

American Firearm Trafficking

Benjamin M. Bradley
Politics, Philosophy and Economics
March, 2026

Faculty Adviser: Benjamin Meiches, Ph.D.

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,
University of Washington, Tacoma

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Introduction

In the US, firearms have an incredibly rich history which is deeply tied to its colonial past and the second amendments ratification in 1791 (Novruzov, 2024, pp. 2) The US constitution states, “that a well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed” (Constitution Annotated). But this document was written over 200 years ago, and the current state of our nation is drastically different than it was at its founding. Between 2017 and 2023 alone, there were 106.7 million firearms sold in the United States (Suplina et al., 2026, pp. 16) which is a quantity that our founding fathers may have never deemed possible. Around the world, weapons manufactured in the US are recovered by law enforcement agencies after being illegally purchased and trafficked to criminals. Gun control measures have been repeatedly implemented, but the annual quantity of trafficked firearms hasn’t shown significant changes as a direct result of regulation.

The damage experienced by our firearms continues to be one of the nation’s most pressing public health crises, contributing to significant loss of life and economic strain. With over 48,830 gun-related deaths reported in 2021 alone, this issue remains pervasive despite America's status as a global economic leader (Novruzov, 2024, pp. 2). Firearms have traumatized children across the nation in mass shootings, and guns have even been used in the assassination of presidents and political activists. But the US’s gun violence has escalated to such an extreme level that it does not stop at our borders, weapons manufactured in the US are consistently trafficked into other nations. Mexico alone, accounts for 72 percent of international cases and an estimated 200,000 firearms are trafficked across the southern border every year (Suplina et al., 2026, pp. 15). Whether these weapons are being sent intrastate, interstate, or international the methods of acquisition for these illicit firearms are identical. With the decentralized nature of the

illicit firearm trade such consistency in methods of acquisition points to a failure of regulation. As a direct result, a flow of firearms constantly flows out of the US and into various communities around the globe. If legislators in the US aren't dedicated to stopping these weapons at their source people will continue to die and the criminals trafficking these firearms will continue to see profits.

In the first section of this thesis, I will describe the domestic and international trafficking routes that criminals use to funnel these weapons into communities. I will discuss how the US regulatory regime is outdated and no longer capable of ceasing or curtailing firearm trafficking. In the second section, I will discuss the typical methods of firearm regulation that we have relied on in the past. I will demonstrate how the Trump administration's complete disregard for this issue nullifies anti-trafficking laws enacted by the previous administration. Finally, I will ask, given our current political situation, how to best redress this issue? We need alternative methods that do not involve the federal government (maybe I need to talk about Trump in the intro), and I intend to highlight the specific communities and organizations that are pursuing and succeeding with non-conventional methods to stop the flow of weapons.

Section 1: Domestic and International Trafficking Networks

In this section I describe how firearms are obtained from FFLs (Federal Firearm Licensee) and analyze the three established interstate trafficking networks as well as the effects on firearm distribution on each market or country.

Section 1.1: Methods of Acquisition

Firearm trafficking in the United States isn't a new issue; considering the fact that 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. Firearm

trafficking is a continuously developing issue where criminals are constantly looking for new ways to circumvent regulation. The three primary methods for illegally obtaining firearms are straw trafficking, unlicensed dealing, and theft from FFLs. I will briefly explore each means of acquisition.

Straw Trafficking

Straw purchasing firearms is perhaps the most notorious method of obtaining a firearm illegally. “Straw purchasing occurs when someone buys a firearm for someone else, usually someone who is prohibited from purchasing a firearm” (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 9). A typical straw purchaser is a US citizen with a clean record who intends to transfer the weapons to someone else shortly after obtaining them. They will usually purchase a suspicious number of weapons for one person and may lack information about the weapons they are purchasing. Weapons connected to straw purchasing typically move through trafficking routes faster than other methods. For example, Travon Brunson is a straw purchaser who bought four pistols in one transaction at an FFL in South Carolina. After 127 days, three out of the four weapons Brunson purchased were recovered at the scene of a crime in states along the I-95 Pipeline (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 10). This case is just one example of Brunson’s trafficking; he was engaged in this behavior for three years, so the damage that he caused directly is difficult to calculate. But, between 2017 and 2021 straw purchasers trafficked around 38,000 firearms with an average of 11 firearms per investigation, and nearly 24 percent of these guns were used in shootings (ATF, Part IV, 2025, pp. 4). Purchasing four firearms at once is a red flag that the FFL should have been looking for; which leaves us to question whether they were knowingly participating or if they were just ignorant of the signs. A program that could reduce the number of firearms being trafficked by straw purchasing has been enacted by the ATF and the National Shooting Sports

Foundation (NSSF). This program is called ‘Don’t Lie for the Other Guy’ and it’s specifically meant to help FFLs detect and deter potential straw purchases of firearms. To achieve this, firearm retailers receive a Don’t Lie kit which includes a video detailing common straw purchasing scenarios used to obtain firearms illegally, store display materials to warn consumers about straw purchases and the penalties associated with them, and retailer guides for training employees (NSSF, 2024).

