The Importance of Crime Gun Trace Data to Studying and Reducing Illegal Gun Trafficking

Daniel W. Webster, ScD, MPH

Homicide rates are determined, in part, by how easy it is for criminals to get guns.¹ Yet for many years, there was scant information about how guns made their way from an assembly line to the hand of a dangerous criminal.

In 1996, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) began a joint effort with cities throughout the country to trace the origins of all guns recovered from criminals. By 1999, more than 50 cities were part of what was called the Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative (YCGII). Researchers soon began using these data to answer important questions relevant to keeping guns from criminals.

Many important findings came from this research. Research with crime gun trace data revealed that just one percent of licensed firearms dealers sold more than half of the guns recovered in crimes, and that most gun dealers rarely have one of their guns show up in crime.² In the city of Milwaukee, a single gun dealer had sold more than half of the guns that were later recovered from criminals in that city.³ Publication of a study that reported that this Milwaukee-area dealer led the nation in the number of guns sold and later traced to criminals prompted that dealer to change sales practices. This change led to a dramatic decline in illegal gun trafficking.³ A study in California indicated that the disproportionate involvement of a small percentage of gun dealers in selling guns later used in crime could not be explained solely by differences in sales volume, purchaser demographics, or crime rates in the surrounding neighborhood.⁴

Research using crime gun trace data has also revealed several instances in which the flow of new guns to criminals declined dramatically following law enforcement interventions. In Chicago and Detroit, police used trace data to conduct undercover stings of gun dealers. Measures of illegal trafficking — also based on traces of crime guns — declined following the stings.⁵ Crime gun trace data were used in an evaluation of a comprehensive anti-gun-trafficking enforcement initiative in Boston that showed that the implementation of the initiative was associated with a significant reduction in trafficked guns.⁶

Using crime gun trace data, we discovered that in places with the most comprehensive regulations of firearms sales, crime guns were more likely to have first been sold out of state⁷/⁸ Reliance upon out-of-state sources for guns was associated with lower levels of gun availability to criminals.⁷

Cities throughout the U.S. are continuing to implement new strategies to stop the flow of guns to criminals. As with any law enforcement strategy, these efforts should be guided by the best available information. Researchers should have access to appropriate data to assist law enforcement to evaluate the effectiveness of those strategies. Research of this type is vetted by institutional review boards (IRBs) at universities and research institutes that carefully review research protocols to ensure that, for example, appropriate measures are taken to protect the confidentiality of the data. Crime gun trace data are therefore an important tool in the fight to make our streets, communities, and nation safer.
REFERENCES


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