



CENTER FOR
INVESTIGATIVE
REPORTING

Gun Reporting Methodology

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Overview

This gun reporting methodology stems from the Center for Investigative Reporting's investigation into one of the largest gun-theft cases in United States' history. That research resulted in "Hot Guns," a 1997 Emmy award-winning public television documentary on stolen handguns, starts with the story of a gun used to kill an innocent woman, a gun that the manufacturer said didn't exist. The investigation traced the gun through a world of corporate neglect and criminal greed to a black market gun ring and ultimately to a massive gun theft.

This methodology is an attempt to increase public understanding of the black market in handguns and how to investigate and report on this world. In particular, journalists, policy makers and community activists need to publicize information on guns used in crimes or seized at crime sites ("crime guns") in their local community. There is little journalism in the area of stolen and crime guns, particularly at the local level, and law enforcement is

sometimes ignorant about how the black market in handguns functions.

According to a September 1999 New York Times article by Fox Butterfield, police chiefs across the nation are shifting their attitudes and actions toward investigating and controlling crime guns because "for many years, most police forces attached little importance to tracing where a gun came from or trying to halt the supply of guns to criminals and juveniles." Top police officials and their departments, ranging from Baltimore to Minneapolis, are now putting their focus on tracing guns and cracking down on gun traffickers "as a major element of crime control."

Therefore, as the issue of gun violence becomes increasingly complex and the debate over guns continues, a research methodology is an important aid to journalists to expand and improve the coverage of gun violence in America.

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Introduction

1. The Methodology

This gun reporting methodology stems from the Center for Investigative Reporting's investigation into one of the largest gun-theft cases in United States' history. "Hot Guns," a 1997 Emmy award-winning public television documentary on stolen handguns, starts with the story of a gun used to kill an innocent woman, a gun that the manufacturer said didn't exist. The investigation traced the gun through a world of corporate neglect and criminal greed to a black market gun ring and ultimately to a massive gun theft.

This methodology is an attempt to increase public understanding of the black market in handguns and how to investigate and report on this world. In particular, journalists, policy makers and community activists need to publicize information on guns used in crimes or seized at crime sites ("crime guns") in their local community. There is little journalism in the area of stolen and crime guns, particularly at the local level, and law enforcement is sometimes ignorant about how the black market in handguns functions.

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Therefore, as the issue of gun violence becomes increasingly complex and the debate over guns continues, a research methodology is an important aid to journalists to expand and improve the coverage of gun violence in America.

2. The ATF's Report on the Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative's "Fastest Time-to-Crime Youth and Juvenile Crime Guns"

In 1999, the ATF released a [report](#) based on their study of the illegal youth firearms market in 27 communities across the country. Below you will find lists of the communities covered in the report and of the fastest time-to-crime guns among youths and juveniles, which will provide you with background on what may be the most common crime guns in your local community. According

to the ATF, fast time-to-crime means that "the weapons move from initial retail sale by a federally licensed firearms dealer (FFL) to recovery by a law enforcement official in three years or less. Time-to-crime in under three years is a trafficking indicator."

Fastest Time-To Crime Guns

- Glock 9mm Semiautomatic Pistol
- Star 9mm Semiautomatic Pistol
- Hi-Point 9mm Semiautomatic Pistol
- Lorcin 9mm Semiautomatic Pistol
- Bryco 9mm Semiautomatic Pistol
- Ruger 9mm Semiautomatic Pistol
- Bryco .380 Semiautomatic Pistol
- Lorcin .380 Semiautomatic Pistol
- Glock .40 Caliber Semiautomatic Pistol
- Smith & Wesson .40 Caliber Semiautomatic Pistol

Communities

- Atlanta, GA
- Baltimore, MD
- Birmingham, AL
- Boston, MA
- Bridgeport, CT
- Chicago, IL
- Cincinnati, OH
- Cleveland, OH
- Detroit, MI
- Gary, IN
- Houston, TX
- Inglewood, CA
- Jersey City, NJ
- Los Angeles, CA
- Memphis, TN
- Miami, FL
- Milwaukee, WI
- Minneapolis, MN
- New York, NY
- Philadelphia, PA
- Richmond, VA
- St. Louis, MO
- Salinas, CA
- San Antonio, TX
- Seattle, WA
- Tucson, AZ
- Washington, DC

A. Police Departments

Local police departments are the best places to find information on incidents involving guns. When contacting police departments for information on guns,

the question is often not whether they have the information but if they can find it. Not all police departments keep a computerized database that lists all the types of guns stored, so it's important to check first to see if they have such a system.

