



GUN TRAFFICKING & CRIME GUNS IN SOUTH CAROLINA

Gun trafficking is arming lethal violence around the country. Every year, hundreds of thousands of guns are illegally channeled into communities across the country, where they are used in shootings and other violent crimes that terrorize neighborhoods. Gun trafficking is not just a problem of the individuals who move guns from legal commerce to illegal use. It is also a problem of the gun dealers who supply these guns through their own negligence or complicity. State leaders can take action to combat gun trafficking.

GUN TRAFFICKING IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM IN SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina is facing a crime gun crisis—and the evidence points squarely at the state’s own federally licensed gun dealers (also known as Federal Firearms Licensees or FFLs). In 2023, law enforcement recovered and traced 12,975 guns in connection with crimes in South Carolina. Twenty-five percent of all South Carolina crime guns were recovered in Columbia and North Charleston.¹

Many of these guns show signs of having been illegally trafficked. Approximately 55 percent of all crime guns recovered in South Carolina in 2023 were purchased less than three years before their recovery by law enforcement²—a key red flag for illegal trafficking.³

Time-to-Crime (TTC)	Number of Traces ⁴	Percentage of Traces ⁵
Less Than 1 Year	2,811	24%
1 Year to Under 3 Years	3,626	31%
3 or More Years	5,172	45%

Between 2017 and 2021, only 9 percent of crime guns recovered in South Carolina were recovered in the possession of the original purchaser,⁶ another significant indication of firearm trafficking.⁷ Using data from ATF, it is estimated that 5,873 crime guns recovered in South Carolina in 2023 were likely illegally trafficked by individuals who purchased them from FFLs.⁸

SOUTH CAROLINA GUN DEALERS SUPPLY THE MAJORITY OF CRIME GUNS IN THE STATE

While gun trafficking is often thought of as an issue of guns crossing state or national borders, in reality, trafficking often involves moving guns short distances within a state. In 2023, South Carolina gun dealers supplied 79 percent of all crime guns recovered and successfully traced in the state.⁹

State Where Gun Originated ¹⁰	Number of Crime Guns Traced from Origin State	Percentage of Total Crime Gun Traces
South Carolina	9,211	79%
North Carolina	700	6%
Georgia	530	5%
Florida	170	1%
Virginia	131	1%

Trafficked guns in South Carolina often don't travel far: between 2017 and 2021, 57 percent of all crime guns were recovered in the state within 25 miles of the dealer they were purchased from.¹¹ The FFLs located in and near cities with a high number of crime gun recoveries are, therefore, the likely source of crime guns in those areas.

The top three methods of firearm trafficking in South Carolina directly implicate gun dealers. An analysis of ATF trafficking investigations conducted in the ATF Charlotte Field Division (which covers the states of North and South Carolina) between 2017 and 2021 revealed that the top three methods of trafficking were theft from an FFL, unlicensed dealing, and straw purchasing.¹²

Method of Trafficking	Number of Cases
Stolen from an FFL	88
Unlicensed Dealing	69
Straw Purchasing	31
Stolen from a Private Party	15

As of September 2025, there are 1,437 active licensed gun dealers in South Carolina;¹³ however, ATF research finds that just 15 percent of retail dealers, 38 percent of pawnbrokers, and about 17 percent of manufacturers account for over 90 percent of all firearm sales.¹⁴ Applying this data to South Carolina, there are likely closer to 251 FFLs actively selling firearms,¹⁵ providing a more manageable number for oversight.

GUN TRAFFICKING FUELS COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

Trafficking is a primary way that individuals who are not legally allowed to buy or possess guns obtain them. According to ATF research, nearly 88 percent of recipients of trafficked guns nationally were prohibited from buying guns because of prior criminal convictions or other prohibitors.¹⁶ Trafficked guns are destined for use in violent crime. Nationally, nearly 28 percent of trafficking investigations involve firearms that were used in furtherance of a drug offense or drug trafficking, 19 percent were used in aggravated assaults, 11 percent were used in homicides, and 9 percent were used in attempted homicides.¹⁷

