

# U.S. Crackdown Launched Against Tide of Gun Theft

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BOSTON — Federal officials are launching a nationwide crackdown against a swelling tide of gun thefts.

For the first time, the Treasury Department is asking trucking companies to report all thefts of gun shipments. They have just discovered that more than 1,000 firearms are hijacked every month.

Even though individuals can readily obtain guns through legal channels in the United States, officials say that by stealing gun shipments criminals can render the firearms virtually untraceable. They also can stockpile guns in quantity.

The crackdown, by officials of the Treasury's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), is aimed at tracing the shipments and deciphering any patterns in the thefts. It is targeted in the Northeast — the "gun belt" — where an estimated 75 per cent of guns are manufactured.

"Guns stolen in shipment can be funneled to criminals throughout the United States, and this makes doubly difficult the . . . job of tracing them when they are used in crimes," said ATF Director Rex D. Davis.

Under a voluntary agreement with more than 28,000 trucking firms, some insurance companies and various gun manufacturers, the ATF is asking for regular reports on stolen or lost weapons.

Crime agencies then plan to file the theft reports with a national crime-information computer, where they will be available to any law-enforcement personnel. Agents also will investigate the thefts and watch any areas where thefts appear frequently.

Some crime officials blame the need for gun-theft control on the Gun Control Act of 1968, which restricts

the interstate sale of various types of guns.

"As we enforce the Gun Control Act, we will find an increase in the number of gun thefts," said James Hardman, an ATF project director. "Anything that is curtailed — like guns — becomes a commodity for stealing."

Gun officials list various other reasons why — with an increased demand for guns — gun heisting has gone up:

- A rise in individual ownership of handguns as a way to deter crime.

- An estimated 30 per cent increase in the amount of guns manufactured in the United States in the last four years.

- Stolen guns are cheaper — especially for multi-gun owners.

Of the estimated 32 million guns in the United States — about one handgun for every 1.5 families — the FBI reports 628,468 lost, missing or stolen guns as of September.

More than 6 per cent of all crimes committed with a gun involve a stolen firearm, officials claim.

Under the Gun Control Act, it is unlawful to transport or ship stolen firearms in interstate commerce or to receive, conceal, store, barter, sell or dispose of any stolen firearms which are moving in interstate commerce.

The ATF reporting program is aimed primarily at the trucking industry, which handles most firearms shipments. The bureau's gun-tracing center in Washington traces more than 1,900 reports a month.

The Treasury agency is mainly concerned with the manufacture, shipment and sale of non-military guns, since the Department of Defense is responsible for the control of military weapons.