

PART III:

Firearm Trafficking Channels and Methods Used

Firearm Trafficking Channels

Most firearm transactions that arm violent offenders are illegal under federal and state laws.¹ As such, prohibited persons rely on illegal firearm markets supplied by sources such as straw purchasers, unlicensed dealers, firearm thieves, corrupt FFLs, and others.² The supply lines for illicit firearms, or “firearm trafficking channels”, can vary across and within LE jurisdictions.³ Part III identifies the types of trafficking channels investigated by ATF SAs, presents regional and ATF field division variations in the frequency that specific trafficking channels were investigated, and briefly summarizes the means and methods used by firearm traffickers in the investigations during the study period. The information in this Part was derived from SA responses to the study survey.

Firearm Trafficking Channel Types

The survey completed by the SAs provided 18 options to select from as to the type of trafficking channel, including an "other" category. There can be more than one trafficking channel cited per case. ATF SAs were able to identify at least one firearm trafficking channel in more than 86% (8,373 of 9,708) of the investigations in the study period. There was an average of 1.3 channels identified per investigation with a range of one to eight trafficking channels. Of the 8,373 included investigations, more than 77% (6,466) identified only one trafficking channel, nearly 18% (1,482) identified two trafficking channels, approximately 4% (315) identified three trafficking channels, and slightly more than 1% (110) identified four or more trafficking channels (Table FTC-01).⁴

Table FTC-01: Total Number and Percentage of Cases by the Total Number of Trafficking Channels Identified per Case, 2017 – 2021

Total Number of Trafficking Channels Identified per Case	Number of Cases	% Total Cases
1	6,466	77.2%
2	1,482	17.7%
3	315	3.8%
4	78	0.9%
5	24	0.3%
6	5	0.1%
7	1	0.0%
8	2	0.0%

As reflected in Table FTC-02, the most frequent types of trafficking channels identified in ATF investigations were unlicensed firearm dealing by private persons (40.7%) and straw purchasing from FFLs (39.5%). ATF investigations revealed a variety of illegal diversions from lawful firearm commerce including trafficking in firearms through online marketplaces (3.6%) such as Craigslist, OfferUp, eBay, Armslist, and Gunbroker; at gun shows, flea markets, or auctions (3.0%); social media platforms (2.7%)

such as Facebook and Instagram; and through peer-to-peer applications (1.0%) such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and Tinder. ATF investigations also revealed the trafficking of firearms through illegal exports (7.8%) from the United States and illegal imports (0.9%) into the United States.

Table FTC-02: Total Number and Percentage of Cases by Firearm Trafficking Channel Types, 2017 – 2021

Trafficking Channel	Number of Cases	% Total Cases
Trafficking in firearms by an unlicensed dealer (private person)	3,404	40.7%
Trafficking in firearms by a straw purchaser or straw purchasing ring	3,305	39.5%
Trafficking in firearms stolen from an FFL	1,452	17.3%
Trafficking in firearms stolen from private persons	664	7.9%
Trafficking in firearms illegally exported from the United States	649	7.8%
Trafficking in firearms through online marketplaces	298	3.6%
Trafficking in firearms through unlicensed making (PMFs, etc.)	253	3.0%
Trafficking in firearms at gun shows, flea markets, or auctions	250	3.0%
Trafficking in firearms through social media platforms	227	2.7%
Trafficking in firearms by an FFL(s)	136	1.6%
Trafficking in firearms through peer-to-peer applications	83	1.0%
Trafficking in firearms illegally imported into the United States	75	0.9%
Trafficking in firearms stolen from a common carrier	50	0.6%
Trafficking in firearms through the dark web (e.g. via TOR or VPN concealer)	5	0.1%
Trafficking in firearms through printed classified or trade magazines	5	0.1%
Trafficking in firearms stolen from law enforcement or the military	4	0.0%

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

ATF trafficking investigations showed that firearms may be stolen and subsequently trafficked from a variety of sources, including FFLs (17.3%), private persons (7.9%), common carriers (0.6%), and law enforcement or the military (<0.1%). These stolen firearms may be sold subsequently by individuals and groups specializing in firearm trafficking or by those fencing stolen goods.⁵ ATF investigates firearm thefts from FFLs and common carriers but does not have direct jurisdiction to investigate theft of firearms from private persons. State, local, territorial, and Tribal police have primary jurisdiction to investigate theft of firearms from private persons.

