



GUN TRAFFICKING & CRIME GUNS IN WASHINGTON, DC

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 WASHINGTON, DC

The District of Columbia is facing a crime gun crisis—and the evidence points primarily at federally licensed gun dealers (also known as Federal Firearms Licensees or FFLs) operating in other states. In 2023, law enforcement recovered and traced 3,106 guns in connection with crimes in Washington, DC.¹ The vast majority of these crime guns were originally purchased from gun dealers operating in other states.²

Many of these guns show signs of having been illegally trafficked. Approximately 50 percent of all crime guns recovered in Washington, DC, in 2023 were purchased less than three years before their recovery by law enforcement³—a key red flag for illegal trafficking.⁴

Time-to-Crime (TTC)	Number of Traces ⁵	Percentage of Traces ⁶
Less Than 1 Year	363	17%
1 Year to Under 3 Years	723	33%
3 or More Years	1,092	50%

Between 2017 and 2021, only 5 percent of crime guns recovered in Washington, DC, were recovered in the possession of the original purchaser,⁷ another significant indication of firearm trafficking.⁸ Using data from ATF, it is estimated that 1,032 crime guns recovered in Washington, DC, in 2023 were likely illegally trafficked by individuals who purchased them from FFLs.⁹

In addition to gun trafficking, the District of Columbia's crime gun problem is also driven by ghost guns, which are privately-made firearms that are untraceable.¹⁰ Between 2022 and 2023, 946 ghost guns were recovered in crimes in Washington, DC, and submitted to ATF—a 31 percent increase compared to the total recovered in the previous five years.¹¹ The District of Columbia ranked 10th in the country for most ghost gun recoveries during this period.¹²

OUT-OF-STATE GUN DEALERS SUPPLY THE MAJORITY OF CRIME GUNS IN WASHINGTON, DC

Washington, DC, is primarily a target for gun traffickers from out of state. In 2023, 94 percent of crime guns recovered were originally sold by dealers operating out of state. Sixty-four percent of the crime guns recovered in Washington, DC, that year originated in states comprising the I-95 East Coast trafficking pipeline (i.e., Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Virginia).¹³ These out-of-state guns pose a serious threat to Washington, DC, communities: according to trace data and analysis by ATF, 1,412 crime guns trafficked into the District from I-95 pipeline states were used in shootings between 2019 and 2023.¹⁴ Additionally, between 2017 and 2021, ATF investigated 116 interstate trafficking cases in which Washington, DC, was the target destination of trafficked firearms.¹⁵

State Where Gun Originated ¹⁶	Number of Crime Guns Traced from Origin State	Percentage of Total Crime Gun Traces
Virginia	748	34%
Maryland	290	13%
Georgia	244	11%
South Carolina	154	7%
North Carolina	138	6%
District of Columbia	120	6%
Florida	64	3%

The top two methods of firearm trafficking in the District of Columbia directly implicate gun dealers. An analysis of ATF trafficking investigations conducted in the ATF Washington Field Division (which covers Washington, DC, and Virginia) between 2017 and 2021 revealed that the top two methods of trafficking were straw purchasing and unlicensed dealing.¹⁷

Method of Trafficking	Number of Cases
Straw Purchasing	144
Unlicensed Dealing	125
Stolen from an FFL	36
Stolen from a Private Party	25

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

Trafficked guns are frequently used in shootings. Nationally, 15 percent of trafficking investigations involve guns that were linked to at least one shooting.²⁰ 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.²¹

In Washington, DC, data shows that trafficked pistols move 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 3.2 years, indicating that these guns were likely trafficked specifically for use in violent crime.²²

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 ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: District of Columbia - 2023,” December 2024, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/report/firearms-trace-data/firearms-trace-data-district-columbia-2023>.

² ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: District of Columbia – 2023.”

³ Everytown analysis of ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: District of Columbia – 2023.” See “Time-To-Crime Rates for Firearms with a District of Columbia Recovery.” TTC known in 2,178 traces.

⁴ 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>.

⁵ 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/>.

⁶ Everytown analysis of ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: District of Columbia – 2023.” See “Time-To-Crime Rates for Firearms with a District of Columbia Recovery.” TTC known in 2,178 traces.

⁷ ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume II: Crime Guns—District of Columbia Territory Report,” November 2023, <https://www.atf.gov/media/14736/download>. See “Crime Guns Recovered and Traced, 2017–2021: Crime Guns by Purchaser/Possessor Grouping when Purchaser is Known.”

⁸ ATF, “NFCTA, Volume II: Crime Guns—Part III: Crime Guns Recovered and Traced within the United States and its Territories.”

⁹ Everytown analysis of ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: District of Columbia- 2023,” and “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume II: Crime Guns—District of Columbia Territory 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 (1,086) 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 (95 percent).

¹⁰ For more information about ghost guns, see Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, “Ghost Guns,” <https://everytownresearch.org/issue/ghost-guns/>.

¹¹ Everytown analysis of ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume IV: Protecting America from Trafficked Firearms—Part V: Privately Made Firearms Updates and New Analysis,” January 2025, 16, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/report/nfcta-volume-iv-part-v-%E2%80%93-pmf-updates-and-new-analysis/download>. See Table PMF-02: “PMF Traces by All Recovery States, 2017–2021 and 2022–2023.”

¹² Everytown analysis of ATF, “NFCTA, Volume IV: Protecting America from Trafficked Firearms—Part V: Privately Made Firearms Updates and New Analysis,” 16. See Table PMF-02: “PMF Traces by All Recovery States, 2017–2021 and 2022–2023.”

¹³ ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: District of Columbia – 2023.” See “Top 15 Source States for Firearms with a District of Columbia Recovery, 2023.” Analysis limited to crime guns traced to a purchase from a gun dealer. Source state known in 2,181 traces.

¹⁴ ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume IV: Protecting America from Trafficked Firearms—Part IV: Firearm Trafficking Investigations Updates and New Analysis,” January 2025, 13, https://www.atf.gov/sites/default/files2/nfcta_volume_iv_-_part_iv_0.pdf. See Figure FTI-07: “Market State of East Coast I-95 Pipeline Traces Associated with At Least One Shooting, 2019–2023.”

¹⁵ ATF, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume III: Firearms Trafficking Investigations—Part IV: Source to Market Type,” April 2024, 9, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/report/nfcta-volume-iii-part-iv/download>. See Table STM-10: “Interstate Trafficking: Top Ten Market-states, 2017–2021.” Categories are not mutually exclusive.

¹⁶ Everytown analysis of ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: District of Columbia – 2023.” See “Top 15 Source States for Firearms with a District of Columbia Recovery, 2023.” Source state known in 2,181 traces.

¹⁷ The cases encompass the entire ATF Washington Field Division, which includes Washington, DC, and Virginia. 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/>.

¹⁸ 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.”

¹⁹ 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.”

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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.”

²² ATF, “NFCTA, Volume II: Crime Guns—District of Columbia Territory Report,” 6. See “Recovered Pistols in NIBIN, 2017–2021: Median TTFS (Years).”