolen firearms to law enforcement:
 - Every year, close to 380,000 firearms are stolen in the United States.¹³
 - One study reported a nearly 50 percent reduction in trafficking activity because of “lost and stolen reporting laws.”¹⁴

Conclusion

The data are clear: Gun trafficking from states with weaker gun laws to states with stricter gun laws is a major contributor to the rise in crime. Implementing commonsense gun laws such as background checks on all gun sales, laws to prevent theft, and improved gun tracing data are just a few ways to curb gun crime in the United States.

Endnotes

- 1 Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, "Data & Statistics," available at <https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/data-statistics> (last accessed June 2022).
- 2 Everytown for Gun Safety, "Gun Trafficking," available at <https://www.everytown.org/issues/gun-trafficking/> (last accessed June 2022).
- 3 Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, "Data & Statistics," available at <https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/data-statistics> (last accessed June 2022).
- 4 *Chicago Tribune*, "Are Chicago's gun laws the strictest in the United States? Not anymore," May 27, 2022, available at <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-news-cb-greg-abbott-texas-gun-laws-chicago-20220527-pruljwytw5c3zmdaqhrr6q4fki-list.html>.
- 5 City of Baltimore, "Mayor, BPD Partner with Everytown to Develop Gun Safety on Innovative Gun Trafficking Tool," May 3, 2021, available at <https://mayor.baltimore-city.gov/news/press-releases/2021-03-03-mayor-bpd-partner-everytown-develop-gun-safety-innovative-gun>.
- 6 Jeff Asher and Rob Arthur, "The Data Are Pointing to One Major Driver of America's Murder Spike," *The Atlantic*, January 10, 2022, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/gun-sales-murder-spike/621196/>.
- 7 Brian Freskos and others, "The ATF Catches Thousands of Lawbreaking Gun Dealers Every Year. It Shuts Down Very Few," *The Trace*, May 26, 2021, available at <https://www.thetrace.org/2021/05/atf-inspection-report-gun-store-ffl-violation/>.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Office of Sen. Bob Mendez, "Sen. Menendez, Rep. Lee Reintroduce Bicameral Bill to End NRA-Backed Ban on Preservation, Disclosure of Gun Records," Press release, March 25, 2021, available at <https://www.mendez.senate.gov/newsroom/press/sen-menendez-rep-lee-reintroduce-bicameral-bill-to-end-nra-backed-ban-on-preservation-disclosure-of-gun-records>.
- 10 Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, "How Guns Flow from Legal to Illegal Commerce," available at <https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/infographics/how-guns-flow-legal-illegal-commerce> (last accessed June 2022).
- 11 Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, "Data & Statistics."
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 David Hemenway, Deborah Azrael, and Matthew Miller, "Whose Guns Are Stolen? The Epidemiology of Gun Theft Victims," *Injury Epidemiology* 4 (11) (2017), available at <https://injepjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40621-017-0109-8>.
- 14 Everytown for Gun Safety, "Report Lost and Stolen Guns," available at <https://everytownresearch.org/solution/report-lost-and-stolen-guns/> (last accessed June 2022).