Police departments with more advanced data collection may have a listing of the following information on the guns they have seized at crime scenes:

- a) case numbers
- b) make
- c) model/caliber
- d) serial numbers
- e) type of crime associated with the type of gun
- f) current location of firearm

1. Public Affairs/Media Relations Officer

Since police departments are often divided into different sections, it's best to start out by calling the public affairs or media relations officer. They are usually helpful in pointing you to the right department or specific officer. Most police departments require a written request before any data is released. Talking to the public affairs officer first to see if they require a formal request can save time.

2. Property Room/Armory

Most of the larger police departments have a separate division – the property room or the armory – where all the recovered firearms are stored. Some police departments have an armory or gunroom where they store confiscated weapons and some of their own weapons.

Another important aspect in gun reporting is to understand police lingo. Most police departments have different types of codes that they use. Please note that each police department has its own definition of different codes used and different definitions for specific terms. So, it's helpful to speak to an officer that can clarify the codes. Some codes include definitions of property terms and abbreviations:

- a) I/O: refers to investigative officer
- b) S/N: refers to serial number of gun
- c) A/O: refers to arresting officer
- d) AFS: refers to Automated Firearms System (a California data system, but other states might have a similar system. For example, the police enter information on confiscated guns into this firearms-in-evidence database maintained by the California Department of Justice).

3. Weapons Unit

Some police departments have a weapons or firearms unit that is dedicated to investigating gun crimes. These departments may be responsible for tracing weapons and working with state and/or Federal law enforcement to prosecute gun crimes. Weapons units may also have special databases on the weapons they encounter. For example, the Oakland Police Department has a weapons unit that maintains a database listing recovered weapons with serial numbers, case numbers and type of gun used. By requesting a listing of their recovered weapons, one can examine whether there are any significant patterns in the serial numbers, which can indicate any possible gun trafficking.

4. Records

All police departments have a records department that manages information on incidents and investigations. As mentioned above, a records department's ability to search their records differs widely from city to city. Some records departments may dismiss your request out of hand if it involves an extensive search by hand or a detailed computer query. In this case, speak with the head of the records division; persistence and flexibility help. For example, if you are told that a search for a specific make and model of gun is impossible, ask if you can search the records by model alone. If the department is computerized, you may speak with the systems/database administrator, who can tell you if your search is possible.

In regards to requesting information on specific cases, a majority of police departments request a written inquiry to the records department before any cases are released. Some cases may still be open and most police departments would then be reluctant to reveal any information regarding an on-going investigation.

5. Homicide Unit

The homicide unit of the police department is another place to acquire information about specific cases if there is a death involved. If you know the case number (which can be identified from the records department), it is much easier for the officers to search a specific case. Looking at an individual homicide case can be useful to acquire a variety of information, such as the perpetrators, the witnesses, the investigating officers, and the type of firearm used.

B. Criminal Courts

1. Clerk/Records in the Criminal Court

The criminal court is the place where criminal charges are filed. In order to obtain more information on specific criminal cases, the clerk of the court in the criminal division is the best place to start.

The clerk's office maintains files on specific criminal cases and has the responsibility for tracking documents. The clerk's office maintains a docket, which is a listing of cases on file. If you have the name of the person who committed the crime, then it's easier to search through the docket and obtain the file numbers so that the clerk can pull the defendant's court records.

Just as with the police departments, the clerk of the court will charge a fee for copying costs. So it would be beneficial to go directly to the office so you can copy what you need and be charged for only those copies. If that is not possible, you can request the clerk to copy certain pages for you.