Unlicensed Dealing

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 (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 11). Since they aren’t officially licensed these FFLs don’t conduct background checks or keep sales records like typical FFLs are required. Michael Wayne Shirley for example, was an unlicensed dealer who, in just 11 months, purchased 224 handguns from a single store in Alabama. Contrary to straw purchasing, unlicensed dealers traffic far more weapons on average; in just two weeks Shirley purchased 24 handguns (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 11). In this specific case, the blame is placed primarily on the FFL that operated in such a blatantly nefarious manner. But, if Shirley had decided to operate in a more intelligent manner—purchasing firearms from multiple FFLs over a short period of time—law enforcement may have had far more difficulty discovering Shirley’s crimes. Even though there may not be a significant number of unlicensed FFLs, they contribute heavily to trafficking. Between 2017 and 2021, unlicensed dealing was responsible for trafficking more than 68,000 firearms and saw an average of 20 firearms per investigation, with 16 percent of cases linked to at least one shooting (Suplina et al. 2026). The solution for this method is similar to straw trafficking, FFLs must be educated on the telltale signs of unlicensed dealing. The Don’t Lie for the Other Guy campaign is designed

specifically for straw purchasing. But it can also assist FFLs in identifying the telltale signs of unlicensed dealing since the two methods are similar in the excessive quantity of weapons purchased.

Stolen Firearms

Compared to the total number of trafficked firearms identified in ATF investigations between 2017 and 2023, which was 230,000 (ATF, Part IV, 2025, pp.3). Firearms stolen from FFLs don't contribute to as much of a significant portion of trafficked firearms when compared to the other methods available. There were a reported 46,072 firearms stolen in 7,140 theft incidents; even though not all of these weapons were trafficked a total of more than 20,000 of those guns were trafficked (Suplina et al. 2026). The people committing theft tend to be younger since they can't purchase the firearms legally, and it is most likely less difficult than attempting to find a suitable straw purchaser. Firearms stolen from FFLs tend to be linked to shootings far quicker than the national average. In 2016 a single Glock 17 pistol stolen from Superior Shooter's Supply in Superior, Wisconsin was linked to 27 shootings in 19 months before it was recovered by law enforcement (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 13). But there is a reliable way to counter this type of trafficking; currently there are no federally enforced security measures for FFLs. But the ATF's recommended security measures include a monitored alarm system, securing firearms when the store is closed, and implementing video surveillance (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 13). With these security measures in place, traffickers won't be able to quickly steal firearms and this issue could be almost entirely nullified.

Section 1.2: Domestic Trafficking Routes

The three most notorious trafficking routes in the United States: the East Coast I-95 Pipeline, the Mississippi River Pipeline, and the Southwest Pipeline (ATF, Part IV, 2025, pp.

10). There are lots of smaller routes throughout the nation which tend to consolidate around interstate highways. Given that guns are easily transportable, lightweight goods and that there is considerable variation in gun laws between states, theories of economic geography predict that guns will flow illegally from origin states with fewer restrictions to destination states with more restrictions (Roberts et al. 2024, pp. 2). The variation in state laws, a reliable transportation method, and incredible profit motive provides traffickers with plenty of incentives to engage in this illicit activity. This presents lawmakers with a difficult dilemma, being tougher on firearms within their own state will bring about positive results like less in-state firearms being used in violent crimes. However this effect can be dampened by neighboring states with weaker laws (Andrade et al. 2020, pp. 6) which feeds the demand for firearms.

One of the statistics which law enforcement use as a telltale sign of firearm trafficking is a weapon's Time To Crime (TTC) number. This statistic measures the time between when that firearm was purchased from a licensed gun dealer and when it was recovered in connection with a crime (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 6). Firearms traced to source states in all three pipelines carry on average lower TTC's, and they are more likely to contribute to a shooting than the national average ; TTC numbers lower than three years usually indicate firearm trafficking.

East Coast I-95 Pipeline

The East Coast I-95 Pipeline naturally affects states along I-95; The states that supply this pipeline include Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. The weapons sent through this pipeline arrive in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island; where 57,282 crime guns were recovered with a median TTC of 3.8 years (ATF, Part IV, 2025, pp. 10-11). The states where these firearms originate, fail to adequately prevent the illegal diversion of firearms; “all

but one of these states have no requirements for background checks for private sales or at gun shows (Pennsylvania and only for handguns). And all but one do not require a permit prior to a handgun purchase (North Carolina)” (Suplina et al. 2016, pp. 28). Major population centers with a scarce supply of legal firearms such as New York, Maryland, and D.C are supplied by I-95. Increased demand for firearms led to 12% of all I-95 Pipeline traced crime guns being associated with at least one shooting. By comparison the national average of crime guns traced to at least one shooting was 6% during the same period (ATF, Part IV, 2025, pp. 13).

