



Gun Smuggling Routes: Intelligent Toll Point Scanning for Gun Smuggling in California

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sent back to the Southern states.

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California faces a severe gun smuggling crisis, with thousands of illegal firearms trafficked annually. Gun smuggling is a prominent matter that dates back to the history of World War II and the inception of mankind itself, and in recent years, the problem has seeped into the corporate world. The brief will cover the history of gun smuggling, the routes that gun smugglers use to transport firearms to the state of California, and how these can be combated with policy implementations.

II. OVERVIEW

California is habitually identified as a major destination for out-of-state trafficked guns. A 2010 Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) study determined that about half of crime guns in strict-law states came from several lax-law bordering states. The researchers later discovered that between 2010 and 2019, 526,801 guns used in crimes were traced to interstate purchases, and multiple interstate highways were involved in this gun flow. Many of these guns were recovered in California, supposedly highlighting the importance of the route in the firearm flow. Trafficked weapons often end up being applied in violent crimes: many firearms were recovered in California and

A. Relevance

Gun smuggling can pose a serious threat to public safety. Weapons that are smuggled and transported illegally usually end up in the possession of gangs or individuals who cannot legally secure them. These black market firearms result in homicides, robberies, and public shootings, particularly in areas struggling with high crime rates. Although historically colonial smuggling shaped the American Revolution and was crucial to militias and people's survival, nowadays gun trafficking differs and rather leads to countless deaths and illegal activities. Understanding smuggling routes helps law enforcement identify weaknesses in gun regulation and improve gun laws and border security.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

During the Colonial Era, gun smuggling from Europe to American colonies was a matter of revolutionary progress and frontier defense. Colonial militias significantly lacked the industrial capacity to produce local firearms in large quantities, so they turned to European

suppliers, in secret and in violation of British trade laws.

Gun smuggling crucially increased in the years leading up to the American Revolution between the 1760s and 1770s. To support patriots, firearms were smuggled from France and the Netherlands. Dutch merchants were in a precarious position: they maintained decades-long relationships with American colleagues and sent war material. American ships full of gunpowder, muskets, and cannonballs outraged the British and the Dutch Estates General.

The “Iron Pipeline” refers to Interstate 95 and connecting highways, initially running traffic from Southern states through the Eastern corridor to New York and New Jersey. According to Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, other “iron pipelines” exist throughout the country; this concept is also applied equally to routes transporting guns into California. Often using straw purchasers (legal buyers purchasing guns for illegal resale), smugglers bought firearms in gun shops or gun shows with loose regulations, like Arizona, Texas, or Florida. These weapons were transported by car, bus, or parcel shipments across state borders into California.

After the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Attorney General, and U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy, President Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Gun Control Act of 1968; this bill specifically banned importing guns that have “no sporting purpose,” and according to the ATF, imposed stricter licensing process and regulations on the firearm industry.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The core individuals or groups are understood to be gun smugglers and traffickers themselves, especially those who either transport firearms personally or have them shipped into California from states like Texas, Arizona, Nevada, Washington, and Oregon. Motivated by profit, in 2014 alone, criminals in California used about 6,000 guns from other states with lenient gun laws and few gun-buying restrictions. These traffickers exploit the patchwork of gun laws between states, implementing straw purchases and illicit networks to move weapons, according to *The New York Times*. What’s more, federal data showcases that about 50,000 guns are found to be diverted to criminals across state lines every year – and many more are likely to cross state lines undetected. As a result, California continues to face challenges in gun law enforcement, as firearms flow in from states with looser restrictions. Ideally, toll points scanning for trafficked guns should be installed on California highways, ensuring that weapons are transported legally and without any potential risks.

Federal law enforcement agencies are stakeholders as they stand to investigate and disrupt firearms trafficking networks. Organizations like the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) frequently collaborate with state and local partners. The U.S. Attorney’s office, Central District of California, announces that local law enforcement agencies use the latest data and evidence from crime scenes to identify patterns, leads, and potential suspects in violent gun offenses.

B. Risks of Indifference

The risk of indifference to firearm trafficking lies

in the perpetuation of turning a blind eye to illegal gun movement across state lines, undermining state-level regulations, and increasing mass shootings and everyday gun violence. If stakeholders continue to neglect the problem at hand, it is given that the societal conditions of trust in law enforcement and public institutions will erode. This is not to mention that inaction would shed a negative light on law enforcement and their inability to uphold public safety. If gun smuggling is no longer a priority, agencies like the ATF may face budget cuts and staff reduction, making it more challenging to investigate illegal firearms. Public violence, like mass shootings and homicides, will grow, leading to long-term community damage. The absence of fear of punishment and political pressure will lead traffickers to operate freely, and violent gun groups grow faster than the ATF's ability to monitor them. Therefore, it only makes sense for there to be action, rather than inaction.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because gun smuggling not only affects individuals but also societies and communities themselves, nonpartisan intervention must take place. The benefits of such intervention include, but are not limited to, the following:

- 1) Pushing towards technological improvement: California must invest not only in stricter enforcement and highway patrol training, but also in digital infrastructure to enhance weapon traceability within the state and at the interstate. Modern scanning technologies, such as advanced license plate readers, etc., will let officers quickly and efficiently access vehicles with fewer delays. The tools will focus on improving public safety

and reducing reliance on outdated, manual methods, ultimately creating a proactive system that reacts before violence occurs.