Trends in Most Frequent Firearm Trafficking Channel Types

Table FTC-03 reflects the yearly trends in the percentage of closed investigations involving firearms trafficked through the top ten firearm trafficking channels identified by ATF SAs. The percentage distribution of investigations remained generally stable across the top ten firearm trafficking channels with a few exceptions. The percentage of investigations involving firearms trafficked by straw purchasers or straw purchasing rings increased by almost five percentage points from 38.1% in 2017 to 42.6% in 2021 (an 11.8% increase in the share of investigations). The percentage of investigations involving firearms trafficked by unlicensed dealers decreased by nearly five percentage points from 41.0% in 2017 to 36.5% in 2020. This decline in investigations involving unlicensed dealers, however, reversed in 2021, when investigations increased by approximately seven percentage points to 43.8% in 2021 (a 20% increase in the share of investigations).

The percentage of trafficking investigations involving firearms stolen from FFLs increased by more than eight percentage points from 14.9% in 2017 to 23.1% in 2020 (a 55% increase in the share of investigations). The percentage of trafficking investigations involving firearms stolen from FFLs then declined by approximately 11 percentage points to 12.5% in 2021 (a 45.9% decrease in the share of investigations). In contrast, the percentage of investigations involving trafficking in firearms stolen from

private citizens decreased steadily by more than seven percentage points from 11.9% in 2017 to 4.8% in 2021 (a 59.7% decrease in the share of investigations).

Table FTC-03: Trends in Percentages of Most Frequent Firearm Trafficking Channel Types

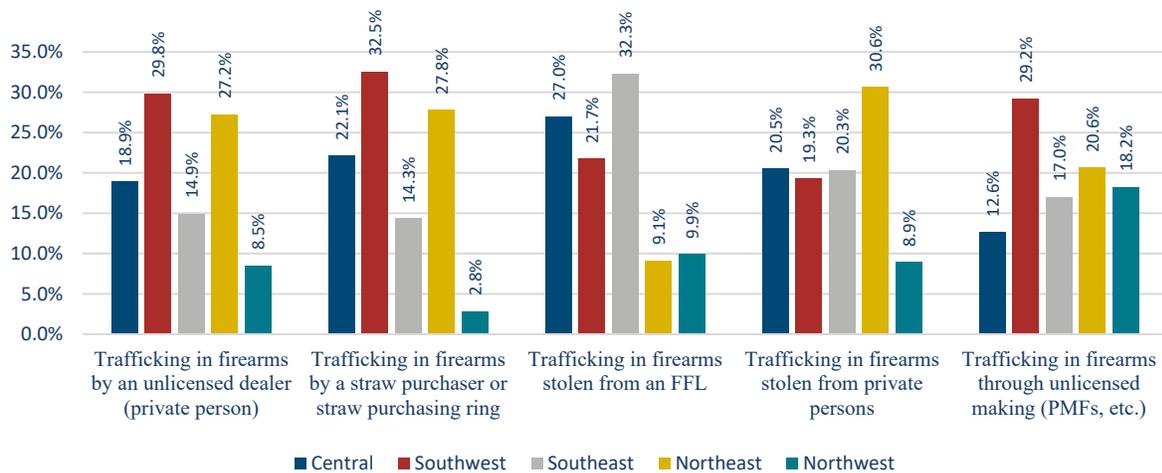
Trafficking Channel	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	% Difference 17 - 21
Trafficking in firearms by an unlicensed dealer (private person)	41.0%	42.8%	38.6%	36.5%	43.8%	2.8%
Trafficking in firearms by a straw purchaser or straw purchasing ring	38.1%	37.9%	38.8%	40.8%	42.6%	4.5%
Trafficking in firearms stolen from an FFL	14.9%	18.0%	18.8%	23.1%	12.5%	-2.4%
Trafficking in firearms stolen from private persons	11.9%	8.1%	7.6%	6.2%	4.8%	-7.1%
Trafficking in firearms illegally exported from the United States	8.4%	8.7%	8.1%	7.0%	6.2%	-2.2%
Trafficking in firearms through online marketplaces	3.4%	3.5%	3.8%	3.1%	4.1%	0.8%
Trafficking in firearms through unlicensed making (PMFs, etc.)	2.4%	3.8%	3.4%	2.0%	3.4%	1.0%
Trafficking in firearms at gun shows, flea markets, or auctions	3.5%	3.1%	2.5%	2.2%	3.5%	0.1%
Trafficking in firearms through social media platforms	2.6%	2.4%	1.8%	2.9%	4.1%	1.5%
Trafficking in firearms by an FFL(s)	1.6%	1.9%	1.8%	1.3%	1.4%	-0.1%
Total	1,868	1,902	1,573	1,504	1,526	8,373