Mississippi River Pipeline

The source states for the Mississippi River pipeline include Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Indiana. Weapons from all of these states are funneled into the state of Illinois where 23,434 weapons were recovered with a median TTC of 3 years. (ATF, Part IV, 2025, pp. 14-15). Two factors driving this pipeline are mostly blamed on the heavy gun control restrictions across the state along with incredibly high demand for firearms in massive cities like Chicago. Much like the I-95 pipeline about 13% of these crime guns were traced to at least one shooting and, more than 68% of the guns traced to a shooting came directly from Indiana (ATF, Part IV, 2025, pp. 16).

Southwest Pipeline

Arizona and Nevada are the source states for the Southwest pipeline which sends weapons to California; there were 37,182 guns sourced to the pipelines which carried a median TTC of 2.6 far shorter than the other pipelines (ATF, Part IV, 2025, pp. 16-17). The statistics coming from this pipeline are different in the way they display results. Which can be attributed to the increased presence of federal agencies like border patrol within the region. The number of Southwest Pipeline firearms connected to at least one shooting matches the national average of

6% (ATF, Part IV, pp. 18). Illegal weapons that are recovered by law enforcement before a shooting occurs are still documented as the illegal possession of firearms which contributes to TTC. Even though this pipeline doesn't present as much of a dire situation as the others, it still demonstrates the effects of an increased presence of law enforcement on firearm trafficking.

Section 1.3: Firearm Trafficking to Mexico

Like the United States, Mexico has a constitutional right to bear arms, although it is not as expansive as our second amendment. Mexican law restricts the type, caliber, and quantity of firearms available for legal purchase. Moreover, there is only one authorized firearm dealer in Mexico who conducts extensive background checks and logs everything into a national registry (ATF, Part VII, 2025, pp. 3). With the existence of massive criminal organizations in the form of drug cartels which are in constant competition with each other, there is incredibly high demand for firearms. It unfortunately hasn't been too hard to satiate their demand, all it took was a look to the north. The number of guns in Mexico has been estimated to be 16.8 million, as a result of an influx from the US. From 2015 to 2020, an average of 69 per cent of all guns seized in Mexico had been manufactured in or legally imported into the US (del Mercado, 2022, pp. 6). These guns are funneled directly to drug cartels in Mexico, which are then used to perpetrate competition with other cartels and the Mexican government. As of 2021, the Mexican government estimated that roughly 200,000 U.S.-sourced firearms are smuggled to Mexico annually (ATF, Part VII, 2025, pp. 3. del Mercado, 2022, pp. 7). Internationally trafficked weapons primarily come from FFLs in states along the south-west border—like Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas; where more than 17 per cent of FFLs within the nation are concentrated (del Mercado, 2022, pp. 5). International traffickers use very similar methods to domestic traffickers when acquiring the weapons from FFLs.

Mexico Crime Gun Traces

Between 2022 and 2023 50,409 trace requests were submitted to the US and only 36% (18,190) were able to be traced to a purchaser (ATF, Part VII, 2025, pp. 4). But that limited amount of evidence still points to the existence of firearm trafficking routes across the southern border. Out of the 18,000 firearms successfully traced, the TTC was actually far larger than the numbers in the United States. The median TTC for Mexico was 5.6 years, but between 2013 and 2023 the median TTC decreased by more than 64% from 14.8 years in 2017 to 5.3 years in 2020 (ATF, Part VII, 2025, pp. 9).

When differentiating exactly where the weapons came from it became obvious that three sources carry drastically shorter TTCs than any others; Gun shows, FFL resale programs, and multiple sales. The median TTC for Mexico crime gun traces to a purchaser sourced from an FFL at a gun show was 3.6 years. That's 37% shorter than the 5.7 year median TTC for crime guns traced that were not obtained from a gun show. The median TTC for Mexico crime gun traces associated with an FRP was 3 years which is 48% shorter than the national median. The median TTC for crime gun traces associated with multiple sales was 2.1 years which is 65% shorter than the national median of guns not associated with multiple sales (ATF, Part VII, 2025, pp. 11). Weapons coming from these three destinations are drastically more dangerous than weapons sourced from other places. This could be an indication that the cartel prefers to get their methods through these specific routes.

