

From Casing to Case Closed:

Making the Most of Your Ballistic Evidence through ATF's NIBIN Program

Courtesy Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms

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Vital technology to help state and local agencies solve firearm-related violent crime is available nationwide, thanks to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF). Through its National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) Program, ATF gives state and local law enforcement agencies access to ballistic imaging and comparison equipment known as the

Integrated Ballistic Identification System, or IBIS. By enabling forensic laboratories to make an initial comparison of bullet and cartridge casing evidence from thousands of cases in minutes, IBIS alerts law enforcement to potential links between crimes. Firearms examiners then compare original evidence to confirm a match, providing connections between crimes that could not be linked by any other means.

When readers of the *Police Chief* last learned about the NIBIN program in April 2000, IBIS equipment was available at 73 sites. Since then, the network has become a single unified network of

184 sites (as of May 31, 2002). NIBIN represents the joining together of two Federal programs deploying ballistic imaging equipment, as ATF and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agreed to collaborate in deploying IBIS technology nationwide.

This two-year deployment will be completed in late 2002, when equipment will be installed at the last of approximately 237 sites. When the network is complete, IBIS technology will be available to each state's bureau of investigation (or equivalent) and to county and city law enforcement in major metropolitan areas. Networking

will enable all users to share data with neighboring jurisdictions or across long distances.

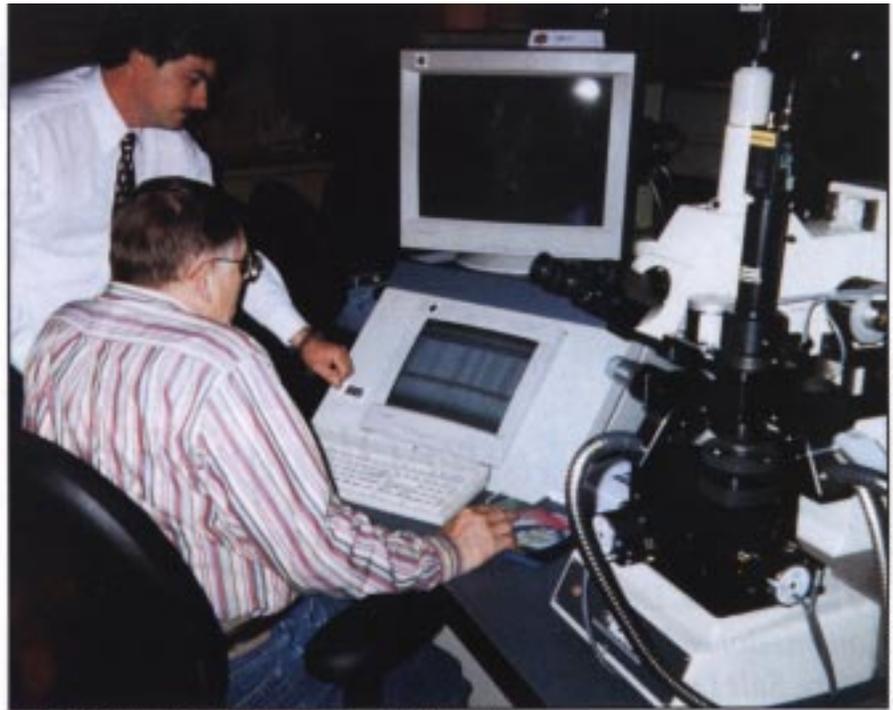
Whether or not they receive equipment directly, law enforcement agencies can gain valuable investigative information from the system. NIBIN is most effective when it includes the maximum evidence for comparison and when the leads generated are given attentive follow-up. In order to gain access to the system, many agencies not receiving equipment directly have worked out agreements to have their evidence entered in other cities or at their state agencies. This kind of information sharing helps the generating agency and the community as a whole, as cross-jurisdictional "hits" are common, particularly in metropolitan areas.

NIBIN partner agencies that have received equipment can benefit most from it by ensuring that all firearms evidence is entered into the system, including crime scene evidence and test-fires of recovered weapons. Entry of crime scene evidence is particularly vital; ATF's experience with the system has shown that the higher the percentage of crime scene evidence within an agency's database, the higher the agency's hit rate.

Agencies participating in the NIBIN program have signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with ATF in which they agree to support the program

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with sufficient resources, including firearms technicians for evidence entry and firearms examiners for comparison



ATF ballistics expert gives hands-on training to NIBIN system user.

Courtesy Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms

of original evidence. Agencies also agree to enter as much crime gun evidence as possible into their systems, to share evidence and intelligence information with ATF and other law enforcement agencies, and to abide by ATF regulations on use of the NIBIN system.

For its part, ATF purchases IBIS equipment for deployment and keeps the systems up to state-of-the-art standards by providing for regular upgrades and service to IBIS units. ATF also provides a week-long training course for new users of the system and administers the high-speed network over which IBIS units communicate.

As in many state and local governments, performance-based program evaluation and budgeting is in effect at the Federal level. Continuation of NIBIN's funding depends on ATF's ability to prove that NIBIN is working effectively. In order to do this, ATF collects statistics about the operation of each site, including the number of entries made at individual sites and the number of hits generated, as well as information about the disposition of cases in which a hit occurs. This information is used to assess the program as a whole and to evaluate the performance of individual sites.

To ensure the future operation of the program, ATF needs its partner agencies' cooperation in releasing some information about the hits they gain through NIBIN participation. Because this information is sensitive and vital to possibly pending cases, ATF will work with partner agencies to safeguard information that would damage a case if it became public knowledge.