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Firearm Trafficking Channel Types by Regions and Field Divisions

Figure FTC-01 reflects the regional variations by type of firearm trafficking channels identified by ATF SAs during the study period. Investigations involving trafficking in firearms by unlicensed dealers were most frequently initiated by ATF SAs working in field divisions in the Southwest (29.8%) and Northeast (27.2%) regions of the U.S. Investigations involving straw purchasing and straw purchasing rings were also most frequently initiated by ATF SAs working at field divisions in the Southwest (32.5%) and Northeast (27.8%) regions of the U.S. Trafficking in firearms stolen from FFLs were most frequently initiated by ATF SAs working at field divisions in the Southeast region (32.3%) while investigations involving trafficking firearms stolen from private persons were most frequently initiated by ATF SAs working in field divisions in the Northeast region (30.6%). Slightly less than one-third of the trafficking investigations involving unlicensed making were initiated by ATF SAs working in the Southwest region (29.2%).

Figure FTC-01: Firearm Trafficking Channel Types by Region, 2017 – 2021



Investigations involving straw purchasers and unlicensed dealers were most frequently initiated by ATF SAs working in the Central, Southwest, Southeast, and Northeast regions (Table FTC-04). FFL theft investigations were most prominent in the Southeast (30.9%), Northwest (24.5%), and Central (21.8%) regions. Investigations involving the illegal export of firearms were most prominent in the Southwest (15.7%) and Southeast (9.3%) regions.

Table FTC-04: Top Five Trafficking Channels by Region, 2017 – 2021

Central (N=1,799)			Southwest (N=2,439)			Southeast (N=1,518)		
Trafficking Channel	Number of Cases	% Cases	Trafficking Channel	Number of Cases	% Cases	Trafficking Channel	Number of Cases	% Cases
Straw Purchaser	731	40.6%	Straw Purchaser	1,073	44.0%	Unlicensed Dealer	507	33.4%
Unlicensed Dealer	643	35.7%	Unlicensed Dealer	1,015	41.6%	Straw Purchaser	472	31.1%
FFL Theft	392	21.8%	Illegal Exports	382	15.7%	FFL Theft	469	30.9%
Private Person Theft	136	7.6%	FFL Theft	315	12.9%	Illegal Exports	141	9.3%
Gun Show/Flea Market	66	3.7%	Private Person Theft	128	5.2%	Private Person Theft	135	8.9%

Northeast (N=1,951)			Northwest (N=587)		
Trafficking Channel	Number of Cases	% Cases	Trafficking Channel	Number of Cases	% Cases
Unlicensed Dealer	925	47.4%	Unlicensed Dealer	290	49.4%
Straw Purchaser	920	47.2%	FFL Theft	144	24.5%
Private Person Theft	203	10.4%	Straw Purchaser	93	15.8%
FFL Theft	132	6.8%	Private Person Theft	59	10.1%
Unlicensed Making	52	2.7%	Unlicensed Making	46	7.8%

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

ATF field divisions accounted for varying percentages of firearm trafficking investigations by trafficking channels (Table FTC-05a). Phoenix field division generated the highest percentage of trafficking investigations involving unlicensed dealers (14.0% of 3,404 investigations), followed by New York field division (8.3%) and Houston field division (6.9%). Phoenix field division also accounted for the highest percentage of trafficking investigations involving straw purchasers (14.1% of 3,305 investigations), followed by Chicago field division (10.8%) and Houston field division (10.2%). Houston field division generated the highest percentage of trafficking investigations involving firearms stolen from FFLs (9.6% of 1,452 investigations) while Boston field division accounted for the highest percentage of trafficking investigations involving firearms stolen from private persons (10.2% of 664 investigations). The Los Angeles and San Francisco field divisions were tied at approximately 13% each for the highest percentage of the 253 investigations involving unlicensed making (i.e., the production of PMFs and other firearms).