The damage caused by these firearms specifically in Mexico has put the national government in a difficult situation. The persistent proliferation of illicit firearms into the hands of criminal organizations has completely adapted daily life in Mexico. From a drug market controlled by only a handful of criminal organizations in the late-1990s, organized crime has

become much more fragmented, diverse and violent with 37 cartels now recognized by the government (del Mercado, 2022, pp. 13). Not all of these cartels have as much power as the Jalisco New Generation or the Sinaloa Cartels, but the widespread existence of criminal organizations has an obvious effect. More than 80 people were murdered every day in Mexico in 2023 (Hernandez-Roy, 2024, pp. 20), this has disastrous effects on not just Mexican society but also politics. Gangs shape elections by killing candidates they do not like and backing others, according to a conservative estimate released two days after the June 2, 2024, general election in Mexico, there were 102 political assassinations during this year's electoral campaign (Hernandez-Roy et al. 2024, pp. 22). Firearms manufactured in the United States have drastically shifted the power balance within Mexico between the government and cartels but this isn't unique to just Mexico.

Section 1.4: Firearm Trafficking to Haiti

The trafficking dynamic within Haiti is completely different than any other nation due to the nation's small size, porous land and sea borders, along with the escalating power of gangs within the country presents a dire situation. Given the fact that by mid-2025, gangs controlled over 85% of Port-au-Prince (Agard et al. 2025, pp. 50), which is Haiti's capitol; the national government is at a massive disadvantage when it comes to combatting trafficking. Gangs seizing control of the capitol city gives them incredible access to a large concentration of ports within the city. According to Haitian custom officials, different Haitian ports are associated with different types of contraband. Firearms and ammunition seizures are common on the western and north-western coasts including Port-au-Prince (Me et al. 2023, pp. 13). The reasoning behind the acquisition of these firearms is similar to Mexican cartels, demand for firearms within the country is astronomically high given the fact that Haiti doesn't manufacture firearms. But unlike

Mexico, there is no absolute number of weapons in Haiti since a vast majority are obtained illegally. Estimations from various international organizations range from 250,000-500,000 small arms within the nation (Me et al. 2023, pp. 16). With rising levels of insecurity across the country due to an unknown quantity of firearms, along with the government progressively losing the ability to stop the rampant gang violence; private security companies have flooded into Haiti to provide security for political and economic elites along with critical infrastructure. Significant numbers of such companies also recruit directly from the Haitian National Police (HNP), with officers either moonlighting or leaving law enforcement altogether to work in the more lucrative private sector (Me et al. 2023, pp. 6). Private security companies's cannibalization of Haiti's national police force—which is already severely underfunded and outgunned—only harms the chances of ever stopping the issue.

Sources of Haitian Firearms

The principal source of firearms and munitions in Haiti is in the US, and in particular Florida. Popular handguns selling for \$400-\$500 at federally licensed firearms outlets or private gun shows in the US can be resold for as much as (*sic*) \$10,000 in Haiti (Me et al. 2023, pp. 18). The massive profits provide traffickers with ample reason to maintain a constant flow of firearms into Caribbean states. Trace data indicates that during the period 2017-24, almost 70% of all successfully traced firearms seized in the six Caribbean states for which data is available came from Florida and Georgia (Agard et al. 2025, pp. 74). Florida and Georgia serve as the primary shipping hubs for illicit weapons, FFLs from states with weak gun laws across the country feed into this trafficking flow. Traffickers prefer to use straw purchasing (Me et al. 2023, pp. 18), since it can provide them with a large quantity of weapons very quickly. After being trafficked to ports in either Florida or Georgia, weapons are traditionally transported by sea, with items

hidden inside consumer products, electronic equipment, garment linings, frozen food items or even the hulls of freighters (Me et al. 2023, pp. 18). These firearms are sent to gang controlled ports in Port-au-Prince where they can be easily obtained without problems. If their routes directly to Port-au-Prince were somehow shut down, there are alternative routes which can still supply these gangs with firearms. Haiti's primary and secondary road networks are also critical vectors for the movement of legal and illicit goods from the coasts to the Dominican Republic and from Dominican Republic into Haiti (Me, 2023, pp. 13).

Haitian Gangs

There are an estimated 150-200 gangs deeply enmeshed within Haiti, but some of the most notable gangs and gang coalitions known as the G9, G-Pep, 400 Mawozo, Baz Galil, Vilma de Dye, Vitelhomme, and Ti Mkak have targeted public and private institutions (Me et al. 2023, pp. 4-5). This data doesn't necessarily explain much about how pervasive these gangs are within Haitian society; the economy has been so heavily affected by gang activity that youth are losing access to schooling and employment. This has led to, approximately 50% of the gang's ranks are composed of children—some as young as ten—who are trained to use firearms, monitor the police and rival gangs, commit kidnappings and attacks, and manage checkpoints (Agard, 2025, pp. 50). But not only are these criminal organizations filling their ranks with children to gain more power, rampant amounts of corruption within the Haitian political system has led to gangs working directly with politicians. Given the fact that gangs are occupying sufficient portions of Haiti's main population centers this gives them lots of voting power which they can influence through violence. Gangs routinely act on behalf of government and opposition figures to control key urban areas by suppressing dissent through assassinations, kidnappings and massacres; influencing the outcome of elections through bribery and intimidation; and disrupting political

opponents from fomenting protests and destroying polling stations in districts where their candidate is set to lose (Anonymous, 2022, pp. 3). With the support of weapons purchased in the US, these criminal organizations have gained enough power to combat and eventually surpass the national government. So much so, that they can control the outcomes of elections and occupy critical infrastructure; which makes life harder for civilians just trying to live their lives.

