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Letters to the editor

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Follow the gun trails

Once again, researcher John R. Lott Jr. is revealing the ideology behind his misrepresented statistics in claiming that gun shows are not a major source of crime guns (Letters to the Editor, "Gun scruples," Sunday).

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) report in question, "Following the Gun: Enforcing Federal Laws Against Firearms Traffickers" (http://www.atf.gov/pub/fire-explo_pub/pdf/followingthegun_internet.pdf) analyzed crime-gun trace data compiled from 1,530 firearms-trafficking investigations over a 2½-year period.

The report found that "gun shows were a major trafficking channel, involving the second highest number of trafficked guns per investigation (more than 130), and associated with approximately 26,000 illegally diverted firearms."

ATF further stated that "prohibited persons, such as convicted felons and juveniles, do personally buy firearms at gun shows and gun shows are sources of firearms that are trafficked to such prohibited persons."

The National Rifle Association and its allies in Congress were so alarmed at the results of this report that they acted in 2004 to prohibit the ATF by law from releasing any further trace information to the American public under the Freedom of Information Act. One would be hard-pressed to imagine a more anti-democratic measure outside of book burning.

The Department of Justice study mentioned by Mr. Lott (<http://www.ojp.usdog.gov/bjs/guns.htm>) involved a survey of inmates in state prisons, 2 percent of whom said that they purchased the gun used in their crime at a flea market or gun show.

An additional 80 percent indicated they got their gun from "family, friends, a street buy or an illegal source." No effort was made to trace the crime guns involved in the study to find out where they were originally bought and how they were subsequently trafficked.

It is likely that many of these guns were originally purchased at gun shows. The only thing the study hinted at was how the last illegal transfer of a firearm had taken place, and we know from ATF that guns often change hands several times before being used in crimes.

The Virginia State Police report that background checks prevented 2,668 illegal transactions by criminals and other prohibited purchasers in Virginia in 2005 alone. If this type of activity is taking place in regulated gun sales that are overseen by the ATF, then what type of individuals are buying guns when the rules are: "No paperwork, cash and carry"? It's a question that the citizens of Virginia should be asking their legislators.

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