Trafficked guns are frequently used in shootings. Nationally, 15 percent of trafficking investigations involve guns that were linked to at least one shooting.¹⁸ Use in shootings is even higher when looking at specific trafficking methods: nearly 24 percent of straw purchasing trafficking cases and 16 percent of unlicensed dealing trafficking cases were linked to at least one shooting.¹⁹

In South Carolina, data shows that trafficked pistols move very quickly from the inventory of a gun dealer to use in a shooting. An analysis of data from recovered pistols shows a median time-to-first-shooting of just 1.5 years, indicating that these guns were likely trafficked specifically for use in violent crime.²⁰

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State leaders can take action to address gun trafficking by adopting a comprehensive strategy that includes (1) using data to identify, interrupt, and prosecute trafficking, (2) implementing robust regulatory oversight of gun dealers, and (3) enacting foundational gun safety laws that deter trafficking. For more information about gun trafficking and policy solutions to address it, visit: everytownresearch.org/firearm-trafficking.

¹ Everytown analysis of ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: South Carolina - 2023,” December 2024, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/report/firearms-trace-data/firearms-trace-data-south-carolina-2023>.

² Everytown analysis of ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: South Carolina – 2023.” See “Time-To-Crime Rates for Firearms with a South Carolina Recovery.” TTC known in 11,609 traces.

³ ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume II: Crime Guns—Part III: Crime Guns Recovered and Traced within the United States and its Territories,” February 2023, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/report/nfcta-volume-ii-part-iii-crime-guns-recovered-and-traced-us/download>.

⁴ Crime gun tracing is an important tool for law enforcement to trace the lawful chain of custody of a firearm in order to generate leads in criminal investigations where firearms are recovered. Crime gun traces are conducted by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF). The tracing process involves contacting the manufacturer, distributor, and dealer to determine the first retail purchaser of a gun. For more information about the tracing process, see Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, “The Supply Side of Violence: How Gun Dealers Fuel Firearm Trafficking,” December 2025, Appendix 1, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/how-gun-dealers-fuel-firearm-trafficking/>.

⁵ Everytown analysis of ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: South Carolina – 2023.” See “Time-To-Crime Rates for Firearms with a South Carolina Recovery.” TTC known in 11,609 traces.

⁶ ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume II: Crime Guns—South Carolina State Report,” November 2023, <https://www.atf.gov/media/14346/download>. See “Crime Guns Recovered and Traced, 2017–2021: Crime Guns by Purchaser/Possessor Grouping when Purchaser is Known.”

⁷ ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume II: Crime Guns—Part III: Crime Guns Recovered and Traced within the United States and its Territories,” February 2023, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/report/nfcta-volume-ii-part-iii-crime-guns-recovered-and-traced-us/download>.

⁸ Everytown analysis of ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: South Carolina - 2023,” and “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume II: Crime Guns—South Carolina State Report” data. To determine the estimated number of traced crime guns likely obtained by traffickers through illegal purchases from FFLs, we took the total number of crime guns traces with a time-to-crime of less than three years (6,437) recovered in 2023 and then multiplied it by the percentage of crime guns recovered between 2017 and 2021 in the possession of someone other than the purchaser (91 percent).

⁹ ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: South Carolina – 2023.” See “Top 15 Source States for Firearms with a South Carolina Recovery, 2023.” Analysis limited to crime guns traced to a purchase from a gun dealer. Source state known in 11,665 traces.

¹⁰ Everytown analysis of ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: South Carolina – 2023.” See “Top 15 Source States for Firearms with a South Carolina Recovery, 2023.” Source state known in 11,665 traces.

¹¹ ATF, NFCTA, Volume II: Crime Guns—South Carolina State Report.” See “Crime Guns Recovered and Traced, 2017–2021: Crime Guns by FFL-to-Recovery Location.”