Table FTC-05a: Top Five ATF Field Divisions by Firearm Channel Types, 2017 - 2021

Unlicensed Dealer (N=3,404)			Straw Purchaser (N=3,305)			FFL Theft (N=1,452)		
ATF Field Division	Number of Cases	% Cases	ATF Field Division	Number of Cases	% Cases	ATF Field Division	Number of Cases	% Cases
Phoenix	475	14.0%	Phoenix	465	14.1%	Houston	139	9.6%
New York	281	8.3%	Chicago	358	10.8%	New Orleans	125	8.6%
Houston	236	6.9%	Houston	338	10.2%	Kansas City	124	8.5%
Chicago	225	6.6%	New York	214	6.5%	Nashville	110	7.6%
San Francisco	205	6.0%	Philadelphia	204	6.2%	Dallas	101	7.0%

Private Person Theft (N=664)			Unlicensed Making (N=253)		
ATF Field Division	Number of Cases	% Cases	ATF Field Division	Number of Cases	% Cases
Boston	68	10.2%	Los Angeles	34	13.4%
Dallas	54	8.1%	San Francisco	34	13.4%
Nashville	53	8.0%	Phoenix	17	6.7%
Philadelphia	42	6.3%	Baltimore	14	5.5%
Houston	38	5.7%	Houston	13	5.1%

See Table FTC-05 in Appendix FTC – Firearm Trafficking Channels for a full ranking of ATF field divisions by selected firearm channel type between 2017 and 2021.

Cases Involving Firearms Trafficked by FFLs

During the study period, trafficking in firearms by FFLs, including pawnbrokers, was relatively rare, representing less than 2% of eligible cases (136 of 8,373). In these FFL investigations, traditional storefront facilities were the type of business premises that ATF SAs identified as most frequently involved, representing 73.5% of all such investigations (100 of 136) (Table FTC-06). The other business premises identified in the investigations included residences (23.5%, 32 of 136) and warehouses / industrial facilities (7.4%, 10 of 136).

Table FTC-06: Total Number and Percentage of Cases by FFL Business Premises, 2017 – 2021

FFL Business Premises	Number of Cases	% Total Cases
Storefront	100	73.5%
Residential	32	23.5%
Warehouse / Industrial	10	7.4%

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Firearm Trafficking Means and Methods

Method of Transport

The survey completed by the SAs provided 12 options to select from as to how the trafficked firearms were transported, including an "other" category. There can be more than one method of transport cited per case. ATF SAs identified at least one method of transport for trafficked firearms in approximately 42% (4,082 of 9,708) of investigations. Automobiles were the most common transportation method for trafficked firearms (83.5%) followed by transportation on foot or bicycle (15.6%) (Table FTMM-01). In much smaller percentages of the 4,082 investigations, ATF SAs noted the U.S. Mail, freight shipments, ships and marine vessels, buses, airplanes, and passenger trains as key methods of transportation for trafficked firearms.

Table FTMM-01: Total Number and Percentage of Cases by Method of Transport, 2017 – 2021

Method of Transport	Number of Cases	% Total Cases
Automobile	3,408	83.5%
Foot / Bicycle	638	15.6%
Common Carrier	179	4.4%
U.S. Mail	131	3.2%
Freight Shipment	120	2.9%
Ship / Marine Vessel	69	1.7%
Bus	67	1.6%
Airplane	65	1.6%
Passenger Train	12	0.3%

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Method of Concealment

The survey completed by the SAs provided 12 options to select from as to how the trafficked firearms were transported, including an "other" category. After review, responses in the "other" category were grouped together resulting in the designation of an additional two categories. There can be more than one method of concealment cited per case. In nearly 58% of the cases in which ATF SAs reported on use of concealment methods, firearms were not concealed while being trafficked (Table FTMM-02). In approximately 25% (2,455 of 9,708) of investigations, however, ATF SAs identified at least one method of concealment. In nearly 18% of investigations, ATF SAs indicated that trafficked firearms were concealed on the trafficker and in approximately 11% of investigations the trafficked firearms were concealed in voids in a vehicle (i.e., hidden compartments).

