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The United States Must Address Its Gun Trafficking Crisis

Gun trafficking fuels crime and undermines state and local efforts to mitigate violence; the Biden administration has taken important steps that must be complemented by congressional and state-level policies.

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[Gun Violence Prevention, State and Local Policy](#)


ATF agents are seen in shadows next to a pickup truck bed holding seized and purchased guns waiting to be shredded at a scrapyard in Western Maryland on March 20, 2013. (Getty/The Washington Post/Ricky Carioti)

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is tasked with preventing gun trafficking and conducting oversight of the gun industry, yet it has been without a permanent director since 2015. This is no minor issue. President Joe Biden, recognizing the problem, [announced his nomination](#) for ATF's permanent director in April 2022. While the Senate, in a bipartisan

agreement, took a positive step by making gun trafficking an explicit federal crime, it should waste no time in confirming President Biden's nomination so that ATF can immediately get to work with a renewed focus on stopping the growing problem of gun trafficking and cracking down on the proliferation of illegal guns in communities across the country.

President Biden has also announced several other steps to tackle gun violence, as it is the key driver of the rise in violent crimes and homicides around the nation. Among those steps is a series of measures aimed at reducing gun trafficking, which significantly contributes to the rise in violent crime.



Gun trafficking appears to be on the rise, and those trafficked guns are being used to carry out violent crimes.

For example, in July 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) launched five gun trafficking strike forces with a focus on removing crime guns from America's streets. More recently, U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland directed all U.S. attorneys to prioritize gun trafficking, and the DOJ increased prosecutorial resources to tackle rogue gun dealers who operate on known trafficking corridors—particularly the “Iron Pipeline” along Interstate 95. Additionally, the DOJ announced a series of rules to address the problem of “ghost guns,” homemade firearms or firearms that lack serial numbers and are being used and recovered in crimes at alarming rates. In particular, the DOJ plans to add serial numbers to receivers and require background checks on the purchase of gun kits.

These represent critical steps in the right direction, but further action is needed.

The gun trafficking crisis

Gun trafficking in the United States is a major problem. According to ATF reports, more than 600,000 crime guns that were traced from 2010 to 2020 originated from out of the state they were recovered in, meaning that they were likely trafficked. Moreover, there are signs that gun trafficking within the country has increased. In addition to firearms trafficked across state lines, there is concern about the rise of 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. STCGs are major indicators of the existence of gun trafficking schemes.

GUN TRAFFICKING: BY THE NUMBERS

600K+

Number of guns that originated from out of the state they were recovered in from 2010 to 2020

90%

The percentage increase of short time-to-crime guns (STCGs) recovered after a crime from 2019 to 2020.

3%

Percentage of the 2,000 gun dealer violations reported from 2015 to 2017 that resulted in a license revocation

380K

Number of firearms stolen every year from private owners

Unfortunately, the frequency by which trafficked firearms are recovered has grown considerably, particularly after the surge of gun sales during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, analysis by *The Atlantic* indicates that while the number of traced guns with a “time to crime” of a year or more rose by 1 percent from 2019 to 2020, guns that had a time to crime of six months or less rose by 90 percent during that same period.

In other words, gun trafficking appears to be on the rise, and those trafficked guns are being used to carry out violent crimes.

Addressing the problem of rogue gun dealers is key to ending gun trafficking

Federal firearm licensees (FFLs) are defined as individuals who are “licensed to engage in the business of manufacturing, importing and/or dealing in firearms.” As of January 2021, there were more than 131,000 FFLs in the United States. Of those, roughly 60,000 were categorized as dealers, 17,000 as manufacturers, 1,500 as importers, and 53,000 as collectors.

Unfortunately, there are corrupt FFLs that often break the law without any consequences. 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. In fact, more than 200 gun dealers sold firearms to individuals that acknowledged that they were prohibited by law to purchase a firearm. Perhaps even more alarming is the fact that out of the 2,000 cases of violation, only 3 percent resulted in a license revocation. This clearly signals that FFLs have little to no fear of facing repercussions if they break the law.

In addition to the lack of consequences, FFLs are rarely inspected. In fiscal year 2020, ATF had 728 industry operation investigators (IOIs) and was only able to conduct 5,827 compliance inspections. This is not a minor concern; it means that less than 5 percent of FFLs are inspected—or about 11 percent if one were only to consider the 60,000 gun dealers and assume that inspections were just conducted for these types of FFLs.

Overall, this suggests that federal violations are seldom identified, meaning that FFLs are not being held accountable and individuals who are prohibited from purchasing firearms are able to continue get them.

Firearm trafficking represents a major challenge, as many of these weapons are later used in crimes, further fueling the country’s gun violence epidemic. According to the latest available data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 19,000 gun-homicides occurred in the United States during 2020. This figure represents a 35 percent increase from 2019, the highest annual increase ever recorded. At the same time, nonfatal gun injuries from assaults have occurred with staggering frequency. Indeed, a report from Everytown for Gun Safety suggests that every year, close to 37,000 people are injured with a gun during an assault. Similarly, estimates from the National Crime Victimization Survey suggest that from 2019 to 2020, more than 832,000 crimes involved the use of a firearm to threaten victims.

