




→ SEARCH

## Coalition Analysis of ATF Trace Data

### TRACE THE GUNS

- CONTRIBUTE
- HOME
- ABOUT THE COALITION
- COALITION MEMBERS
- MEDIA CENTER
- FEDERAL LEGISLATION
- STATE & LOCAL INITIATIVES
- RETAILER PARTNERSHIP

- TRACE DATA CENTER**
- Coalition's 2008 Report
  - FBI NICS Data
  - 2007 State Trace Reports
  - 2006 State Trace Reports

- RESEARCH
- INVESTIGATIONS
- PUBLIC OPINION
- CONTACT THE COALITION

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### What is Gun Trace Data and Why is it Useful?

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) collects and maintains trace data for firearms recovered at crime scenes. A gun trace is initiated when local, state, or federal law enforcement recovers a gun and asks ATF to determine its origin. ATF is typically able to determine the original retailer of a gun, the original purchaser of a gun, and the date of sale. This information can be enormously useful to federal, state, and local law enforcement in the investigation of individual crimes. Further, when pooled together, trace data is also very useful in analyzing illegal gun trafficking patterns, as well as identifying illegal gun traffickers and gun dealers who may not be following the law.

[Download the coalition's full report \(in PDF\)](#)

### Coalition Report: The Movement of Illegal Guns in America

In the highly contentious debate about the appropriate scope of gun laws, it is important to keep in mind two propositions that almost all sides agree on. *First*, the vast majority of gun owners in this country are law-abiding citizens; most gun crimes are committed by a small minority of the gun-owning population. *Second*, gun laws must be designed to keep firearms away from the criminal minority without infringing on the rights of the law-abiding majority.

One such law that has won broad support among both advocates for stricter gun laws and gun rights advocates is the requirement that federally licensed gun dealers conduct background checks on all purchasers. Under federal law, felons, domestic violence misdemeanants, and other categories of individuals are prohibited from possessing or purchasing firearms. Background checks identify these "prohibited purchasers," helping to keep guns out of the hands of those most likely to use them in crimes. Nevertheless, thousands of guns make their way into the hands of such prohibited possessors through an illegal market. This report looks at how guns move from the legal to the illegal marketplace - and into the hands of criminals.

Different researchers have come to a variety of conclusions on the broad question of the relationship between gun regulation and crime. A number of studies have suggested that oversight of gun dealers, regulation of private gun sales, and aggressive enforcement of illegal gun possession laws can reduce crime rates.<sup>1</sup> Others have suggested that easing access to guns can drive crime down by deterring criminals and contend that



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◀ 2 OF 8 ▶

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precautionary regulations, such as those at gun shows, do not lead to reductions in crime rates.

This report - the first of its kind - examines a more focused question: *What is the relationship between a state's gun regulations and the likelihood that it will be a source of guns recovered in out-of-state crimes?* While all states operate under the same federal gun laws, many states have enacted a series of additional laws - such as background checks on all gun show sales, mandatory reporting of lost and stolen guns to police, and state gun dealer inspections - to choke off the illegal market and reduce criminal access to guns. The states that have not enacted these additional regulations, or others beyond federal law, have comparatively weak gun laws. This report begins to shed light on the interstate marketplace for illegal guns and suggests that it flourishes in states with weaker laws.

Part One of the report explains how this analysis is possible, whereas less than two years ago it was not. The key to unlocking the relationship between gun laws and the movement of crime guns lies in "trace data," which refers to the tracing of a gun's origins. Such traces occur when law enforcement officers recover guns used in crimes and request that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) conduct an investigation to identify the original retail seller and buyer of the gun. When aggregated, trace data also provides a wealth of information about the buyers, dealers, and geographic areas that are associated with guns used in crimes across the country.

Part Two uses trace data to identify the scope of interstate trafficking of crime guns and to highlight the top source states for interstate crime guns.

Part Three analyzes which states "export" crime guns to other states at the highest rates, on the basis of both population and gun sales volume. These export rates identify states that are outliers as sources of crime guns - states that are either major or minor sources of interstate crime guns. On the basis of population, ten states - West Virginia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Kentucky, Alabama, Virginia, Georgia, Indiana, Nevada, and North Carolina - supply interstate crime guns at a rate two and a half times the national average.

Part Four seeks to answer the question of why some states export crime guns at higher rates by comparing the average export rates of states that have enacted specific gun laws to the export rates of states that have not. In doing so, it finds a strong relationship between high crime gun export rates and the absence of certain state gun laws. Five such laws are examined, and the report finds that the ten states that supply interstate crime guns at the highest rates have, on average, 0.6 of these regulations in place, compared to 3.4 in the ten states that supply interstate crime guns at the lowest rates - five times higher than the states with the highest export rates.

Part Five examines the relationship of a state's crime gun exports to its crime gun imports and finds that states with high crime gun export rates typically export far more guns than they import. This finding bolsters the notion that, within states with

high export rates, ready access to crime guns reduces the need for crime gun imports.

Part Six examines the relationship between export rates and gun murder rates, finding that states with the highest crime gun export rates suffer from 59% more gun murders than the states with the lowest crime gun export rates. In addition, these high export states suffer nearly three times as many fatal shootings of police officers as states that are the least frequent suppliers of guns trafficked across state lines.

This report's conclusion summarizes how the preceding analysis sheds light on a decades-old debate about the nature of the illegal gun market. Many law enforcement officials have long maintained that a pattern of illegal gun trafficking exists between states. For example, there has been much discussion of an "Iron Pipeline" through which guns from states in the Southeast are trafficked into the hands of criminals in Mid-Atlantic and Northeast cities along Interstate 95. This report confirms these accounts, suggesting there is an interstate illegal gun market driven, at least in part, by the relative ease of access to guns in particular states. **The key finding of this report is that states that supply crime guns at the highest rates have comparatively weak gun regulations. This association strongly suggests that gun traffickers favor these states as sources.**

### Coalition Report Identifies States with the Highest Crime Gun Export Rate

By controlling for population, the report determined the rate at which each state "exports" or supplies guns that are recovered in crimes in other states. In this way, the crime gun export rates are used to identify which states are the largest per capita suppliers of guns recovered in out-of-state crimes.

The table below shows the ten states with the highest crime gun export rates in 2007.

Ten States with the Highest Crime Gun Export Rates		
2007		
Guns Exported per 100,000 Inhabitants		
1.	<a href="#">West Virginia</a>	41.0
2.	<a href="#">Mississippi</a>	39.0
3.	<a href="#">South Carolina</a>	30.6
4.	<a href="#">Kentucky</a>	29.7
5.	<a href="#">Alabama</a>	29.4
6.	<a href="#">Virginia</a>	29.3
7.	<a href="#">Georgia</a>	27.6
8.	<a href="#">Indiana</a>	26.2
9.	<a href="#">Nevada</a>	23.7
10.	<a href="#">North Carolina</a>	19.6

*By clicking on the state names in the table above, you can access maps showing the primary recovery locations of guns from that state in 2007.*

[Download the coalition's full report \(in PDF\)](#)

### **Additional Resources**

[2007 State-by-State Trace Data released by ATF](#)

[2006 State-by-State Trace Data released by ATF](#)

[FBI Crime Data](#)

[NICS Data](#)

[Police Officers Killed Data](#)

[Brady Campaign's analysis of 2007 ATF trace data](#)

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