Sometimes a written inquiry or request is required before obtaining court records, which will provide the indictment (formal charge by a grand jury), arrest warrants (statements that there is enough evidence to arrest), affidavits (sworn statements), depositions (sworn statements by witnesses), and transcripts of the hearing.

2. District Attorney/City Attorney/Prosecutor

The district attorney's office or city attorney's office can also be helpful in gun reporting. Since there are currently many cities filing lawsuits against the gun industry, the city or district attorneys have gathered data, which may be useful to your story. Many of the attorneys are working closely with the police departments and other groups so they may be able to refer you to important sources of information as well as provide data that they've found in your community.

The prosecuting attorneys can also be helpful when investigating a particular case. For example, if a case went to trial, such as a homicide case, then the prosecutors who handled the case may be good sources of information, especially when a case is closed. If a case is open, then it may be difficult to get information because the prosecutors may not agree to talk on the record. Check then to see if they can provide background material. In addition, the presiding judge may be a good source, especially when a case is closed and they are more willing to talk.

3. Defendant's Attorney

When investigating specific cases, such as a homicide case or a gun trafficking case, the defendant's attorney may be helpful in pulling your story together. A good place to find the name of the attorney is to look at the indictments from the defendant's court records.

C. Actors in Crime Cases

1. Prison Locator Service

When locating those in prison who were involved in certain criminal cases, such as a homicide case or a gun trafficking case, you can contact the appropriate prison locator service. If they are in state prison, contact your state prison locator service. And if they are in a federal prison, contact the U.S. federal prison locator at (202) 307-3126. The prison locators can check the person's name as well as some aliases.

It's also important to check to see what the state regulations are in gaining access to state prisons. Some states have strict guidelines and restrict interviews with inmates.

2. Parties Involved in a Case

If you have a police report or a court report, you can obtain information about the people who are involved in a case and/or the witnesses. Contacting all parties involved in the case, including the defendant's and the victim's family members and friends, may prove helpful.

D. Medical Organizations

1. Coroner's Office/Medical Examiner

When investigating a case involving a homicide, the coroner or medical examiner's office can be very useful in finding specific information. So check your county's coroner's office.

The coroner's office has information regarding the age, race, cause of death, the time of death, results of autopsy and laboratory tests, including the presence of drugs or alcohol, and specifically, information about gun wounds (such as how many bullets entered the victim's body). So they may have information about the type of bullets used and possibly the type of gun. It might be best to speak to

the medical examiner that handled the specific homicide case as well as any other assistants who examined the victim's body. In addition, you can request copies of the coroner's report, but remember they might charge a fee so it's best to ask what the costs would be.

2. Hospitals/Physicians

Many hospitals, especially emergency rooms, treat gunshot victims. So checking your local hospital can be beneficial to acquire data on the number of patients that come in with gun-wound fatalities. Most local hospital emergency departments keep a record of fatal and nonfatal emergencies. This data is categorized based on E-Codes, which stands for the International Classification of Diseases External Codes. This data describes the external cause of an injury to a person as well as the nature of the injury, diagnosis, age and sex of the patient. In addition, emergency room physicians could be the best sources to speak to and they may be willing to provide information. Contact your local hospital's records department and obtain records or E-Codes as well as information on the emergency room physician and who was on duty at the time the victim was admitted to the hospital.

3. 911 Paramedic Data

Since emergency medical technicians are required to fill a report each time they respond to a call, check 911 paramedic data or emergency medical service data that provides the reports on fatal and non-fatal emergencies. The reports would include data that pertains to the causes and the treatment of the injury as well as the date and time of the incident, the medical condition of the injured person, sex, age, race, location of the incident, and a description of the injury.

E. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF)

1. Public Affairs Division

The Public Affairs Office is the best place to start when requesting information from the ATF. The main office of the ATF is located in Washington, DC, but they also have public affairs officers or spokespeople in the regional offices. They will let you know whether a written FOI request is required.

General information, such as current gun data, can be obtained through the ATF's public affairs office or check their [web site](#). But, if you're requesting specific

information, sometimes a Freedom of Information (FOI) request will be required and it may take time to receive the requested data.

For example, when CIR requested information from the ATF, we were required to submit a FOI request, which the ATF later denied. After we filed an appeal, we did receive the information.

