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TECHNICAL
R E P O R T



Strategies for Disrupting Illegal Firearms Markets

A Case Study of Los Angeles

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Supported by the National Institute of Justice



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This research was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Justice and conducted under the auspices of the Safety and Justice Program within RAND Infrastructure, Safety, and Environment (ISE).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this publication.
ISBN #978-0-8330-4478-5

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Published 2008 by the RAND Corporation
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Summary

In 2001, with the support of a grant from the National Institute of Justice, RAND initiated a research and program-development effort to understand the nature of illegal gun markets operating in the city of Los Angeles, California. The primary goal of this project was to determine whether a data-driven, problem-solving approach could yield new interventions aimed at disrupting the workings of local, illegal gun markets serving criminals, gang members, and juveniles in Los Angeles. There were two key components of this research and development project. First, we created a new software tool intended to identify key patterns in relevant data—such as Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) firearm-trace data, California state handgun-purchase and -sale data, and local Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) gun-crime data—that would help law-enforcement officials identify and trace illicit pathways by which criminals acquire guns. Second, we used this software to conduct data analyses and illegal gun-market research, whose findings were incorporated into an inter-agency working-group process that developed a community-based intervention designed to disrupt the illegal flow of guns to Los Angeles-area criminals. Key participants in the working group included ATF, LAPD, the U.S. Attorney’s Office, state and city prosecutors, academics, and other criminal-justice agencies.

By studying applicable firearm laws, making good use of available data sources, soliciting input from several law-enforcement agencies, developing and implementing strategies, and evaluating their results, we demonstrate that this approach can result in effective interventions that have the potential to reduce the supply of illegal firearms.

Why Los Angeles?

After sharp falls from the peaks in 1991, Los Angeles’ violent-crime rates began to worsen in the early years of this decade. In 2000, the city registered a 27-percent increase in homicides, and, when we proposed this study in 2001, Los Angeles was on track to show a 12-percent increase over 2000 (LAPD, undated). Other crime categories, including robbery, aggravated assault, and rape, were showing similar increases. As a consequence, Los Angeles’ violent-crime rate (922.3 per 100,000 residents) was higher than the rates in Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Detroit. Only New York had a higher total violent-crime rate. Los Angeles’ homicide rate (9.3 per 100,000 residents), however, substantially exceeded New York’s (7.3 per 100,000 residents). Much of the crime, particularly homicide, was, and continues to be, gun-related. LAPD statistics show that, between 1999 and 2003, 64 percent of homicides were committed with a handgun (MacDonald, Wilson, and Tita, 2005).

Los Angeles' 1999 Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative (YGCII) data suggest that a substantial portion of the city's crime guns (guns used in commission of a crime) (20 percent) go from first retail purchase to use in a crime relatively quickly (ATF, 2002). This finding suggests that a noteworthy portion of California retail sales may be associated with criminal intent. Combined, the YGCII data suggest that Los Angeles has a problem with people acquiring guns from illegal and unregulated sources.

Our working knowledge of the operations of the illegal gun market needed to be further refined to develop effective supply-side interventions. During the developmental stages of this project, it quickly became apparent to the interagency working group that, for the purposes of launching street-level interventions, attempting to address the illegal gun market citywide was not feasible. Given available resources, the group needed to focus on a particular area of the city. LAPD's 77th Street policing area (south Los Angeles) was chosen for two reasons:

1. Between January 1999 and March 2003, there were 322 homicides in this area, 91 percent involving guns. In three of the past four years, the 77th Street area ranked first among all LAPD areas in total number of homicides. These homicides primarily involved gangs; 53 percent were gang motivated, and another 20 percent involved gang members. The 77th Street area serves a population of approximately 175,000 in a 12-square-mile area. This area is characterized by many social ills, including concentrated poverty, single-female-headed households, high unemployment, and violent crime.
2. The 77th Street policing area is also a target area for the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ)-sponsored Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) initiative. Since a key element of PSN is to address the illegal sources of guns and many of our law-enforcement partners were already part of the PSN enterprise, it made sense to capture economies of scale by incorporating members and resources across both working groups.

Accomplishments

This project consisted of three activities. The first was the creation of a software tool to increase ATF's ability to analyze patterns in crime-gun data to identify gun-trafficking cases. The second activity focused on developing an intervention to reduce the supply of illegal guns in two Los Angeles neighborhoods. The intervention involved a public information campaign designed by our working group to target straw purchasers to discourage them from transferring legally purchased guns to illegal possessors. The third activity evaluated the utility of records of retail purchases of ammunition for identifying prohibited firearm possessors. We describe each of these briefly here. Each of the remaining chapters of this report describes these activities and their results in more detail.

