



# eTrace Quick Reference Guide for Law Enforcement Agencies

## Overview

eTrace is an online firearms tracing system managed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF). When law enforcement agencies recover crime guns, eTrace can be used to trace the firearm from its domestic manufacturer or importer to its first retail purchaser. **As a best practice, law enforcement agencies should enter all recovered firearms into eTrace.**

eTrace allows law enforcement to **quickly and conveniently** submit electronic firearms trace requests to the ATF's National Tracing Center (NTC). Once submitted, agencies can monitor the status of trace requests, view trace results, and analyze trace data.

## Purpose of This Reference Guide

- To provide guidance on **how to use trace results** (individual and aggregate) in active criminal investigations.
- To identify the **most useful eTrace queries** for generating and following up on investigative leads, as well as for identifying potential gun trafficking trends.
- To help law enforcement agencies **identify offenders** who are committing gun-related crimes in multiple jurisdictions and **to work collaboratively with other law enforcement officials in these areas** to share information that will lead to the arrest and conviction of these repeat gun offenders.

## Getting Started

eTrace is free and available only to approved law enforcement agencies and officials. To be approved, agencies must sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the ATF and establish a primary point of contact within the agency. All of this can be completed at <https://www.atfonline.gov/etrace/>. Once a department is authorized to use eTrace, it can make eTrace available to as many officers as needed.

### Why use eTrace? What are the benefits to local law enforcement?

*eTrace provides critical information that can help solve individual crimes.* eTrace provides agencies with quick-turnaround investigative leads on recovered firearms. **When a firearm is recovered in relation to a violent or high-profile crime, an “urgent” trace, which frequently provides trace results in 24 hours or less, can be conducted by the NTC.**

Trace results identify the date and location of the first retail sale and the identity of the first purchaser, as well as information on any previously traced firearms associated with that purchaser or the possessor of the recovered firearm. **This information can be used to identify potential witnesses, suspects, or co-conspirators, as well as identify additional crimes the investigator was unaware of.**

- *For example, an interview of the initial purchaser may reveal that the purchaser transferred the gun to a third party who is already a suspect in the case.*

*eTrace also provides a big-picture look at the sources of crime guns in a jurisdiction and provides information on how guns are getting into the hands of criminals in the area.* If agencies comprehensively submit and analyze trace data, law enforcement officials will be able to detect firearms trafficking patterns and identify potential straw purchasers and common sources of crime guns.

## Collective Data Sharing (CDS)

eTrace's CDS feature enables local police departments to share trace data with other agencies within their state. A police department, through its primary eTrace point of contact, must opt-in to CDS in order to view partner agencies' trace data. In turn, other state agencies will then be able to view that police department's trace data as well. The CDS feature is a significant tool for sharing data and developing investigative leads. The more agencies within your state that opt-in to CDS, the more trace data there will be available to investigators. If an agency has opted-in to CDS and has a particularly sensitive firearm trace, that agency can tag the trace as "sensitive" in eTrace, making it unreviewable by the other state agencies in CDS.

### Reasons to "Opt-in" to CDS

- Your agency will be able to immediately access all trace data submitted by other agencies in your state.
- Crime problems in one jurisdiction frequently impact nearby jurisdictions. Smaller suburban agencies that may not use eTrace frequently will still benefit from a larger city agency's data pool.
- Larger amounts of data may significantly increase an investigator's ability to develop leads for violent crime and gun trafficking investigations.

Having access to a larger data pool will make it easier to recognize firearms trafficking patterns, straw purchasers, and common source FFLs.

### Examples of how CDS can be beneficial for developing leads in criminal investigations:

*Below are several examples of the many ways that CDS can help law enforcement officials to develop leads in criminal investigations:*

- **Example 1: An agency recovers a firearm with an obliterated serial number.** Police search the make and model of the firearm in CDS, revealing that two other firearms of the same type, also with obliterated serial numbers, were recovered months earlier by two other departments. The serial number on one of the guns is restored and successfully traced to an individual. A check of his name in CDS reveals that he previously purchased several other

traced firearms during the past three years. The departments confer with one another and ATF, and a joint firearms trafficking investigation is initiated. **This example illustrates not only the benefit of opting into CDS to develop leads, but also the importance of tracing firearms in eTrace, even if the serial number is missing.**

- **Example 2: A police department recovers a firearm from an individual previously convicted of a felony and initiates a trace request.** The trace reveals that the gun was purchased by a young woman, who was also connected to another gun recovery from a gang member in a town several miles away. The guns in both incidents had been reported stolen shortly after being purchased. The two departments interview the woman, who admits to purchasing the guns for her boyfriend and falsely reporting them as stolen. The woman and her boyfriend are both charged with criminal violations.
- **Example 3: A police department is investigating a shooting incident in which several shell casings were recovered from the scene.** An informant provides the make and model of the gun used in the shooting, as well as details on how the gun was disposed of. Using the firearm search function in CDS, police learn that a gun matching the informant's description was recovered by a neighboring agency on the night of the shooting, and a suspect arrested. The department sends the ballistic evidence from the shooting for NIBIN comparison with the recovered gun, which results in a match. The gun is traced to another individual and upon running his name in CDS, police learn he was the purchaser of several other guns that were recovered by various police departments in the area. **In this example, a CDS query has produced leads on a suspect in the shooting investigation, linked the firearm to the shooting, and identified a potential straw purchaser or gun trafficker.**