Gun violence has spilled over into nearly every facet of normal life; for example the healthcare system has been targeted specifically by gangs. More than 60% of healthcare facilities in Port-au-Prince were no longer operational by mid-2025 due to the fact that gangs use firearms to disrupt health services, take control of clinics, and occupy major hospitals (Agard, 2025, pp. 55). Without access to healthcare facilities, citizens living in Port-au-Prince are at a far higher risk of dying from preventable causes. Given the fact that 87.7% of weapons seized by border authorities in Haiti were sourced to the US (del Mercado, 2022, pp. 6), the ongoing destabilization within the country is a direct effect of our firearms.

Section 2: Status Quo of Trafficking Regulation and the Effect of the Trump Administration

Firearm trafficking isn't a new issue, legislators have been attempting to stop the flow of weapons since the 1930s. Previous attempts to regulate the firearm trade revolve around two essential acts, The National Firearm Act of 1934 (NFA) and the Gun Control Act of 1968 (GCA) (Cohen & Foster, 2025). In particular, the NFA required the creation of records for the sale of a machine gun or shotgun while also imposing a tax on these transfers. In contrast, the GCA covers nearly all firearms, it enforces FFLs to conduct background checks; while also limiting who exactly can legally purchase a firearm (Cohen & Foster, 2025). Both of these acts are incredibly important since these laws are still in place today assisting law enforcement's trafficking investigations. One factor of regulation that is notably missing is how law

enforcement punishes FFLs that violate these laws; but under the Biden administration, the federal government redefined how they enforce noncompliant FFLs with the zero tolerance policy. Which allowed the ATF to revoke licenses of gun dealers who willfully violate certain federal laws (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 18). This policy quickly brought about results, not only due to the ATF's increased ability to prosecute violations discovered during their compliance inspections. But also the information received during those inspections was investigated; "in the first 10 months, there was a 225 percent increase in the number of criminal referrals as compared to the previous fiscal year" (Suplina et al. 2026, pp.19).

But it's been a year and the Trump administration—which initially promised to be tough on crime—has blatantly undermined law enforcement and regulation efforts to stop firearm trafficking. The current administration has done this by revoking the zero-tolerance policy, cutting ATF funding by approximately 26 percent, and diverting the already limited number of agents within the ATF towards immigration enforcement (Suplina et al. 2026. Myers, 2026). All of these actions will make the ATF inept at its core responsibility of combatting firearm traffickers and enforcing firearm regulation on FFLs and gun owners. In this section I present how the firearm trafficking situation looked in the 20th century and how our institutions were responding to it. While also explaining how Trump has emboldened these firearm traffickers and corrupt FFLs.

Section 2.1: Previous Anti-Trafficking Campaigns

Prior to the passage of the Brady law in 1993 and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 there were 286,500 firearm dealers licensed in the United States. At that point in time, there were more official gun dealers in the United States than there were gas stations (Newburger, 2000, pp. 4). This provided opportunities for certain criminal FFLs to go

unnoticed, since there was simply no way the ATF could investigate a sufficient number of establishments; this presented the government with a need to reduce the amount of FFLs to a manageable level. In 1993, the Firearms Trafficking Program was created to enhance local and federal law enforcement's ability to inspect FFLs. The program's goal is to enact effective strategies to reduce the level of violent crime by controlling and reducing the illegal trafficking of firearms (Newburger, 2000, pp. 3).

This is why it was essential to create the Firearm Licensee Compliance program which provided funding for statewide task forces—in Indiana, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, and California—concentrated on ensuring FFL compliance with state and local requirements, unscrupulous dealers can be identified and put out of business (Newburger, 2000). These task forces investigated whenever trafficked firearms were traced to an FFL, and in collaboration with local law enforcement, each task force saw positive results in the form of arrests or lower violence crime rates. Collectively, these efforts as a whole lead to a 56% reduction in the number of licensed FFLs within the US by 1997 (Newburger, 2000, pp. 3). This is a perfect example of previous advancements made in the fight against firearm trafficking. The task forces demonstrated that smaller regional task forces could be far more efficient than a national body. But, due to fluctuations in funding and various administrations changing their priorities, efficiency hasn't been incredibly consistent.