¹² The cases encompass the entire ATF Charlotte Field Division, which includes North and South Carolina. ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume III: Firearms Trafficking Investigations—Part III: Firearm Trafficking

Channels and Methods Used,” April 2024, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/report/nfcta-volume-iii-part-iii/download>. See Appendix FTC - Firearm Trafficking Channels, Table FTC-05: “Number and Percentage of Cases by ATF Field Division and Selected Firearm Channel Type, 2017–2021.” Unlicensed dealing involves an individual buying and selling firearms for profit, but without first obtaining a license from ATF to do so, as federal law requires. A typical instance of unlicensed dealing in furtherance of trafficking is when an individual buys a large number of guns in a few transactions over a short period of time, often purchasing multiples of the same type with the intent of reselling them to other purchasers without conducting a background check. Straw purchasing occurs when someone buys a firearm for someone else, usually someone who is prohibited from purchasing a firearm. For more information about these trafficking methods, see Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, “The Supply Side of Violence: How Gun Dealers Fuel Firearm Trafficking,” December 2025, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/how-gun-dealers-fuel-firearm-trafficking/>.

¹³ ATF, “State Federal Firearms Listings: South Carolina,” September 2025, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/listing-federal-firearms-licensees/>. Includes Type 01 (firearms dealers), Type 02 (pawnbrokers), Type 07 (manufacturers), and Type 08 (importers) FFLs.

¹⁴ According to ATF research, actual sales are concentrated among a small subset of this overall group of licensees: just 15 percent of gun dealers (Type 01 FFLs) account for 92 percent of all retail gun sales, 38 percent of pawnbrokers (Type 02 FFLs) are responsible for 91 percent of pawnshop sales, and 17 percent of manufacturers (Type 07 FFLs) are responsible for 96 percent of retail sales conducted by manufacturers. Because importers (Type 08 FFLs) comprise only 0.5 percent of all estimated sales ATF did not provide a breakdown of the number of FFLs by sales volume and is therefore excluded here. ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume I: Firearms in Commerce,” May 2022, 67–68, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/report/national-firearms-commerce-and-trafficking-assessment-firearms-commerce-volume/download>. See Tables SD-03: “Total Type 01 FFLs and EMSV by EMSV Range, 2017–2020;” SD-04: “Type 02 FFLs and EMSV Range, 2017–2020;” and SD-05: “Type 07 FFLs and EMSV Range, 2017–2020.”

¹⁵ Everytown analysis of ATF, South Carolina FFL Listings, September 2025, and “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume I: Firearms in Commerce” estimated minimum sales volume data. Estimate based on sum of 123 (818*15%) Type 01 FFLs, 53 (139*38%) Type 02 FFLs, and 75 (444*17%) Type 07 FFLs. Estimated minimum sales volume by number of FFLs for Type 08 FFLs was not provided by the ATF and is therefore excluded from this analysis.

¹⁶ ATF Special Agents were able to identify an end recipient of trafficked firearms in 46 percent of the cases studied. In these cases, 12 percent of end recipients had no prior prohibiting convictions. ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume III: Firearms Trafficking Investigations—Part VI: Characteristics of Firearm Traffickers, End Users, and Defendants,” April 2024, 13, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/report/nfcta-volume-iii-part-vi/download>. See Table CFT-25a: “Number and Percentage of Cases by Top Five End User Background Characteristics, 2017–2021.”

¹⁷ There can be multiple crimes identified in a firearm trafficking investigation, so these statistics are not mutually exclusive. ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume III: Firearms Trafficking Investigations—Part IX: Investigation Outcomes,” April 2024, 4, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/report/nfcta-volume-iii-part-ix/download>. See Figure IO-03: “Top Ten Crimes Identified, 2017–2021.”

¹⁸ ATF Special Agents (SAs) were able to report whether trafficked firearms were or were not used in shootings in approximately 66 percent (6,455 of 9,708) of cases. In these 6,455 investigations, SAs indicated that a trafficked firearm was used in a shooting in 15.1 percent (974) of cases. ATF, NFCTA, Volume III: Firearms Trafficking Investigations—Part IX: Investigation Outcomes,” 5.

¹⁹ ATF, NFCTA, Volume III: Firearms Trafficking Investigations—Part IX: Investigation Outcomes,” 5. See Table IO-06: “Total Number of Cases by Trafficking Channel and Use in Shootings, 2017–2021.”

²⁰ ATF, NFCTA, Volume II: Crime Guns—South Carolina State Report,” 6. See “Recovered Pistols in NIBIN, 2017–2021: Median TTFS (Years).”