The ATF, as well as other federal agencies, may withhold information if it properly falls in one of the nine categories of exempted material. The exemptions to disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act are:

- National Security
- Housekeeping materials (Matters related solely to the internal personnel rules and practices of an agency)
- Statutory Exemption
- Trade Secrets
- Working papers/Lawyer-client privilege * Personal privacy
- Law enforcement records
- Financial institutions
- Geological data

For specific information regarding these exemptions, contact the [Reporter's Committee for the Freedom of the Press](#).

2. ATF Agents

ATF agents are also helpful when investigating a specific case. For example, if you were investigating a gun trafficking ring, the ATF agent in charge of the investigation would be an excellent source of information. Check with the closest ATF office in your area and ask the ATF public information officer who was the ATF agent in charge of the investigation. Again, in some cases, a written FOI request might be required, especially for cases that are still open or under investigation by the ATF.

3. ATF National Tracing Center

Located in West Virginia, ATF's National Tracing Center has a database that traces the origin and ownership of recovered firearms used in crimes throughout the country. The National Tracing Center provides around-the-clock assistance only to law enforcement. A zip disk containing ATF trace database figures for the past ten years is available by calling the ATF (202-927-8480) and requesting the trace database available on zip disk for approximately \$50. It is suggested that reporters also ask for the multiple sales database. If you can find a gun violence or other organization that already owns the

database for the year(s) you are interested in, you may be able to obtain the data you need for little or no cost.

NOTE: For other databases, please see section L. Databases.

F. Organizations and Academic Sources

1. Anti-gun violence groups/gun prevention and survivors groups

There is a wealth of gun violence prevention and gun control organizations. Some of these organizations and their websites include:

Violence Policy Center <http://www.vpc.org>
Handgun Control, Inc. <http://www.handguncontrol.org>
Coalition to Stop Gun Violence <http://www.gunfree.org>
Brady Center to Prevent Handgun Violence <http://www.cphv.org>
Join Together <http://www.jointogether.org>
Pacific Center for Violence Prevention <http://www.tf.org/tf/pcvp2.html>

2. Pro-Gun lobbying organizations

Most prominent among the pro-gun or Second Amendment rights lobbying organizations is the National Rifle Association (NRA). These organizations and their websites include:

National Rifle Association <http://www.nra.org>
Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms <http://www.ccrkba.org>

3. Academic sources

Several of the experts on guns and gun violence can be found at universities, think tanks or research organizations. Some notable names are:

David Kennedy
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
79 JFK St.
Cambridge, MA 02138
(617) 495-5188, fax: (617) 496-9053
Email: david_kennedy@harvard.edu

Dr. Garen Wintemute
[Violence Prevention Research Program](#)

University of California, Davis
2315 Stockton Blvd.
Sacramento, CA 95817
(916) 734-3083, fax: (916) 734-3063
Email: gjwintemute@ucdavis.edu

Tom Diaz
[Violence Policy Center](#)
1350 Connecticut Ave., NW; Suite 825
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Philip Cook Terry
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Florida State University
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(850) 644-7651

G. Gun Manufacturers

Since many cities across the country are filing lawsuits against the gun industry (see section on lawsuits), the gun manufacturers are potential sources for views and information about their side of the gun control issue. Although they may be difficult to interview, they can be beneficial sources of information.

Several gun manufacturers are based in Southern California and are referred to as the “Ring of Fire” companies that dominate the manufacture of “junk guns” or “Saturday night specials.” Some of the companies include:

Arcadia Machine & Tool (AMT)

6226 Santos Diaz St. Dept B
Irwindale, CA 91702
(818) 334-6629

Bryco Arms

380 Clinton St.
Costa Mesa, CA 92626
(714) 252-7621

Davis Industries

11186 Venture Dr.
Mira Loma, CA 91752
(919) 360-5598

Phoenix Arms

1420 South Archibald Ave.
Ontario, CA 91761
(909) 947-1843
(909) 947-6798 fax

Sundance Industries

25163 W. Avenue Stanford
Valencia, CA 91355
(805) 257-4807

H. Gun Dealers and Federal Firearms Licensees (FFL's)

1. FFL List

There are approximately 93,000 Federal Firearms Licensees in the United States, according to the ATF. A Federal Firearms License (FFL) is required in order to sell a firearm.