Section 2.2: Trump's Approach to Firearm Trafficking

The Trump administration will be a massive chapter in our history books. Through his immigration, foreign, and trade policy; Trump has drastically shifted the primary goals of the government to focus on immigration enforcement. In this section I would like to present exactly how Trump's actions are undermining the fight against firearm trafficking.

Reversing the Zero Tolerance Policy

Under Biden, the ATF had instituted a Zero Tolerance policy for FFLs that had previously violated the rules: “The violations that would trigger revocation under this policy include transferring a firearm to a prohibited person, failing to run a required background check, falsifying records, failing to respond to an ATF crime gun tracing request, or refusing to permit ATF to conduct an inspection” (Suplina et al., 2026, pp. 18). This may seem extreme, but given the severity of these violations it gave the ATF a good indication of which FFLs could be associated with criminal activity. For example, “between 2006 and 2010, authorities reportedly traced more than 1,700 crime guns back to Arrowhead Pawn, making it the fifth-largest source of crime guns in the country during that period” (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 18). Normally an FFL owner would be notified of their involvement in a trafficking scheme, the owner would share their sales records with law enforcement. But, Arrowhead Pawn did not stop selling guns until their license was revoked under the zero tolerance policy in 2021 (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 19). Without the zero tolerance policy in place, it will be very taxing for the ATF to revoke the FFLs from dealers heavily associated with trafficking.

Slashing ATF funding

The Trump administration, however, decided to reverse the zero tolerance policy, and invite the FFL holders that had their licenses revoked to apply to get them back (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 20). Moreover, to pursue his goal of mass deportations, funding from government agencies has been drastically shifted away from vital institutions such as the ATF. The administration’s proposed budget for fiscal year 2026 would slash ATF funding by 26 percent... This would eliminate 541 of the agency's 825 investigators responsible for inspecting gun dealers, which would reduce annual gun compliance inspections from 10,000 to approximately

3,400 (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 20). Together, reducing the ATF's ability to enforce rules on FFLs and completely eliminating the ability for them to easily revoke firearm dealing licenses effectively kills the agency's goals. Also out of that reduced number of federal agents, the Administration has also been requesting that a majority of ATF special agents be redeployed to perform immigration enforcement duties which are completely out of their scope (Myers, 2025).

This cut in funding has ripple effects for the agency's normal operations, specifically their eTrace system and their National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN). Using eTrace, the ATF can trace a firearms serial number to identify where it was first sold at retail and who it was sold to... NIBIN further allows law enforcement to automatically compare their ballistic evidence with other evidence from across the country to identify when the same gun was used at multiple crime scenes (Myers, 2025). These programs are all the time to assist law enforcement investigations that involve firearms. Due to the funding cuts to the ATF, these programs could drastically drop in efficiency leading to investigations involving firearms being dead in the water. Ordinarily ATF attempts to fulfill states' eTrace requests within one week, or within just 48 hours for urgent requests like those related to homicides or mass shootings... A non-urgent request now takes nearly two weeks to process, and while the agency is still able to quickly handle most urgent requests, the Trump administration's cuts will make that all but impossible (Myers, 2025). This data presents a very gloomy picture, I was previously unaware of the implications behind the funding cuts to the ATF. But we don't have to lose all hope, there are still options for our states to step forwards and attempt to fill the massive gap left behind by the federal government.

Section 3: What do we do now?

Given the stance of our federal government and the weakened state of the ATF, we need to discover new avenues to combat the issue of firearm trafficking. Below, I will advocate for the state to increase their power to monitor, enforce, and prosecute FFL violations. Along with creating a statewide intelligence program which local law enforcement could use without relying on the ATF's struggling programs. These two initiatives, in collaboration with state and local law enforcement engaging in FFL inspections, could fill the gaps left behind by the federal government. For example, there is no federal law or regulation which forces FFLs to comply with minimum security standards. The ATF has published a guide with information on how retailers can prevent thefts, but adoption of its practices and procedures is completely voluntary (Life Saving Promise, 2025, pp. 10). Firearm theft is the third top contributor to trafficked firearms, so refusing to implement minimum security measures only helps perpetuate the trafficking of stolen firearms.