The Software Tool: The Firearms Trace Pattern Analysis Workstation

This project coincided with ATF's establishment of a new regional crime-gun center for Southern California, based in Los Angeles. Consequently, a large portion of our work focused on developing the analytic capacity of the fledgling crime-gun center. We did this by creating a software-based tool: the Firearms Trace Pattern Analysis (FTPA) workstation. The FTPA workstation is intended to address two important law-enforcement needs: (1) to identify pat-

terns of potential firearm trafficking and other suspicious activities and (b) to minimize the training and technical expertise required to obtain this type of intelligence. It was designed to operate as an application within ATF's overall firearm-tracing and crime-analysis processes and to expand analysts' and agents' ability to perform pattern-analysis searches of firearm-trace data. As the project unfolded, staffing at the Southern California Regional Crime Gun Center (SCRCGC) declined such that, by the end of 2006, the office had no analysts assigned to the lead-generation process. However, the careful documentation of the development of SCRCGC's information resources and analytic capacity serves as an important blueprint for other jurisdictions interested in developing a dynamic knowledge base to launch strategic gun-market interventions.

The FTPA system consists of five components: (1) a data warehouse that integrates information from different individual database tables within the Firearms Trace System (FTS), as well as—from other databases within ATF—(2) data cleaning; (3) development of indicators of potential firearm trafficking, other suspicious behaviors, and characteristics of illegal firearm markets; (4) an interface allowing analysts and investigators to select indicators to identify potential patterns of firearm trafficking and other suspicious behaviors; and (5) a customizable reporting system for suspicious patterns that investigators have identified.

Using our new tool, we conducted initial analyses of illegal gun markets serving criminals in the target area. Results showed that many crime guns were first purchased at local—that is, in-county—licensed dealers, rather than from out of state. That is, contrary to the conventional wisdom in the Southern California law-enforcement community that crime guns were being trafficked across state borders from places with less stringent regulations, such as Arizona and Nevada, we found that a majority of the guns used in crimes were purchased in Los Angeles County. Furthermore, we found that, when the firearm possessor was not the original purchaser, the geographic distance between the two was quite small. In more than one-third of all such instances in the 77th Street study area, the original legal purchaser resided within 4.5 miles of 77th Street. Based on its investigative experience, the interagency working group suggested that the local nature of the market was driven by prohibited possessors who were having local friends or family members conduct straw purchases¹ for them.

Targeting Straw Purchasers

Consistent with criminological theory, the working group felt strongly that, because the person conducting the straw purchase does not have a criminal history forbidding him or her from making legal purchases, this population could potentially be deterred from initiating this illegal activity. While we have no information on whether this pathway of crime guns is particularly more dangerous than other sources, the working group assessed that law enforcement has the most leverage, through police and legal options, to influence this pathway cost-effectively. As a result of these analyses, the working group associated with the project organized a “letter-campaign” intervention that attempted to dissuade legal firearm purchasers from selling or transferring their firearms to others without filing the necessary paperwork with the state. This program was possible because California law requires the California Department of Jus-

¹ Under current federal law, a straw purchase occurs when the actual buyer of a firearm uses another person, a straw purchaser, to execute the paperwork necessary to purchase a firearm from a licensed dealer. The straw purchaser violates the Gun Control Act of 1968 (P.L. 90-618) by making a false statement with respect to information required to be kept in the licensed dealer's records (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, 2000b, p. 1).

tice (CalDOJ) to maintain a database of all firearm sales. In selected areas, new gun buyers received notification letters during their 10-day waiting period, before they picked up their newly purchased firearms, that informed them of their responsibilities as gun owners and that the firearms could be traced back to them if used in a crime. The key idea of this new gun-market-disruption strategy was to deter small-scale straw purchasers from picking up their firearms and from making other illegal purchases in the future. Our findings suggest that the campaign may have had a large impact on straw purchasing.

Findings from Ammunition-Sale Analysis

The interagency working group was also very concerned about the apparent ease with which criminals in Los Angeles acquired ammunition for their illegal firearms. Fortunately, the City of Los Angeles regulates ammunition sales and requires city dealers to keep records of ammunition-sale transactions in a log book. We acquired and analyzed data on retail ammunition sales to assess the volume of sales to prohibited possessors of ammunition. The purpose of these analyses was to inform the public debate on regulations that might require checks for ammunition or might give local law enforcement an intelligence tool for locating potential crime guns. We found that 3 percent of ammunition purchasers had a prior felony conviction or another condition that prohibited them from possessing ammunition. During the study period, prohibited possessors purchased more than 10,000 rounds of ammunition in Los Angeles.

The initial reaction to these findings might be to try to close the pathway of illegal ammunition transfers by expanding Brady criminal-background checks (P.L. 103-159) to include prospective ammunition. However, the ammunition logs might also be used as an intelligence tool for local, state, and federal law-enforcement agencies. Not only can law-enforcement agencies prosecute individuals who purchase and possess ammunition illegally, but it is reasonable to conclude that these prohibited possessors also possess a firearm. On the basis of the ammunition-log data, local authorities can seek a search warrant that may lead to the confiscation of firearms from these prohibited possessors. The costs and benefits of recording and screening ammunition-sale records needs further evaluation.