

Alarm Over Internet Gun Purchases

Raid Foils Alleged Scheme by N.J. Teens, Triggers Concern Over Ease of Access to Weapons

By DALE RUSSAKOFF
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MONTCLAIR, N.J.—The name on the parcel—"Clint's Gun Distributors"—piqued the curiosity of a UPS driver familiar with the modest, residential street. The contents required an adult's signature, also odd for a town heavy with Gateway and Victoria's Secret orders.

When a teenage boy said no adult was home, the driver took the package and his suspicions to his supervisor, who notified the sender and federal authorities.

Last week, those authorities raided the home, uncovering an alleged scheme in which two juveniles bought four semiautomatic handguns on the Internet without triggering a single federal background check, fingerprint request or other safety procedure.

The suspects, both 17-year-old boys who allegedly bought four more handguns on the street, passed themselves off as licensed gun dealers using forged federal firearms licenses made with computer graphics software, according to Montclair Police Chief Tom Russo. They used fictitious business names, including Clint's Gun Distributors, police said.

That an alert deliveryman saw through the alleged scheme, even as it slipped easily through federal and state gun safety regulations, has made the case a rallying point for gun control advocates seeking tighter laws. The incident also has fueled concerns about ease of access to guns on the Internet, although authorities said the ruse would have worked as well using catalogues or classified ads.

"The Internet and the ways people manipulate the Internet is a recent phenomenon that's creating a lot of new predicaments," said Bill Kinsella, spokesperson for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. He said no existing law or regulation would prevent other juveniles from obtaining guns the same way, and ATF cannot act without authority from Congress.

"If it wasn't for the UPS man, those kids might have gotten 100 guns," said Nina Wilson, co-president of the Parent Teacher Association Council in the 6,000-student district about 12 miles from Manhattan. "This isn't about school safety. This is about everyone's safety. Where were the gun laws? If this could happen here, it could happen anywhere."

Russo said there is no evidence the boys intended to bring the guns to Montclair High School, where they are seniors. A police canine search last week turned up no guns at the high school. Law enforcement authorities said they do not know what the suspects planned to do with the guns. But three of the semiautomatic guns purchased on the street are missing and may have been sold illegally, police said.

Acting Essex County, N.J., prosecutor Donald C. Campolo said he has not yet decided

whether to try the boys as adults. They are charged as juveniles with unlawful possession of weapons, conspiracy and forgery of a federal license. Authorities are withholding their names.

In a departure from the now-familiar scenario of schoolboys and guns, the mood was markedly calm this week at Montclair High, an economically and racially diverse school of 1,700 students where the boys are well-known. More than a dozen groups of students interviewed as they sat or walked outside the school at lunchtime this week said unanimously they were sure the boys planned no school violence.

"This is not Columbine Two," said Katie Carver, a junior, who, like her peers, was annoyed by local media attention. "We don't have outcasts here. There's no cool clique. White kids get along with black kids. Athletes get along with kids who don't play sports. Everybody feels safe here."

"They were normal kids with a lot of friends," said Jayson Miller, another junior who played football with one of the boys. "I don't think they wanted to hurt anybody. I think they wanted to make money."

Russo told a news conference that "these were two kids who, for the lack of a better word, were very enterprising." The boys' parents told him they knew nothing of their sons' purchases, Russo said.

Montclair Schools Superintendent Michael Osnato said he is not reassured that the boys weren't targeting the high school. "It is of no solace to me that there was no violence on school property," he wrote in a letter to parents.

One of the suspects said in an interview on New York television station WB11 Wednesday night that the pair bought the guns as a hob-

by—"something you could look at and something that you could take apart and put it back together."

"We didn't buy the guns to shoot—never," said the boy, appearing on camera with his name withheld. Wearing a baseball cap turned backward and an oversized, red crew-neck shirt, he resembled a teenager from Central Casting.

But Russo said two of the seized guns were loaded and one had been fired. He said the boys bought guns on the street in Florida last August and in neighboring East Orange, N.J., in November. The Internet purchases began this March, when they made contact with a licensed Florida gun dealer in an Internet chat room, posing as adults interested in going into the gun business.

They persuaded the dealer to give them his federal firearms license number, police said. Using that number, the boys then forged licenses with the Montclair address by "cutting and pasting" the information onto an image of a gun dealer license downloaded from the Internet, Russo said. The license is about the size of a car title and does not carry a photograph.

Accompanied by what appears to be a federal firearms license, a mail order for guns would trigger no background checks, age verifications or other safety measures designed to keep guns out of the wrong hands, authorities and gun dealers said.