Mandated Employee Background Checks and Training

There are lots of blindspots within our firearm regulation, but the lack of background checks and training for FFL employees is truly reprehensible. Until 2022, FFLs were not even statutorily permitted to use the federal background check system to run voluntary checks on their employees to ensure they are not legally prohibited from having guns (Life-Saving Promise, 2025, pp. 12). There are several states that have passed laws which require background checks and training for employees; ranging from Massachusetts and Delaware which require annual background checks for FFL employees, to New Jersey where employees must get their own state gun dealer licenses (Life-Saving Promise, 2025, pp. 12). Dealers that don't conduct background checks for their employees are irresponsibly putting the lives of their communities at risk. If

someone is intending to facilitate straw purchases and they are truly dedicated, why not work at an FFL in West Virginia, Minnesota, Florida, Montana, and New Mexico which lack employee background laws (Live-Saving Promise, 2025, pp. 13-14). An operation like this could distribute weapons efficiently; if the seller is participating in the illicit firearm trade, all of the education programs set forth by the ATF would be useless because the employee would willingly ignore all red flags. So, it is mandatory that we ensure the people supplying citizens with guns are actually able to legally own firearms themselves. This initiative would be productive in reducing some of the guess work for law enforcement, but the state has more opportunities to stop the flow of weapons at the source.

State-led Compliance Inspections and Disciplinary Power

The ATF has consistently been unable to inspect a sufficient number of FFLs every year; this can leave it up to chance whether an FFL operating under the radar supplying traffickers with weapons will be caught through an inspection. Since the inspections currently rarely catch these people in the act and we are only able to discover their violations after the weapon had already been trafficked, recovered by law enforcement, and traced; clearly we need to change things. In every year between 2019 and 2023 the ATF was only able to inspect less than 15 percent of FFLs, this can be primarily attributed to the sheer number of FFLs within the nation; as of 2025, excluding type 3 FFLs which are antique collectors, totaled over 78,000 (Live-Saving Promise, 2025, pp. 15). If local law enforcement were able to assist the ATF in their inspections the number of annual inspections would drastically increase.

But these inspections would ultimately be useless if the state doesn't have the power to punish these rule violations, currently they would have to rely on the critically underfunded ATF. So, to increase their ability to operate independently individual states should follow in the

footsteps of the Biden administration with their zero tolerance policy which gave the ATF far more ability to revoke an FFL license. Prior to this policy, “the ATF must prove that the dealer knew they were acting illegally, often by showing a record of warnings issued to the dealer... ATF data shows that dealer inspections generally result in a large number of violations—for example, in 2020, ATF inspectors found violations in almost half of inspections” (Live-Saving Problems, 2025, pp. 17). This can make it incredibly taxing to simply revoke one FFL license, because the FFL could just simply claim ignorance; this process must take lots of violations over time to prove criminal behavior. But, given the reductions in their workforce, the ATF simply will not be able to do this in a manner efficient enough to make a dent in the number of FFLs across the nation. This is why states should enact something similar to the zero tolerance policy, especially in states that are highly known for trafficking weapons such as Texas. The state could get to work and investigate the FFLs that are highly associated with trafficked firearms; but without consistent trace information, states will need to develop their own information networks which can easily supply them with gun trace data.

Centralized Records and an Intelligence Based Approach

Recently there has been an increase in the advocacy for the use of the eTrace and NIBIN programs when solving crimes involving firearms. This makes it far easier to solve gun crimes given the vast amount of information that they give you access to. But truthfully, this system is archaic in its operations and it’s time for our local lawmakers and law enforcement to rethink their typical approach.

The ATF is prohibited from centralizing any of the dealers' records, which sounds absurd given the wealth of other nations, including Mexico which employ national firearm databases. When tracing a crime gun, ATF’s National Tracing Center is required to call individual dealers

identified as part of the distribution chain to get specific purchaser information. When a dealer goes out of business, it is required to submit all of its business records to the ATF for purposes of facilitating crime gun traces (Live-Saving Promise, 2025, pp. 16). Yet again, the ATF is restricted from centralizing these forms which only makes the tracing process take far longer than normal. State wide databases would be far more accessible to local law enforcement, enabling them to engage in an intelligence based approach. Rather than operating with limited information and attempting to find a few needles in a massive haystack. Law enforcement could use this data not only to identify the perpetrators of individual crimes but also uncover illegal trafficking activity, including which dealers are enabling it” (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 23). An approach like this may not work if the contributors to the trafficking of firearms didn’t remain consistent. But, “just 13,000 sellers are responsible for more than 90 percent of all retail firearm sales. That means less than one-fifth of dealers are responsible for supplying nearly all the guns in circulation” (Suplina et al. 2026, pp. 24). Adoption of this technique would guarantee that vital time and resources aren’t wasted checking on FFLs which would never think about violating the law. And those resources are spent investigating known people constantly breaking the law and as a direct result people across the nation and the world die.

