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L.A. gangs stockpile untraceable 'ghost guns' that members make themselves



Los Angeles Police Det. Ben Meda holds a handgun during a news conference at the Hollywood station Thursday. More than 40 firearms were seized in a recent joint task force operation, authorities said. (Jae C. Hong / Associated Press)

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A small arsenal of weapons that authorities seized from gang members during a six-month undercover operation lay across the tables at LAPD's Hollywood station Thursday.

It's not unusual for the Los Angeles Police Department and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to grab high-power weapons during these types of

sweeps.

But these AR-15-style semiautomatic rifles and pistols were different — homemade, untraceable “ghost guns” without the traditional serial numbers, built from parts purchased over the internet.

Authorities said they are seeing more gangs turn to homemade guns as it becomes more difficult to acquire real ones.

“Criminals are making their own weapons because they cannot buy them legally ... or they are paying other people to make those guns for them to get around the gun laws,” said Bill McMullan, special agent in charge of ATF’s L.A. Field Division. “This is a trend among Southern California gangs.”

Investigators seized 45 firearms, as well as fake police ballistic vests, and eventually arrested 10 alleged gang members involved in the manufacture and sale of so-called ghost guns to criminals.

These weapons are effectively unknown to law enforcement, making them difficult to track or trace.



Firearms are on display during a news conference at the Hollywood Community Police Station Thursday. More than 40 firearms were seized in a recent joint task force operation, authorities said Thursday. (Jae C. Hong / AP)

Investigators say ghost guns begin as partially manufactured weapons. A buyer can legally purchase a partial built lower receiver, which is not part of a firearm that is required to be stamped with a serial number when sold.

An unfinished lower receiver, sometimes referred to as an “80% receiver,” can legally be purchased without a serial number from a seller who is not a federally licensed firearms dealer as long as it is missing the key components that would make it a firearm.

The lower receiver then can be completed easily by drilling a few remaining holes into the unfinished metal shell. It is then ready for a barrel, trigger mechanism, stock and upper receiver to be attached.

Investigators explain that those forbidden from purchasing a gun, such as felons and those with documented mental health issues, can still buy the partial lower receiver and then buy the other parts of the weapons off the internet.

In 2013, John Zawahri killed five in the Santa Monica area using an AR-15-style rifle, which he built from a partially manufactured lower receiver that did not have a serial number and therefore did not have to be registered. Police said the parts needed to assemble a working rifle, including magazines of ammunition, were shipped in from out of state.

Federal gun regulation has long targeted the lower receiver because it is the heart of the firearm that holds together the weapon.

Ghost guns are legal for those allowed to own firearms, but investigators say they are now involved increasingly in crime. “They are ending up in the hands of some of the most violent gang members,” said LAPD Cmdr. Blake Chow.

Chow said many of the weapons recovered were made in the heart of Hollywood, not a random warehouse. “They manufactured all over Hollywood in the hotels in the community,” he said.

“It was like driving up to fast food restaurant, ordering whatever you wanted, somebody manufacturing it, that person comes to Hollywood, pays the money and they were on their way,” he said.

Investigators seized assault rifle manufacturing equipment and parts along with 3 pounds of methamphetamine, vehicles and a silencer, as well as a stack of bulletproof vests.

At the center of the criminal enterprise was Enrique Saucedo Jr., who detectives say is the primary suspect in the transportation, distribution and sale of illegal firearms in Hollywood and the San Fernando Valley.

Detectives say Saucedo was a pipeline for weapons for street criminals across L.A.

Saucedo was convicted in October of assault with a firearm and sentenced to 364 days in jail and three years probation, court records show.

“If these guns had been back on the streets, you can imagine the number of homicides [they] would have been involved in,” Chow said.

Los Angeles County prosecutors have filed a combined 47 felony charges, including the manufacture of assault rifles, possession of a silencer and criminal conspiracy, against Saucedo and nine other associates.

LAPD Det. Ben Meda of the department’s gun unit said authorities are particularly concerned that they came across homemade 9-millimeter handguns in the bust. Authorities are now recovering more and more homemade versions of the handgun, the weapon of choice in shootings across L.A.

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