Table FTMM-02: Total Number and Percentage of Cases by Method of Concealment, 2017 – 2021

Method of Concealment	Number of Cases	% Total Cases
Not concealed	1,417	57.7%
On Trafficker	435	17.7%
Voids in Vehicle	278	11.3%
Luggage	195	7.9%
Shipping Container / Packaging	161	6.6%
Disassembled	79	3.2%
Food / Beverage / Household	71	2.9%
Electronics	35	1.4%
Small Bag / Backpack	32	1.3%
Home Appliances	28	1.1%
Other	7	0.3%
Clothing / Linens	3	0.1%

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive.

Summary

ATF investigations document that firearms are illegally diverted through a diverse range of trafficking channels. These trafficking enterprises include unlicensed dealers who buy firearms with the primary purpose of reselling them, straw purchasers who buy firearms for criminal sellers and users, thieves and fences who sell firearms stolen from FFLs and private citizens, unlicensed firearm makers who sell firearms to prohibited persons, corrupt FFLs, and illegal importers / exporters who engage in unlawful firearm commerce. To facilitate illicit gun transfers, firearm traffickers exploit well-established firearm commerce venues, such as gun shows and flea markets, and new technology -- including online marketplaces, social media platforms, and peer-to-peer applications. The prominence of specific trafficking channels varies across regions of the U.S. Some regional variations include noteworthy shares of straw purchasing and unlicensed making investigations in the Southwest and Northeast regions; the prominence of trafficking in firearms stolen from the FFLs in the Central and Southeast regions; and the relatively high rate of investigations involving thefts of firearms from private individuals in the Northeast region.

Although comparisons between the 2000 *Following the Gun* report and this report must take into account notable methodological and data-availability differences, the data analyzed in this report indicates that a shift in the types of trafficking channels used over the course of the last two decades has occurred. Unlicensed making (i.e., PMFs) was not previously considered to be a substantive pathway for criminals

to acquire firearms; and it is now in the top ten trafficking channels. In contrast, corrupt FFL investigations represented almost 9% of trafficking investigations in the 2000 report, but now represent less than two percent of trafficking investigations. This decrease in the share of trafficking investigations involving corrupt FFLs may represent enhanced screening of FFL applicants, improved regulation of active FFLs, and/or better business practices by active FFLs. Finally, the previous report scarcely mentioned unlawful selling of firearms over the internet as a source of guns to criminals. While only representing small shares of gun trafficking investigations, ATF SAs investigate firearm trafficking through web and application-based sources almost as frequently as firearm trafficking through gun shows, flea markets, and auctions.

APPENDIX FTC – FIREARM TRAFFICKING CHANNELS

Table FTC-05: Number and Percentage of Cases by ATF Field Division and Selected Firearm Channel Type, 2017 - 2021

Trafficking by Unlicensed Dealer ^(N=3,404)		
ATF Field Division	Number of Cases	% Total Cases
Phoenix	475	14.0%
New York	281	8.3%
Houston	236	6.9%
Chicago	225	6.6%
San Francisco	205	6.0%
Boston	194	5.7%
Dallas	192	5.6%
Columbus	159	4.7%
Baltimore	135	4.0%
Tampa	128	3.8%
Philadelphia	126	3.7%
Washington	125	3.7%
Miami	117	3.4%
Los Angeles	112	3.3%
Nashville	95	2.8%
Louisville	88	2.6%
Kansas City	85	2.5%
Charlotte	69	2.0%
Newark	64	1.9%
Atlanta	58	1.7%
Detroit	49	1.4%
Denver	46	1.4%
New Orleans	40	1.2%
Seattle	39	1.2%
St. Paul	37	1.1%
International Affairs Division	18	0.5%
Operational Intelligence Division	6	0.2%

Trafficking by Straw Purchasers ^(N=3,305)		
ATF Field Division	Number of Cases	% Total Cases
Phoenix	465	14.1%
Chicago	358	10.8%
Houston	338	10.2%
New York	214	6.5%
Philadelphia	204	6.2%
Boston	187	5.7%
Dallas	183	5.5%
Washington	144	4.4%
Columbus	140	4.2%
Miami	134	4.1%
Baltimore	128	3.9%
Atlanta	125	3.8%
Kansas City	91	2.8%
Los Angeles	87	2.6%
Nashville	75	2.3%
Louisville	60	1.8%
Tampa	59	1.8%
New Orleans	48	1.5%
San Francisco	46	1.4%
Detroit	43	1.3%

Newark	43	1.3%
St. Paul	39	1.2%
Charlotte	31	0.9%
Denver	29	0.9%
Seattle	18	0.5%
International Affairs Division	16	0.5%