A list of all FFLs, except collectors of curios and relics, is available to the public through the ATF. The list includes the licensee name, trade name (if any), mailing address, license number (including type), and business phone number. It is available in different formats (i.e.: computer tape and disk, print-outs, etc). The list can be customized, such as by state, zip code, region or by types of FFLs (i.e. importers and manufacturers). This data is useful for reporters to investigate where gun dealers are concentrated and who is selling firearms.

A description of how to order the FFL list can be found on the [ATF web site](#). Or, contact the ATF's contractor directly for information and/or to place an order: Basics Information Systems, Inc., 11141 Georgia Avenue, Suite 515, Wheaton, MD 20902. There is a set-up charge of \$54.00 per order.

The minimum order charges are as follows:

- Computer tape: \$109.00
- Printouts: \$141.50
- Cheshire labels: \$145.50
- Adhesive labels: \$233.00

A request for a listing of FFL's in your residential zip code should be addressed to: Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Chief Firearms, Explosives and Arson Services Division 650 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Room 5100 Washington, DC 20226.

A list of current Federal Firearms Licensees can also be purchased from [NICAR/IRE](#).

2. Out-of-Business Records & Multiple Sales Records

The ATF maintains records of FFL's (and gun manufacturers) out-of-business records, which may be useful in acquiring data about a specific FFL or a gun manufacturer. Please direct all questions concerning out-of-business records to the ATF number: 1-800-788-7133 ext. 213.

In addition, to obtain a record of whether an FFL conducted multiple sales (significant activity with a single purchaser), contact the ATF or write them directly at the above address.

I. Statistics on Crime Rates

Since interpreting statistics is one of the major challenges in reporting, it's always best to contact the researcher who

conducted the report to clarify any questions you have regarding the statistics.

Some places to acquire statistical data on gun violence include:

- [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#) (publishes an annual report called The Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics)
- [National Center for Health Statistics](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (provides data on deaths called Monthly Vital Statistics Report)
- [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) (provides data on crimes called the Uniform Crime Reports)
- [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms](#)
- [National Criminal Justice Reference Service](#) (NCJRS).

J. Gun Legislation

1. Federal Legislation

When gathering information about specific legislation before Congress or requesting interviews with specific Senate or House members, the best place to start is by contacting the press office for the specific legislator or legislative committee. The press officer coordinates interviews and handles media inquiries.

If you're seeking background information, you can also speak to the legislative aide that handles issues relating to crime and gun control. They are the ones most knowledgeable about the issues and the different types of legislation that is before Congress. (They are often not able to speak on the record since most statements need to come directly from the Senate or House member. They can obtain that statement for you.)

Another good source for information on specific bills is to check on-line. Most Senators and House members have web pages providing information on legislation, especially the ones that they've introduced. Some members place their position on a specific issue or specific reports that they've conducted on crime and gun violence on their web site.

For example, Senator Charles Schumer (D.-NY) released a report on gun dealers. Refer to his [web site](#), or contact him through email to request the report: senator@schumer.senate.gov

In addition, refer to House Member Bob Barr's (R.-GA) [web site](#). He was named to House Speaker Hastert's

Special Youth Violence Panel on June 30, 1999. The panel is responsible for developing recommendations on initiatives to curb youth violence.

It's always beneficial to check a member's web site before contacting the office to familiarize yourself with the issue. A listing of congressional members web sites can be found at: www.senate.gov and www.house.gov.

You can also check the [Thomas guide](#), which provides the status of various bills that are pending on the floor or committee. For example, the House and Senate have recently passed youth violence legislation, which is now in conference.