*Note: When using other departments' data, police agencies have an affirmative obligation regarding coordination and deconfliction with the involved agencies before initiating their own investigation or taking other police action.*

## Tracing Program Best Practices

- Trace **all** recovered crime guns.
- **Accurately and completely identify all firearms** before entering them into eTrace. This includes the domestic manufacturer or importer (company name and city and state of operation will appear on the firearm but may be in the form of an abbreviation); model (if designated); caliber or gauge; and serial number (on the frame or receiver). *Local law enforcement may contact the ATF's National Tracing Center or local ATF office for help identifying a firearm.*
- **Interview every individual** who is arrested in possession of a firearm, and document their statements in the case file for future reference.<sup>1</sup>
- Conduct a **criminal history check** on anyone who is in possession of a firearm when arrested to determine if the person was previously convicted of a felony or is a potential "Armed Career Criminal"<sup>2</sup> offender.
- Submit all recovered crime guns to be **test-fired for submission to the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN)**. (Likewise, **all recovered shell casings** should also be submitted for analysis in NIBIN.)
- Consult eTrace's **referral list** to determine if a traced firearm is linked to other traced firearms with common purchasers, possessors, associates, and firearms dealers.
- Analyze your agency's **cumulative trace results** to identify patterns and trends in purchases, recoveries, and the crimes associated with those crime guns.
- Opt-in to eTrace's **Collective Data Sharing (CDS)** feature – this enables you to see trace results of recovered firearms from other jurisdictions in your area...including information on possessors, retail purchasers, locations where guns were recovered, etc.
- Consult the NTC and/or the local ATF office for assistance to help identify **obliterated serial numbers**.
  - The firearm should still be traced, as this may identify previously traced firearms that are associated with the possessor. All firearms with an obliterated serial number are crime guns and should be submitted to a laboratory, as obliterated serial numbers can frequently be partially or completely restored. Traffickers who obliterate serial numbers frequently leave a "signature," using the same method of obliteration and/or the same tool. Investigators should look for other firearms with a similar method of obliteration recovered by their department and by other nearby law enforcement agencies.

### Reasons for Unsuccessful Trace Results

- Requestor did not accurately or completely identify the firearm submitted for tracing
  - ***This is the #1 reason traces are unsuccessful.***
  - For example, the domestic importer was not identified on a foreign-manufactured gun, or a patent number was mistaken for the serial number.
- The firearm is too old to trace.
  - Firearms manufacturers and retail dealers are only required to keep records for 20 years, and some destroy them after that time.
  - Shotguns and .22 caliber rifles manufactured before 1968 were not required to have serial numbers.
- The serial number is obliterated.
  - Contact the NTC and/or the local ATF field office for assistance in retrieving an obliterated serial number from a firearm.

1. ATF Publication 3312.12, page 11, provides a list of questions to ask possessors and associates and is available at: <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/police-officers-guide-recovered-firearms-atf-p-331212/download>

2. The Armed Career Criminal Act of 1984 provides sentence enhancements for felons who commit crimes with firearms if they have three previous convictions for a violent felony or a serious drug offense. For more information, see 18 U.S.C. § 924(e).

## Possible Indicators of Firearms Trafficking

- The recovered firearm has an obliterated serial number.
  - eTrace results show:
    - A “time-to-crime” of under two years.
      - “Time-to-crime” refers to the period of time between the original retail purchase of a firearm and the recovery of that firearm by law enforcement.
    - The firearm was one of several firearms purchased at the same time, by the same purchaser, from the same dealer.
    - The purchaser is associated with previously traced crime guns. Multiple recoveries associated with the same purchaser may indicate a variety of things, such as the purchaser’s guns were stolen in a burglary; that the purchaser sold them (knowingly or unknowingly) to a traffickers or prohibited persons; or that the purchaser is part of a trafficking ring.
- These indicators suggest that these guns may deserve investigative follow-up, particularly when two or more indicators are present.**

## Aggregate Data Search Queries

Following are examples of terms or search queries which may be useful in searching aggregate trace data to develop potential leads or to identify crime or trafficking patterns. Local eTrace users can create broad or specific searches in eTrace. If the requestor’s agency has opted-in to eTrace’s Collective Data Sharing (CDS) feature, the agency will have access to all of the trace results of other CDS agencies within that state.

- **Firearm**
  - Search by type, caliber, model, etc. to identify patterns or crime gun preferences.
- **Individual**
  - Name, DOB, race, city and street address, etc. to determine whether they are associated with any traces as a purchaser, possessor, associate, etc.
- **Firearms Dealers Data**
  - Is the Federal Firearms Licensee (FFL) associated with multiple traces?
- **Vehicle Information**
  - Are there vehicle license plates, year/make/models associated with any traces?
  - Are there known gun offenders or associates linked to the vehicle?
- **Other Miscellaneous Search Terms/Potential Indicators**
  - Firearm reported stolen
  - Gang-related
  - Obliterated serial number
  - Murder/Homicide
  - Narcotics
  - NIBIN associated
  - Aggravated assault with a firearm.

**For additional information and resources, please contact your local ATF office or the ATF’s National Tracing Center at 1-800-788-7133 or at <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/national-tracing-center>.**

Trace request forms (ATF F 3312.1, National Tracing Center Trace Request) are available online or by contacting the ATF National Tracing Center.

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