The boys also appear to have thwarted regulations of the proliferating Internet gun trade, under which all sales must be made by federally licensed dealers. Normally, individual buyers e-mail or call dealers who advertise guns on a site, then contract to purchase the guns through a federally licensed dealer in their own

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state, who must conduct all required background checks, age checks, and fingerprinting. Since the boys passed themselves off as dealers, this safeguard was evaded.

Federal regulations appear highly susceptible to such a ruse. Dealers are not required to verify that they are selling to another federally licensed dealer beyond requiring the buyer to send a photocopy of his federal firearms license bearing a fresh signature. Sellers are not required to call the ATF to verify that a name or address on a license is valid, although the regulation says dealers may investigate further if they wish.

Montclair police said the boys bought the guns from four dealers in California, Pennsylvania and Texas, any of whom could have foiled the scheme with a call to the ATF to verify the name on the license. That's what happened once the deliveryman raised suspicions, prompting UPS and the Texas-based gun dealer to call the ATF.

Minutes after one teenager signed for a UPS package on May 16, local, state and federal law enforcement officials raided the house, discovering a Glock 9mm handgun and an old revolver—both bought on the street—and another handgun purchased via the Internet, police said. The UPS package contained a .357-caliber semiautomatic Model 33 Glock, police said.

Officers also seized large amounts of ammunition, several fake federal firearms licenses and a personal computer, whose hard drive they are searching for evidence of more purchases.

Since the raid, two more guns have been intercepted at the Montclair Post Office, and postal workers have been put on alert for more, according to Postal Inspection Service spokesman Tony Esposito.

The guns ranged in price from \$200 to \$500, according to police. Asked where they got thousands of dollars to spend on guns, the boys said they received the money as birthday presents and wages for after-school jobs, police said.

A number of dealers who advertise on the Internet said the scheme easily could have fooled them. "The next time I get a copy of an FFL [federal firearms license] in the mail, I'll probably give [the ATF] a call," said Milton Schick, co-owner of Starlight Enterprises, a Tucson gun dealership.

Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said he is revising pending gun control legislation to require online verification of licensees, but that would not take effect until a database becomes available.

Andy Molchan, director of the National Association of Federally Licensed Firearms Dealers, said the solution is not more laws but harsh penalties for culprits. If the boys are tried and convicted as juveniles, he pointed out, they will be eligible for release when they turn 18—a matter of months.

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Teacher Shot To Death by 13-Year-Old, Police Say

By MITCH LIPKA
Sun-Sentinel, South Florida

LAKE WORTH, Fla., May 26—In the last minutes of the last day of school, a seventh-grader at Lake Worth Middle School walked up to his teacher in the hallway outside a classroom this afternoon and shot him to death in front of six students.

The 13-year-old boy, who police said had no history of trouble in school and had earned A's and B's, reportedly was angry over getting a poor grade in Barry Grunow's honors language arts class. Grunow, 35, died where he was shot just before 3:30 p.m., 15 minutes before school was dismissed for the summer.

Police said Nathaniel Brazill is scheduled to appear in court Saturday, and that a judge will determine if he will be charged as a juvenile or as an adult. He was arrested about a quarter-mile from the school after he flagged down a patrol car and said he was responsible for the shooting at the school just south of West Palm Beach.

The boy was carrying a .25-caliber Raven semiautomatic pistol that police said he retrieved from a dresser drawer at his grandfather's house last week. Police Chief William Smith said the grandfather could also be charged.

"I saw him shoot him right around the temple," said Timothy Gandolfo, 13, another seventh-grader at the school. "Nate said, 'Ha, ha, what are you going to do now?'" before running from the school.

About two hours before the shooting, Brazill was sent home by another teacher, authorities said, because he had thrown a water balloon at a student.

Brazill's 74-year-old grandmother, Everlena Josey, said the boy seemed troubled when he came home. "He looked like he was mad," she said. "I said, 'What's wrong?'" but the boy did not respond.

"He was the best boy. He stayed home all the time," Josey said.

Students at the school described the suspect and the victim in the same fond terms.

Grunow "was really nice and he just had a baby and they killed him," student Aneesa Hyatt said.

Grunow had been with the Palm Beach County School District since 1987. He and his wife, Pam, have a 5-year-old son and a newborn daughter.

While Brazill had seemed like a good kid, Hyatt recalled a comment he had made that now haunts her: "He would say to people, kidding, I'm going to shoot you. I'm going to put you on my hit list."

The Washington Post

SATURDAY, MAY 27, 2000