In addition, here is significant information for the Senate and House Judiciary Committees that handle gun and criminal justice legislation:

- [Senate Judiciary Committee](#) U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary Republican: (202) 224-5225 Democrat: (202) 224-7703
- [Senate Subcommittee on Youth Violence](#) U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Youth Violence Room SDG-13, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510 (202) 224-4124
- [House Judiciary Committee](#) Republican: (202) 225-3951 Democrat: (202) 225-6906
- [House Subcommittee on Crime](#), U. S. House Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime, 207 Cannon House Building Washington, DC 20515 (202) 225-3926

2. State Legislature

Similar to the federal government, your state governmental offices have press officers and legislative aides who may be able to assist you. Again, check their web sites for specific bills and reports.

K. Lawsuits Against the Gun Industry

As of September 29, 1999, 28 cities and counties have filed lawsuits to reform the gun industry. In some cases, several cities and counties have joined together to file a single complaint, such as San Francisco and Los Angeles. Other cities and counties are currently planning or considering lawsuits.

The lawsuits seek to recover damages as compensation to the cities and counties for the costs they attribute to the gun industry and the way certain companies make and sell

their products. Each state differs in the legal rules and principles that apply in these lawsuits and therefore the complaints filed by the cities and counties include claims under a number of different legal theories.

The claims fall into three general areas: unsafe gun design, negligent distribution and deceptive marketing and advertising.

For more information, including the actual case briefs, see the Brady Center's [Legal Action Project's web site](#).

The following is a list of cities and counties that have filed a lawsuit against the gun industry:

- New Orleans, Louisiana (October 30, 1998)
- Chicago, Illinois (November 12, 1998)
- Miami/Dade County, Florida (January 26, 1999)
- Bridgeport, Connecticut (January 27, 1999)
- Atlanta, Georgia (February 5, 1999)
- Cleveland, Ohio (April 8, 1999)
- Wayne County, Michigan (April 26, 1999)
- Detroit, Michigan (April 26, 1999)
- Cincinnati, Ohio (April 28, 1999)
- St. Louis, Missouri (April 30, 1999)
- San Francisco, CA (May 25, 1999) Includes: Berkeley, Sacramento, San Mateo County, Alameda County, Oakland and East Palo Alto
- Los Angeles, CA (May 25, 1999) Includes: Compton, West Hollywood and Inglewood
- Camden County, NJ (June 2, 1999)
- Boston, MA (June 3, 1999)
- Newark, NJ (June 9, 1999)
- Camden, NJ (June 21, 1999)
- Los Angeles County (August 27, 1999)
- Gary, Indiana (August 27, 1999)
- Wilmington, Delaware (Sept. 29, 1999)

L. Databases

The National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting (NICAR) is a project of Investigative Reporters and Editors and the University of Missouri School of Journalism. Founded in 1989, NICAR maintains a library of databases containing government data. NICAR can be found through the [IRE web site](#) and/or at www.nicar.org. A listing of current Federal Firearms Licensees can be purchased from NICAR/IRE (see below).

1. Uniform Crime Reports

NICAR maintains the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). UCR consists of six separate databases, which the FBI

compiles from crime information collected from law enforcement agencies around the country.

The six databases are:

- The Return A - provides number of crimes in 27 categories, including murder, rape, robbery, assault, burglary, and larceny. Crimes are reported by month and broken down into actual offenses cleared by arrest and clearances under 18.
- Supplement to Return A - provides detail on property crimes
- Age, Sex, and Race Database - provides male and female totals for a variety of different crimes. Race is given for juveniles and adults.
- Supplemental Homicide Report - provides age, sex and race information for the offenders and victims and is broken down by individual homicide.
- Arson - provides information including offenses where structures are uninhabited and estimated value of property damage.
- Police database - provides information about assaults and murders of police officers.

2. Gun Dealer License Database

NICAR also maintains a [listing](#) of all federally approved gun dealers in the United States.