- 2) Confidence in the legal system: Tackling gun smuggling is a practical step toward not only reducing violence but also strengthening law enforcement. The public should be able to trust and rely on their legal forces and not live in fear of facing a violent criminal with a gun in their hands.
- 3) Protecting communities regardless of political affiliation: Gun smuggling into California across state lines is not a red-state vs. blue-state issue – it is a public catastrophe that jeopardizes the lives of everyday people and undermines the law. Regardless of where one stands politically on gun rights, it is straightforward that illegal weapons bypass the very protections Californians have voted for. California's stricter gun regulations were put in place through a democratic process, and smuggling from the neighboring states outwits the state law. This is a matter of respecting the legal boundaries of the state one lives in, and ensuring communities are safe from weapons that fuel criminals, gangs, and mass shootings.

V. TRIED POLICY

To begin with, eTrace, a web-based submission system developed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), was introduced in the United States in 2005 to trace recovered firearms back to their original point of sale and provide an electronic exchange of crime gun incident-based data. Through eTrace, law

enforcement agencies can electronically submit firearms trace requests, monitor the progress of traces, and retrieve completed trace results.

However, eTrace only tracks firearms to the first retail purchaser. Many such guns are usually sold or stolen, often several times. eTrace cannot trace firearm ownership to the last owner, nor any intermediate owners, ultimately making this a major limitation in the eTrace system. Additionally, the Tiahrt Amendment prohibits the National Tracing Center (NTC) of the ATF from sharing the gun trace database information with other eTrace users who are non-ATF members or non-law enforcement entities, therefore reducing transparency and coordination. As a result, the system can be used; however, further policy is needed to determine the last and intermediate owners in real time.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Highway Patrol Enhancement Focusing on Gun Trafficking

Gun smuggling into California from nearby states via highways is the easiest and most commonly used option to get away with the illegal activity. Blending with the endless traffic on the roads, criminals freely transport firearms that were purchased in a nearby state with lenient gun regulations.

To overcome this, I recommend increasing California Highway Patrol (CHP) presence on major routes entering California, like I-15, I-40, I-5, and US-95. With the specialized training and technology like the Licence Plate Readers (LPR), the device will be able to scan plates and detect vehicles linked to previous gun incidents. It is convenient as the device can be used in real-time

by CHP officers in patrol cars, without needing to stop every car manually. Additionally, officers should be encouraged to especially look out for suspicious activity at the peak traffic of the day, as criminals usually try to blend with the legitimate drivers.

Stronger Penalties for Interstate Straw Purchases

Straw purchasing is when someone who is legally eligible to buy a firearm does so on behalf of another individual who cannot. Often, this happens in states with weaker gun regulations, and then a weapon is transported into a stricter state like California. Therefore, state-level penalties in California for any individual transporting firearms obtained from out of state need to be increased.

Under California Penal Code §27515, straw purchasing can be charged as either a misdemeanor (1 year in jail) or a felony (up to 3 years in jail). I offer to consider making an interstate straw purchase an automatic felony. Additionally, with the approval of the Department of Justice and ATF, increasing prison sentences to 5 years, instead of 3, will keep criminals more fearful. Finally, double sentences or fines should be imposed for each repeat offender for straw purchasers involved in cross-border gun trafficking. Thus, this approach does not target legal gun owners but aims to address already existing laws more effectively, making it riskier and costlier for criminal traffickers to operate in the state of California. Finally, double sentences or fines should be imposed for each repeat offender.

Intelligent Toll Point Scanning Installations at California Highways:

Despite California's strict gun laws, a 2017 California Department of Justice report demonstrates that over 70% of guns used in crimes came from out of state. This is a sign that state-level policy alone cannot control interstate gun flow.

I offer to equip toll plazas and bridge crossings with non-intrusive X-ray and AI weapon recognition that can detect objects resembling firearms inside a vehicle. Integrating with automatic license plate readers will help to link detected vehicles to state DMV records to contact a driver later. This way, if a weapon-shaped object is recorded, the system saves the vehicle's license plate. After this, DMV, along with the Department of Justice, can determine whether the driver is a registered gun owner or not, and whether they have any prior straw purchase or trafficking cases. In case a driver does not have a registered ownership of the firearm, this data should be passed to the California Highway Patrol (CHP) and the Department of Justice specialists for further follow-up, such as an in-person stop or mailed compliance notice.

When considering implementation zones in Southern California, I-5 bordering Mexico, the 91 Freeway, and interstate 10 and interstate 15 corridors connecting Western states like California, Nevada, and Arizona are potential roads for further scanning implementations. In the Bay Area, there are the Golden Gate Bridge, the Dumbarton Bridge across San Francisco Bay, and the San Mateo-Hayward Bridge. Lastly, Northern California presents the I-80 corridor connecting San Francisco to the Nevada border and the Carquinez & Bay Bridges.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have explored a plethora of ways underlying gun smuggling into the state of California and the challenges this topic presents to law enforcement and society. I went into an in-depth analysis of specific bridges and roads where straw purchasers' guns are transported, and explored an existing eTrace platform that allows ATF and law enforcement agents to trace the original gun owner. Finally, I offered an enhanced California Highway Patrol presence, as well as stronger penalties for interstate straw weapon purchases. However, besides these two options, the one that is the most implementable in its scope is Intelligent Toll Point Scanning Installations at California highways, administered by the California Highway Patrol (CHP), the Department of Justice, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF).

With that said, gun smuggling is a vital concept, and in order to study it, taking even the most trivial detail into account is essential to gain an adequate understanding of it. Though we have a long way to go in achieving absolute public safety and complete gun law obedience, it can be achieved by focusing on policy structure and its implementation, and modern digital infrastructure.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Institute for Youth in Policy wishes to acknowledge Mason Carlisle, Lilly Kurtz, Asher Cohen, Paul Kramer, and other contributors for developing and maintaining the Fellowship Program within the Institute.

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