But the network's completion is only the beginning of the program's development. ATF is eager to work with NIBIN partner agencies to ensure that the system and the program meet their needs. A users congress, composed of a user selected from each multistate region, will advise the NIBIN program on policies and standards, seek out and publicize best practices for NIBIN implementation, and assist in audits of NIBIN sites. Also, an ATF agent from each ATF field division is designated a NIBIN coordinator and is responsible for working with NIBIN sites, so information and help is probably available near you.

Participation in the NIBIN program also helps state and local agencies gain access to the variety of other services and expertise that ATF can provide, such as regional gun centers and gun tracing. The gun centers in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles serve as clearinghouses for firearms information in their regions.

Regional crime data and gun trace results are gathered, then analytical technology, such as crime mapping and crime analysis, is used to gain detailed information about trends in firearms-related crimes. This information helps to create investigative leads and assists federal, state and local law enforcement in deploying resources where they are most needed.

The current gun tracing system provides valuable information to law enforcement. The integration of gun tracing into IBIS also holds tremendous potential for further development. The IBIS system contains a screen to gather the informa-

tion needed to trace a recovered weapon as the testfire is entered into the system. While many logistical details involved with returning trace results must still be worked out, the capacity to submit weapons for tracing as they are entered into NIBIN could produce innumerable new leads with minimal need for additional police resources.

The program also holds much potential for safeguarding Americans against terrorism. IBIS equipment is already in use in 27 countries. ATF is exploring the possibility of creating an international network to allow nations to share terrorism-related firearms information.

One of ATF's strategic goals is removing violent offenders from America's streets, and the NIBIN program is a key element of ATF's efforts. Federal deployment of IBIS technology gives state and local law enforcement authorities a tool that many would be unable to fund without federal assistance, and provides the networking structure necessary to make the best use of the information gathered. Through this program and others, ATF demonstrates its continuing commitment to reduce violent crime. ❖

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Making the Case for NIBIN

While ATF has been deploying IBIS technology as part of the NIBIN Program, just over 4600 hits have been logged. Behind each is a story of a crime solved, a criminal stopped, the public's safety ensured. In the following cases, the use of NIBIN provided valuable intelligence information for police investigations of violent crimes. Though some of the cases below are too recent to have completed the adjudication process, it is possible to see NIBIN's vital role in providing investigative leads to law enforcement.

● **The Broward County, Florida, Sheriff's Office** received equipment as part of the NIBIN network's expansion, and has already experienced success as a result. After a series of armed robberies in which suspects fired shots to demonstrate their violent intent, the sheriff's office entered the cartridge casings from the crime scenes into NIBIN. Through NIBIN correlation, four of the armed robberies were linked to the same .40-caliber handgun. A short time later, sheriff's deputies noticed suspicious activity around a local business. When they attempted to interview the suspects, the suspects fled in a vehicle. During the chase, the suspects attempted to dispose of a handgun; deputies recovered the gun after making the arrests. The gun was test-fired and the resulting evidence entered into NIBIN. Correlation highlighted a possible link between this handgun and the four previous armed robberies. Firearms examiners confirmed the link through examination of the original evidence. The arrested suspects have been charged with four prior armed robbery offenses.

● Officers from the **Stockton, California, Police Department** used their NIBIN equipment to discover links between two shootings two months apart in which two people were injured. The shootings were believed to be related to Asian gangs. Two months later, in the course of impounding an automobile, a Stockton police officer recovered a .45-caliber handgun from the floor of the car. The driver was arrested and charged with traffic offenses and possession of a firearm. The recovered firearm was test-fired; after the casing was imaged into the NIBIN system, a link was discovered to the earlier incidents. ATF assisted the Stockton Police Department in tracing the firearm and performing a criminal background check on the defendant. This cooperation contributed to a federal case against the defendant. The state of California is also considering additional charges.

● In Fort Worth, Texas, a shooting occurred at an elementary school just as students were being dismissed for the day. After the shooting, **Fort Worth Police Department** officials arrested two defendants and seized a firearm. The seized firearm was imaged into NIBIN, and correlation revealed a possible link to a recent robbery-murder at a local grocery store. Firearms examiners compared the original evidence in the two cases and verified that the gun used in the school shooting had also been used in the robbery-murder. The two defendants in the school shooting were then also charged with the murder.

● **Indiana law enforcement agencies** have used NIBIN successfully to solve gang-related shootings in their areas. Lake County Sheriff's deputies responded to the scene of a drive-by shooting, recovering seven cartridge casings from the scene and submitting them for NIBIN entry. Two weeks later, in Gary, a small child was killed in a drive-by shooting. Gary Police Department officers recovered 18 cartridge casings and several fired bullets at the scene, and they were imaged into NIBIN. Correlation revealed a potential link between the cases, a link that was later confirmed by firearms examiners. After the discovery of the link, a gang task force began investigating illicit activities associated with the Latin Kings street gang. The NIBIN hit helped to show linkages between gang members and the criminal acts committed. Several high-ranking gang members were indicted and subsequently found guilty of various Federal offenses.

● **The Sheriff's Office in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana**, routinely enters all its incoming firearms evidence into NIBIN. After a shooting incident at a motel, cartridge casings were recovered and submitted for NIBIN entry. Later that month, three witnesses reported that a subject had fired shots at them, and again, cartridge casings were recovered and imaged into NIBIN. Two months later, a victim of domestic violence surrendered to Sheriff's deputies a firearm owned by her attacker. NIBIN correlation, followed by comparison of the original evidence, established that the gun from the domestic violence incident had been used in the two previous shooting incidents. An arrest has been made; the suspect is charged with aggravated assault and illegal discharge of a firearm. ❖

For more information about NIBIN, please visit booth 2107 at IACP 2002, visit www.nibin.gov, send e-mail message to atfnibin@atfhq.treas.gov, or call (202) 927-5660.

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