Section 3.1: Objections From the Second Amendment and Political Will to Pass Legislation

There are two recent Supreme Court decisions which will limit the state’s ability to regulate FFLs; 2022 *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen* and 2024 *United States v. Rahimi*. In Bruen the Supreme Court struck down a New York State law, in their opinion the court stated when the second amendment’s plain text covers an individual’s conduct... The government must justify its regulation by demonstrating that it is consistent with the nation’s historical tradition of firearm regulation (Rahimi and Bruen Standard, n.d). This decision seems

quite vague considering the nation didn't have fully automatic firearms or state militias at the nation's founding. But it was clarified two years later in the *Rahimi* decision which restricted domestic violence offenders from possessing firearms. "Due to founding era laws that forbade people from possessing weapons in public, and laws that require an individual to post bond when suspected of a crime. The court concluded that these two kinds of laws confirm a principle suggested by common sense: the government may disarm anyone who poses a clear threat of physical violence to another person" (Lund & Winkler, n.d). This precedent, if used in collaboration with founding era laws regulating the misuse of firearms could be extended to stop people from contributing to trafficking. The primary downside to the *Bruen* decision lies in the fact that guns were manufactured by private individuals or blacksmiths during the founding era. So, there is a lack of historical precedent to draw on when attempting to regulate firearm trafficking.

At the federal level, debate about gun laws has remained fairly stagnant; but the states have already been passing legislation aimed to give them more control over firearms. Connecticut passed HB 7042 which imposes a standard of reasonable controls designed to prevent straw firearm purchases and sales to prohibited individuals. Additionally 7042 takes advantage of the PLCAA's exception for state laws related to the sale or marketing of firearms and related projects (Earp, 2025). The PLCAA prevents victims of gun violence from suing firearm manufacturers, but in Connecticut, manufacturers could actually be held accountable for unethical advertising practices. Colorado passed six bills regulating firearms in the first half of 2026, two of them apply to firearm traffickers. Due to SB 158, state buyers must choose vendors who meet transparency and accountability requirements, including sharing ATF trace request data, reporting on inspections, thefts, or losses (Earp, 2025). This bill will prevent state agencies

from feeding into firearm trafficking when acquiring weapons from FFLs, additionally agencies would be provided with more information on problem FFLs within the region. Finally HB 1238, enforces tighter security measures on gun shows within the state by requiring organizers to submit security plans to law enforcement, obtain liability insurance, and restrict unaccompanied minors from attending (Earp, 2023). Due to the private sale loophole within our gun laws, sales at gun shows don't require background checks so they are very frequently targeted by firearm traffickers. Although it will be difficult to convince red states like Texas to adopt more strict firearm policies; there is momentum in states across the nation to fix the various loopholes within our regulation which enables the flow of illicit firearms to continue.

Conclusion

America is known across the world for our firearm ownership, so much so that it is one of the few things people with limited knowledge of the country may know. But our firearm industry has grown so massive that our weapons permeate across borders and into other nations. These weapons shift the typical power dynamics within society and they can grant random criminal organizations a boost in power against regional or even government opposition. These weapons are flowing into various communities within the US and abroad as a direct result of our weak firearm regulation. Traffickers have been using methods such as straw purchasing, unlicensed dealing, and theft from FFLs because they are consistent methods which allow them to maneuver around any laws we attempt to put in place. Once the trafficker obtains the weapon they transport them along well established routes within the US, or in well established routes across the southern border. The story is the same no matter where the weapons end up, the traffickers are driven by a massive profit, and once they're sold, these weapons are typically far more dangerous than those that are legally obtained. Previous attempts to combat the issue have

resulted in newfound respect for techniques like regional task forces and databases, but they haven't been pursued in a scale which is effective.

But today we are presented with a state of the nation that's never been seen before. The executive branch of our government so far in the first year of his term, Trump has reversed progress made by lawmakers. Through his reversal of the Zero-Tolerance policy he has shown corrupt FFLs and traffickers that they will have no issue making massive amounts of profits off of their contributions to the illicit firearm trade. But Trump has also made the ATF, an institution which is used to being underfunded, completely inept at completing their normal responsibilities (FFL compliance inspections, eTrace and NIBIN responses, and investigating firearm related crimes). Without the ATF serving as the first responders to firearm trafficking, we need the states to step forward and fill the gap left behind by the loss of federal funding. To go about this the states need to increase their judicial power over FFLs within the state so they don't have to rely on the federal government. Allow local law enforcement to conduct compliance inspections on FFLs in place of federal officers. And finally our states need to create their own databases independent of eTrace and NIBIN. These databases could be far more reliable to local law enforcement and it will enable them to quickly acquire information which previously would have taken multiple days to obtain if they had contacted the ATF.

If increased security measures for gun dealers are put in place, straw purchasers, traffickers, and corrupt FFLs feeding weapons into the domestic and international pipelines would feel far more pressure during transactions. And if the weapons are still trafficked then recovered at a crime, the use of centralized state firearm records would provide law enforcement with the FFL and purchaser. After increasing state power to inspect and enforce violations on

FFLs, the weapon would provide probable cause to investigate and most likely revoke the FFL if sufficient violations are found.

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