3. ATF Trace Database

The ATF compiles trace data on guns when law enforcement agencies request it concerning guns seized at crime scenes or obtained elsewhere. According to an ATF spokesperson, the ATF trace database for the past 10 years is now available on a zip disk for approximately \$50. It includes serial number data for past years, though the most recent year available does not include serial numbers in the trace data. To arrange to obtain this zip disk, contact the ATF at 202-927-8480

M. Bibliography and Other Resources

The following is a list of books and other resources that may be useful when reporting on issues relating to gun violence:

Reporting on Violence: A Handbook for Journalists by the Berkeley Media Studies Group. Contact: [Berkeley Media Studies Group](#) 2140 Shattuck Avenue, Suite 804 Berkeley, CA 94704 (510) 204-9700

Covering Criminal Justice by [The Center on Crime, Communities & Culture](#) and the [Columbia Journalism Review](#)

Paper Trails: A Guide to Public Records in California by Stephen Levine and Barbara Newcombe, Center for Investigative Reporting. Contact: [Center for Investigative Reporting](#) 131 Steuart St., Ste. 600 San Francisco, CA 94105 (415) 543-1200

Media Guide by the Academy of Criminal Justice Science (provides listings of academic criminologists) Contact: [Academy of Criminal Justice Science](#) 1-800-757-ACJS

The Reporter's Source Book by Project Vote Smart Contact: [Project Vote Smart](#) 129 NW Fourth St., Suite 204 Corvallis, OR 97330 (541) 754-2746

Making a Killing: The Business of Guns in America. Tom Diaz. The New Press: New York. 1999.

N. Gun Reporting and Suggested Stories

Articles you can write about guns and crime in your community:

1. Check with your state Department of Justice to see what their statistics reveal about which guns are seized most by police in your state and determine if there are any trends.
2. Check with evidence rooms at your local police departments or county sheriff departments to determine what make and caliber of guns are seized as evidence and how many are destroyed each year. See if there are trends over the past few years. Ask if the departments can do an analysis of their statistics on guns seized at crime scenes to determine if there are interesting statistics to report on. See how your local statistics compare with ATF's figures on guns they trace most each year.
3. Check recent newsworthy shootings to determine if the make and model of the gun used is on the list of guns most frequently traced by the ATF or most seized by local police or law enforcement in your state.
4. Check whether certain guns seem to show up frequently at crime scenes in the most crime-ridden neighborhoods in your community. Check whether there are suspicious patterns with the serial numbers of guns seized at crime scenes in your community.

5. Check the age and race of shooting victims and gun criminals in your community and see if they compare with national statistics. See if the guns used in youth gun violence or youth gun deaths in your community reveal a pattern.

6. Check how long criminal justice agencies in your community or state collect and keep their statistics on guns and how they make them available to the press and public. In California, the state Department of Justice deletes its quarterly statistics from its records after three years.

7. Check whether there have been significant robberies at gun stores or losses of guns from a particular FFL in your community. Lost, missing or stolen guns from an FFL are supposed to be reported to the ATF. Investigate what happened to these guns.

O. Stories you can do on guns and crime in your community

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- Check whether certain guns seem to show up frequently at crime scenes in the most crime-ridden neighborhoods in your community.
- Check the age and race of shooting victims and gun criminals in your community and see if they compare with national statistics. See if the guns used in youth

gun violence or youth gun deaths in your community reveal a pattern.

- Check how long criminal justice agencies in your community or state collect and keep their statistics on guns and how they make them available to the press and public. In California, the state Department of Justice deletes its quarterly statistics from its records after three years.

Bonus: How CIR Got the “Hot Guns” Story

“Hot Guns” began as a totally different story: an examination of the gun massacre in Killeen, Texas in 1991 and, spearheaded by a survivor of the carnage, the eventual passage of a law allowing the legal right to carry a concealed weapon in that state. Killeen was the worst one-day gun massacre in U.S. history and left 22 dead and 44 wounded. But lacking a new angle, reporters at the Center for Investigative Reporting set out to find an original way to tell a story about guns in America.

Of immediate interest was the little known story about the southern California manufacturers of inexpensive handguns. Overall, there were surprisingly few stories on the rise of the cheap gun industry in the United States. Two exceptions stand out: reporter Alix Freedman did a memorable print investigative story on the subject in a 1992 *The Wall Street Journal* article; and *Day One* produced a segment in May 1994, “America Under the Gun,” where ABC News reporters looked at Lorcin Engineering and interviewed the firearms manufacturer’s president, James Waldorf. Both stories appeared before a major theft of guns from the Lorcin plant became public. This theft of guns became the central story element for the CIR/*Frontline* documentary “Hot Guns.”

