Best Practices for NIBIN Sites

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) recommends that National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) sites follow the best practices below, which are based on the four critical steps of comprehensive collection, timeliness, investigative follow-up, and feedback. These practices are derived from successful NIBIN operations and they strengthen the effectiveness of NIBIN programs, allowing them identify and disrupt violent gun crime throughout the country.

Comprehensive Collection

Comprehensive collection is the foundation for NIBIN. Using advanced technology, NIBIN automatically compares ballistic evidence, fired cartridge casings and test fires, to hundreds of thousands of previously recovered and entered ballistic evidence. It is therefore imperative to:

1. Develop and institute agency/department policy to recover and process through NIBIN all suitable ballistic evidence from crime scenes.

2. Avoid laboratory policies that requires a submitting agency request to process recovered ballistic evidence through NIBIN.

3. Avoid laboratory policies that requires a submitting agency to pay for NIBIN processing of ballistic evidence. Agencies will tend to prioritize the processing of ballistic evidence if they are charged a fee, which will inhibit comprehensive collection and entry of recovered ballistic evidence.

4. Avoid laboratory policies that limit ballistic evidence submissions for processing through NIBIN.

5. Identify and remove any obstacles to the comprehensive submission of ballistic evidence.

Timeliness

Violent crime investigations can go cold quickly; as a result, timely intelligence gained through NIBIN may be critical to solving violent crimes and stopping violent offenders before they can reoffend. Timely turnaround during all phases of NIBIN analysis, including the entry and acquisition into NIBIN, correlation reviews, and the dissemination of NIBIN leads, is vital. Processes often pose a bigger obstacle to turnaround times than resources. It is therefore imperative to:

1. Remove unnecessary delays from:

    a. Evidence submission procedures.
    b. Evidence submission times at the NIBIN site.
    c. Transferring NIBIN-suitable evidence to examiners/technicians.
    d. Acquisition and correlation procedures.
    e. Other laboratory analyses (e.g., DNA, latent fingerprints, firearms examination)

2. Triage ballistic evidence to use the best samples for NIBIN acquisition.

3. Make acquisition/correlation process more technician-driven than firearms examiner-driven.

4. Establish a goal for turnaround time (from evidence submission to NIBIN results) and develop and implement a plan to optimize all processes related to NIBIN.

5. Process the most recent evidence first and, if current, then work backwards on any existing backlog.

6. Seek advice from other successful sites.

Investigative Follow-up

NIBIN provides valuable intelligence and leads for the identification, investigation, and prosecution of associated violent crime and shooters. If NIBIN is not used, however, crucial information and opportunities may be missed. When combined with other resources, NIBIN generates comprehensive crime gun intelligence that may immediately help identify potential shooting suspects and it allows law enforcement to gauge and evaluate patterns of violent crime occurring in their region. It is therefore imperative to:

1. Develop and implement a plan to integrate NIBIN with other forms of intelligence in investigating violent crimes

2. Identify information needed by investigators to follow-up.

3. Triage NIBIN leads to determine investigative priorities and tasks.

4. Forward NIBIN leads to the submitter and the ATF field division Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC). ATF CGICs are a valuable asset in layering NIBIN and other intelligence resources to develop investigative leads and referrals.

5. Ensure open communication between all investigative, intelligence, and lab resources.

6. Track the dissemination/results of NIBIN leads (by either the CGIC or investigative entity).

7. Develop and institute methods to streamline notification procedures of NIBIN leads to investigators.

8. Follow-up regularly to determine if further changes are necessary.

Feedback

Feedback for all parties involved in the NIBIN process is vital to sustaining a successful NIBIN program. Officers/investigators recovering crime guns and fired casings, technicians performing NIBIN entries and correlation reviews, intelligence analysts developing investigative leads, and investigators working the violent crime cases must all be included in the feedback cycle. This information emphasizes each party's crucial role in targeting shooters, improves communication

among stakeholders, and leads to improvements in the NIBIN process and the use of crime gun intelligence. Promoting NIBIN successes is also necessary to continue funding and expansion of NIBIN programs. It is therefore imperative to:

1. Develop and employ effective methods of informing everyone involved in NIBIN process of follow-up or investigative results/successes.

2. Work with the local ATF CGIC to develop tools to evaluate performance.

3. Use feedback to determine how to make the program more effective.

4. Keep the command staff informed of any changes made and their effectiveness.

5. Meet regularly with all parties to discuss progress, successes, and potential improvements.

Poor Practices

The following are three real-life examples where adherence to the NIBIN minimum required operating standards and best practices could have prevented violent crimes or provided intelligence.

Case #1

In October 2015, two shootings took place three hours apart: an attempted carjacking and an attempted robbery/homicide in another jurisdiction. Investigators identified the carjacker, but because the second jurisdiction did not enter casings from the homicide for 10 months, NIBIN did not link the two cases.

The 10-month delay in NIBIN acquisition meant that investigators lost precious leads, including cell phone records, surveillance videos, and associate interviews. Fortunately, law enforcement arrested the suspect for unrelated crimes in November 2015, but he trafficked the firearm, and someone used it in another crime in February 2016.

The lack of timeliness prevented a quick arrest and the potential recovery of a crime gun.

Case #2

In November 2015, a series of aggravated assaults occurred in a three-hour period, all using the same firearm. On January 27, 2016, law enforcement in another jurisdiction arrested a felon for possession of a firearm but did not test fire the firearm in a timely manner. It was not until March 2016 that NIBIN linked the firearm to the November shootings. By that time, valuable opportunity to interview the suspect and to gather additional evidence was lost.

The lack of timeliness led to missed opportunities in the investigation of the aggravated assault cases.

Case #3

In July 2007, officers responded to a "shots fired" call. The suspect shot at three officers, who returned fire. They arrested the subject and recovered the firearm but did not test-fire and enter it into NIBIN for six months.

NIBIN linked the firearm to a shooting in a nearby jurisdiction. Because their procedures allowed them to issue only NIBIN hits confirmed by a firearms examiner, they sent a letter to the second jurisdiction requesting that they re-submit their ballistic evidence. The letter "slipped through the cracks," so the investigators in both cases did not learn of the link until preparing for trial, losing valuable evidence.

The lack of timeliness and investigative follow-up led to missed opportunities in both cases.

Summary

The NIBIN minimum required operating standards and best practices can help to avoid circumstances as mentioned above. Violent criminals and the illegal movement and use of firearms know no jurisdictional boundaries. Thus, effective processes across all NIBIN sites allow the NIBIN network to perform as designed, serving as a critical tool to document and act upon evidence-based leads in violent crime investigations regardless of jurisdiction of occurrence.