

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-553](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

ATF, which was transferred from the Department of the Treasury to DOJ in 2003, is responsible for investigating federal laws related to firearms, explosives, arson, alcohol, and tobacco. In 2012, there were almost 9,000 reported murders involving firearms. ATF oversight was a DOJ's 2013 top management challenge for ensuring effective and efficient law enforcement. Congress continues to raise questions about ATF's criminal law enforcement activities and operations. GAO was asked to review ATF's activities.

This report addresses (1) how ATF's priorities for its criminal law enforcement investigations have changed since fiscal year 2003, (2) ATF's staffing challenges, and (3) the extent to which ATF has data to monitor the timeliness and outcomes of delayed denial investigations. GAO reviewed ATF policies, analyzed investigative data from fiscal years 2003 through 2013, and interviewed ATF officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that ATF establish a mechanism to provide headquarters managers readily available data to better monitor the timeliness and outcomes of delayed denial investigations. ATF concurred with the recommendation and ATF officials outlined steps they plan to take to address it.

View [GAO-14-553](#). For more information, contact Eileen R. Larence at (202) 512-8777 or larencee@gao.gov.

June 2014

BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, FIREARMS AND EXPLOSIVES

Enhancing Data Collection Could Improve Management of Investigations

What GAO Found

Since fiscal year 2003, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), within the Department of Justice, has been focusing more on decreasing violent crime. Beginning in 2010, ATF made criminal organization investigations one of its highest priorities, similar to firearms investigations, and deemphasized alcohol and tobacco investigations that do not involve violent crime. ATF data show that alcohol and tobacco investigations decreased by 85 percent (from 168 to 25 investigations opened) from fiscal years 2003 through 2013. In 2012, to more effectively identify and address the most violent criminal threats, ATF established the Frontline initiative to, among other things, prioritize investigations and evaluate ATF's efforts in reducing violent crime. ATF began evaluating its efforts in March 2014, and does not yet have a time frame for completing the evaluations. As such, it is too early to tell how well Frontline helps ATF to assess how effective its investigations are in addressing violent crime.

ATF reported facing funding and hiring challenges. ATF's number of special agents generally increased from fiscal years 2004 through 2010, but decreased by about 6 percent (from 2,562 to 2,399) through fiscal year 2013, which represents the lowest number of special agents in 8 years. According to ATF management officials, ATF was unable to hire agents because its funding did not keep pace with the cost of employee salaries and benefits. According to ATF data, the average salary and benefits costs for ATF employees increased by 55 percent from \$100,000 in fiscal year 2003 to \$155,000 in fiscal year 2013. Further, about a quarter of ATF's on-board special agents were eligible to retire as of the end of fiscal year 2013, with an additional 20 percent becoming eligible to retire through fiscal year 2018. As of April 2014, ATF was hiring human resources personnel to assess how to better address staffing challenges, but it is too soon to tell the extent to which these efforts will address such challenges.

ATF does not have readily available data to track and monitor the timeliness and outcomes of delayed denial investigations. Delayed denial investigations are investigations of individuals who improperly purchased firearms when background checks did not initially determine that the individuals were ineligible to purchase a firearm. N-Force, ATF's investigations database, does not have information readily available to systematically track the timeliness and outcomes—such as if a firearm is retrieved—of delayed denial investigations. ATF considers these investigations a top priority and is committed to responding to them quickly to protect public safety and prevent violent crime. A mechanism to (1) readily obtain data on the timeliness of such investigations and (2) allow managers to easily query and analyze trends on the outcomes of such investigations could help ensure that ATF is retrieving firearms from prohibited persons to maximize public safety.