



# GUN TRAFFICKING & CRIME GUNS IN CALIFORNIA

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 CALIFORNIA

California is facing a crime gun crisis—and the evidence points to the state’s own federally licensed gun dealers (also known as Federal Firearms Licensees or FFLs) as one key part of the problem. In 2023, law enforcement recovered and traced 56,382 guns in connection with crimes in California.<sup>1</sup> One-quarter of all California crime guns were recovered in Los Angeles, Sacramento, Fresno, San Bernardino, and San Diego.<sup>2</sup>

Many of these guns show signs of having been illegally trafficked. Approximately 37 percent of all crime guns recovered in California in 2023 were purchased less than three years before their recovery by law enforcement<sup>3</sup>—a key red flag for illegal trafficking.<sup>4</sup>

| Time-to-Crime (TTC)     | Number of Traces <sup>5</sup> | Percentage of Traces <sup>6</sup> |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Less Than 1 Year        | 4,457                         | 13%                               |
| 1 Year to Under 3 Years | 8,292                         | 24%                               |
| 3 or More Years         | 21,265                        | 63%                               |

Between 2017 and 2021, only 15 percent of crime guns recovered in California were recovered in the possession of the original purchaser,<sup>7</sup> another significant indication of firearm trafficking.<sup>8</sup> Using data from ATF, it is estimated that 10,846 crime guns recovered in California in 2023 were likely illegally trafficked by individuals who purchased them from FFLs.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to gun trafficking, California’s crime gun problem is also driven by ghost guns, which are privately-made firearms that are untraceable.<sup>10</sup> Between 2022 and 2023, more than 21,123 ghost guns were recovered in crimes in California and submitted to ATF.<sup>11</sup>

## CALIFORNIA GUN DEALERS SUPPLY A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER 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, California gun dealers supplied 54 percent of all crime guns recovered and successfully traced in the

state.<sup>12</sup> California is also a target for gun traffickers from out of state. In 2023, nearly 20 percent of the crime guns recovered in California originated in the neighboring states of Arizona and Nevada.<sup>13</sup>

| State Where Gun Originated <sup>14</sup> | Number of Crime Guns Traced from Origin State | Percentage of Total Crime Gun Traces |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| California                               | 18,402                                        | 54%                                  |
| Arizona                                  | 4,372                                         | 13%                                  |
| Nevada                                   | 2,065                                         | 6%                                   |
| Texas                                    | 1,662                                         | 5%                                   |
| Utah                                     | 631                                           | 2%                                   |

Trafficked guns in California often don't travel far: between 2017 and 2021, 39 percent of all crime guns were recovered in the state within 25 miles of the dealer they were purchased from.<sup>15</sup> 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 two methods of firearm trafficking in California directly implicate gun dealers. An analysis of ATF trafficking investigations conducted in the ATF Los Angeles and San Francisco Field Divisions (which cover all of California, Nevada, and part of Arizona) between 2017 and 2021 revealed that the top two methods of trafficking were unlicensed dealing and straw purchasing.<sup>16</sup>

| Method of Trafficking       | Number of Cases |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| Unlicensed Dealing          | 317             |
| Straw Purchasing            | 133             |
| Stolen from an FFL          | 46              |
| Stolen from a Private Party | 34              |

As of September 2025, there are 2,077 active licensed gun dealers in California;<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> Applying this data to California, there are likely closer to 327 FFLs actively selling firearms,<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

Trafficked guns are frequently used in shootings. Nationally, 15 percent of trafficking investigations involve guns that were linked to at least one shooting.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

In California, 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 3.8 years, indicating that these guns were likely trafficked specifically for use in violent crime.<sup>24</sup>

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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](https://everytownresearch.org/firearm-trafficking).

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<sup>1</sup> ATF, "Firearms Trace Data: California - 2023," December 2024, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/report/firearms-trace-data/firearms-trace-data-california-2023>.

<sup>2</sup> ATF, "Firearms Trace Data: California – 2023."

<sup>3</sup> Everytown analysis of ATF, "Firearms Trace Data: California – 2023." See "Time-To-Crime Rates for Firearms with a California Recovery." TTC known in 34,014 traces.

<sup>4</sup> 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>.

<sup>5</sup> 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/>.

<sup>6</sup> Everytown analysis of ATF, "Firearms Trace Data: California – 2023." See "Time-To-Crime Rates for Firearms with a California Recovery." TTC known in 34,014 traces.

<sup>7</sup> ATF, "National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume II: Crime Guns—California State Report," November 2023, <https://www.atf.gov/media/15391/download>. See "Crime Guns Recovered and Traced, 2017–2021: Crime Guns by Purchaser/Possessor Grouping when Purchaser is Known."

<sup>8</sup> 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>.

<sup>9</sup> Everytown analysis of ATF, "Firearms Trace Data: California - 2023," and "National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume II: Crime Guns—California 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 (12,749) 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 (85 percent).

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

<sup>11</sup> 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/sites/default/files2/nfcta\\_volume\\_iv\\_-\\_part\\_v\\_0.pdf](https://www.atf.gov/sites/default/files2/nfcta_volume_iv_-_part_v_0.pdf). See Table PMF-02: “PMF Traces by All Recovery States, 2017–2021 and 2022–2023.”

<sup>12</sup> ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: California – 2023.” See “Top 15 Source States for Firearms with a California Recovery, 2023.” Analysis limited to crime guns traced to a purchase from a gun dealer. Source state known in 34,087 traces.

<sup>13</sup> ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: California – 2023.” See “Top 15 Source States for Firearms with an Illinois Recovery, 2023.” Analysis limited to crime guns traced to a purchase from a gun dealer. Source state known in 34,087 traces.

<sup>14</sup> Everytown analysis of ATF, “Firearms Trace Data: California – 2023.” See “Top 15 Source States for Firearms with a California Recovery, 2023.” Source state known in 34,087 traces.

<sup>15</sup> ATF, NFCTA, Volume II: Crime Guns—California State Report.” See “Crime Guns Recovered and Traced, 2017–2021: Crime Guns by FFL-to-Recovery Location.”

<sup>16</sup> The cases encompass the entire ATF Los Angeles and San Francisco Field Divisions, which includes the entire state of California, Nevada, and Yuma, Arizona. 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/>.

<sup>17</sup> ATF, “State Federal Firearms Listings: California,” September 2025, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/listing-federal-firearms-licenses/>. Includes Type 01 (firearms dealers), Type 02 (pawnbrokers), Type 07 (manufacturers), and Type 08 (importers) FFLs.

<sup>18</sup> 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.”

<sup>19</sup> Everytown analysis of ATF, California 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 202 (1,348\*15%) Type 01 FFLs, 26 (69\*38%) Type 02 FFLs, and 99 (582\*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.

<sup>20</sup> 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.”

<sup>21</sup> There can be multiple crimes identified in a firearm trafficking investigation, so these statistics are not mutually exclusive. ATF, NFCTA, Volume III: Firearms Trafficking Investigations—Part IX: Investigation Outcomes,” 4. See Figure IO-03: “Top Ten Crimes Identified, 2017–2021.”

<sup>22</sup> 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, “National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), Volume III: Firearms Trafficking Investigations—Part IX: Investigation Outcomes,” April 2024, 5, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/report/nfcta-volume-iii-part-ix/download>.

<sup>23</sup> 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.”

<sup>24</sup> ATF, NFCTA, Volume II: Crime Guns—California State Report,” 6, <https://www.atf.gov/media/15391/download>. See “Recovered Pistols in NIBIN, 2017–2021: Median TTFS (Years).”