Furthermore, as a national problem, gun trafficking undermines state- and city-level efforts to reduce crime and violence. In this regard, the movement of crime guns tends to flow from states with weak gun laws to states with strong gun laws. For example, 2010 through 2020 ATF data show that 73 percent of crime guns recovered in New York—a state with strong gun laws—originated from out of state.

This problem, unfortunately, appears to be getting worse. ATF data show that 79 and 81 percent of crime guns recovered in the state of New York during 2019 and 2020, respectively, originated out of state. Moreover, the origin of these firearms supports the urgency of prioritizing oversight of the Iron Pipeline. ATF data show that in 2020, 53 percent of crime guns recovered in New York originated from six states with weaker gun laws: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Virginia.

Examples of crime guns flowing from out of state

- In January 2022, a police officer was fatally shot in New York City, and another was critically wounded, after a man allegedly opened fire using a firearm that had been stolen in Maryland during 2017.
- In 2021, a woman purchased a firearm in Indiana that was recovered in a crime scene in Chicago four days later. The woman has been charged with allegedly making false statements while purchasing the gun.

Policy recommendations

While the Biden administration has taken adequate steps to address gun trafficking, there are numerous actions that can be taken to complement such efforts.

Address gun trafficking corridors across the country

Even though the Iron Pipeline is a well-known gun trafficking corridor along the East Coast, it is not the only region with such challenges. For instance, Illinois' efforts to reduce crime have clearly been undermined by the thousands of crime guns that pour in from other states. Indeed, ATF data suggest that 1 in every 2 crime guns recovered in Illinois originate from out of state—mainly from Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, or Wisconsin, all states with weaker gun laws according to the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. When looking specifically at the city of Chicago, the proportion is even higher: ATF data show that 66 percent of crime guns recovered in Chicago are traced to out-of-state sources, primarily Indiana, Wisconsin, Mississippi, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

Accordingly, the administration should address the problem of rogue gun dealers not only along the Iron Pipeline but in other trafficking corridors as well.

Monitor firearm sales at private gun shows

Gun trafficking is an issue that requires attention across all stages of the firearms supply chain, not just rogue gun dealers. For example, little is known about the thousands of gun shows that take place every year across the country. As many states do not require any form of background check during private sales, gun shows can be venues for traffickers to acquire or sell guns with no questions asked. In fact, ATF has recognized private sales as a common channel for gun trafficking. In October 2021, for example, four men were arrested for allegedly purchasing firearms at gun shows and then trafficking them across state lines, from St. Louis to Chicago.

An additional step that the administration could take to address this issue would be to monitor and compile information on gun shows and request a report from ATF. The latest ATF report on gun shows was published in 2007, 15 years ago.

Pass gun violence prevention legislation at the federal and state level

Policies to tackle gun trafficking require legislative action. Specifically, Congress must pass laws that require universal background checks at all points of sale—a policy that is supported by most of the population. In addition, the Senate must confirm President Bidens’s nomination for ATF director, and Congress must pass bills to repeal the Tiahrt Amendment, a series of policy riders that prevent the release of gun crime tracing data.

States also have an important role to play. For instance, states that have no background check requirements during private sales can pass their own state laws to close this gap. They can also follow the example of Maryland and ban ghost guns, a measure that would complement the DOJ’s ruling. In addition, states could help tackle gun theft from federal firearm licensees—who report thousands of stolen or missing firearms every year—by requiring additional security measures at FFLs, such as alarm systems or simple-locking firearms after business hours.

With roughly 380,000 firearms being stolen every year from private owners, states should also pass bills that require the reporting of lost and stolen firearms.

Take action at the local level to address gun trafficking

Finally, cities can generate gun trafficking reports. Collecting data on where crime guns originate and where they end up is imperative to addressing the issue of gun trafficking.

In 2017, the city of Chicago, in concert with the Chicago Police Department, released “Gun Trace,” a detailed report that examined how many crime guns were found within city limits and which gun dealers the firearms came from. The report found that guns used in Chicago crimes were primarily purchased in neighboring suburban areas, including counties outside of Illinois. Notably, the top 10 source dealers were responsible for 25 percent of all crime guns recovered in Chicago. Other cities can replicate this model of reporting to demonstrate the flow of guns and ensure that FFLs are held responsible if they are contributing to the gun trafficking crisis.

Conclusion

The United States is suffering a gun violence epidemic that is driving the rise in homicides and violent crime. A key approach to addressing this challenge is tackling gun trafficking. The Biden administration has taken positive steps by focusing on rogue dealers, tackling ghost guns, and nominating an ATF director. Yet these steps must be accompanied by other complementary actions. Specifically, Congress and state-level policymakers must pass legislation to address the issue. Only then, can the United States get one step closer to ending the gun trafficking crisis, which fuels violent crime.

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TEAM**Gun Violence Prevention**

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Sensible Solutions To Prevent Gun Violence in the U.S.

Gun violence in the United States is a pervasive public health issue. Ending this crisis requires a multipronged approach to address the many forms of gun violence that affect our communities. Firearm suicides, homicides, intimate partner and domestic violence, community gun violence, gun trafficking, and more all contribute to the immediate and growing need for comprehensive gun violence prevention policies.

Gun violence is not inevitable. The following resources discuss sensible solutions to address the gun violence epidemic.

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