Trafficking in Firearms Stolen from FFL (N=1,452)

ATF Field Division	Number of Cases	% Total Cases
Houston	139	9.6%
New Orleans	125	8.6%
Kansas City	124	8.5%
Nashville	110	7.6%
Dallas	101	7.0%
Charlotte	88	6.1%
Atlanta	77	5.3%
Columbus	64	4.4%
Detroit	61	4.2%
Seattle	60	4.1%
Tampa	59	4.1%
Phoenix	58	4.0%
Denver	55	3.8%
Chicago	52	3.6%
St. Paul	48	3.3%
Louisville	43	3.0%
Washington	36	2.5%
Baltimore	29	2.0%
San Francisco	29	2.0%
Philadelphia	28	1.9%
New York	26	1.8%
Los Angeles	17	1.2%
Boston	12	0.8%
Miami	10	0.7%
Newark	1	0.1%

Trafficking in Firearms Stolen from Private Person (N=664)

ATF Field Division	Number of Cases	% Total Cases
Boston	68	10.2%
Dallas	54	8.1%
Nashville	53	8.0%
Philadelphia	42	6.3%
Houston	38	5.7%
New York	37	5.6%
Chicago	32	4.8%
Tampa	32	4.8%
Denver	31	4.7%
Kansas City	30	4.5%
Louisville	30	4.5%
Detroit	25	3.8%
Washington	25	3.8%
Baltimore	24	3.6%
Los Angeles	20	3.0%
Phoenix	16	2.4%
Charlotte	15	2.3%
New Orleans	15	2.3%
San Francisco	14	2.1%
Seattle	14	2.1%
St. Paul	11	1.7%
Atlanta	10	1.5%
Miami	10	1.5%
Columbus	8	1.2%

Newark	7	1.1%
International Affairs Division	2	0.3%
National Investigative Division	1	0.2%

Trafficking in Firearms via Unlicensed Making ^(N=253)

ATF Field Division	Number of Cases	% Total Cases
Los Angeles	34	13.4%
San Francisco	34	13.4%
Phoenix	17	6.7%
Baltimore	14	5.5%
Houston	13	5.1%
Boston	12	4.7%
Miami	11	4.4%
Dallas	10	4.0%
New York	10	4.0%
Kansas City	9	3.6%
Nashville	9	3.6%
Tampa	9	3.6%
Chicago	8	3.2%
Denver	8	3.2%
Atlanta	6	2.4%
Newark	6	2.4%
Philadelphia	6	2.4%
St. Paul	6	2.4%
New Orleans	5	2.0%
Columbus	4	1.6%
Louisville	4	1.6%
Operational Intelligence Division	4	1.6%
Seattle	4	1.6%
Washington	4	1.6%
Charlotte	3	1.2%
International Affairs Division	2	0.8%
Detroit	1	0.4%

ENDNOTES

¹ Anthony A. Braga and Philip J. Cook. 2016. “The Criminal Records of Gun Offenders.” *Georgetown Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 14 (1): 1 – 16.

² Philip J. Cook. 2018. “Gun Markets.” *Annual Review of Criminology*, 1: 359 – 378.

³ Anthony A. Braga, Garen J. Wintemute, Glenn L. Pierce, Philip J. Cook, and Greg Ridgeway. 2012. “Interpreting the Empirical Evidence on Illegal Gun Market Dynamics.” *Journal of Urban Health*, 89 (5): 779 – 793; Anthony A. Braga, Philip J. Cook, David M. Kennedy, and Mark H. Moore. 2002. “The Illegal Supply of Firearms.” *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, 29: 319 – 352; Philip J. Cook and Anthony A. Braga. 2001. “Comprehensive Firearms Tracing: Strategic and Investigative Uses of New Data on Firearms Markets.” *Arizona Law Review*, 43 (2): 277 – 309.

⁴ Investigations involving unlicensed firearms dealers and straw purchasers represented the most frequent combination of trafficking channels observed by ATF SAs, accounting for slightly more than 9% of all investigations with at least one identified trafficking channel (778 of 8,373) and almost 41% of investigations with multiple trafficking channels identified (778 of 1,907).

⁵ Philip J. Cook. 2018. “Gun Theft and Crime.” *Journal of Urban Health*, 95(3): 305-312.