The investigation of the story began with a standard methodology: gathering all of the existing published reports on the topic. This included newspaper and magazine articles, books, journal articles and reports. Then a search for relevant civil lawsuits took place. This revealed a host of personal injury and product liability cases filed against the gun manufacturers located in southern California. A search for criminal lawsuits proved most fruitful. Shortly before the investigation began, a criminal case against two former Lorcin employees became public. Jeremy Mendoza and Ernest Zamora, who stole guns from the company while working there, pled guilty to gun theft charges, and began serving time for one of the largest gun theft case U.S. history. This seemed to

be an excellent story to focus on if access to some of the key players involved could be obtained.

A call to the Federal Inmate Locator Service determined in what prison they were incarcerated. Letters were written to them requesting an interview but neither responded. An accomplice was also contacted who was serving time in another federal prison. After months of attempting to make contact with him, he finally responded and an interview was arranged. This footage was, in the end, not used in the program.

Contact was also made with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) to see if they would cooperate with an examination of the case of the stolen Lorcin guns. After some consideration, they agreed to grant interviews with some of the key officials involved in the case. We determined through *The Press Enterprise*, which ran a local newspaper story in Riverside County on the theft case, that the stolen Lorcin guns were used to commit crimes around the country. The victims of these crimes were located through official police records, former co-workers, employers and by using national telephone listings. Several of them were interviewed for the documentary, with two appearing in the final cut.

We also attempted to contact the criminals who used these guns in crimes. Most of them were serving time in California prisons. We hoped to find out how the stolen guns were sold onto the street and follow their trail from theft at the factory to the crimes where they were used. Many of these inmates responded to our letters and said they would agree to be interviewed. However, currently the California Department of Corrections forbids media interviews with inmates.

This policy is being contested by the Society of Professional Journalists and other organizations. Perhaps the most useful part of our investigation was a search through public records. For this we consulted the CIR’s guidebook, *Paper Trails: A Guide to Public Records in California*, to find out what records were publicly available, where they were kept, and what types of information they contained. Most useful for reporting “Hot Guns” were records that allowed us to gather company background information and to find company ex-employees who might be willing to talk about how the company conducted business. *Paper Trails’* extensive subject index allowed us to zero in on two specific public records to locate former Lorcin employees. Cal/OSHA accident report files helped us find an ex-employee who was shot in the head when a Lorcin gun fell to the ground during a test firing at the plant. A review of cases at the California Fair Employment and Housing Commission

found Michael Bryant, another former Lorcin employee, who was terminated by and filed a complaint against Lorcin charging racial discrimination. His interview appears in “Hot Guns.”

Paper Trails was also used for an exploration of local zoning and licensing records in Riverside county that helped determined there were no official local or county records indicating that guns were being manufactured at Lorcin’s address. These records indicated that the area containing Lorcin’s factory had been zoned for medium industrial purposes, which legally included gun manufacturing. There were no specific local approvals needed to operate a firearms manufacturing plant. The public records indicated there was an official chance that no local authorities knew that Lorcin manufactured hundreds of thousands of guns at their facility.

Using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is also a useful way to gather records about a subject when a federal agency is involved in a story. A FOIA request to the ATF produced production figures for Lorcin and other gun manufacturers and retrieved Lorcin’s original application for a Federal Firearms License (FFL).

Working the telephone and making contacts with people interested in this subject also led to a valuable tip from a lawyer who follows firearms litigation. Lorcin filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy while we were reporting our story. Early knowledge of this allowed us to attend the bankruptcy creditor’s committee meeting on the bankruptcy and learn valuable information about how the company operates. It also allowed us to make contact at the meeting with Jim Waldorf, President of Lorcin. Later, we were able to obtain a copy of Waldorf’s deposition in the bankruptcy, and arrange an on-camera interview with him.

Hot Guns shows that there is no mystery to investigative reporting, just hard work over time and a little luck.

LEARN MORE: Visit the [Hot Guns website at PBS](#).

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