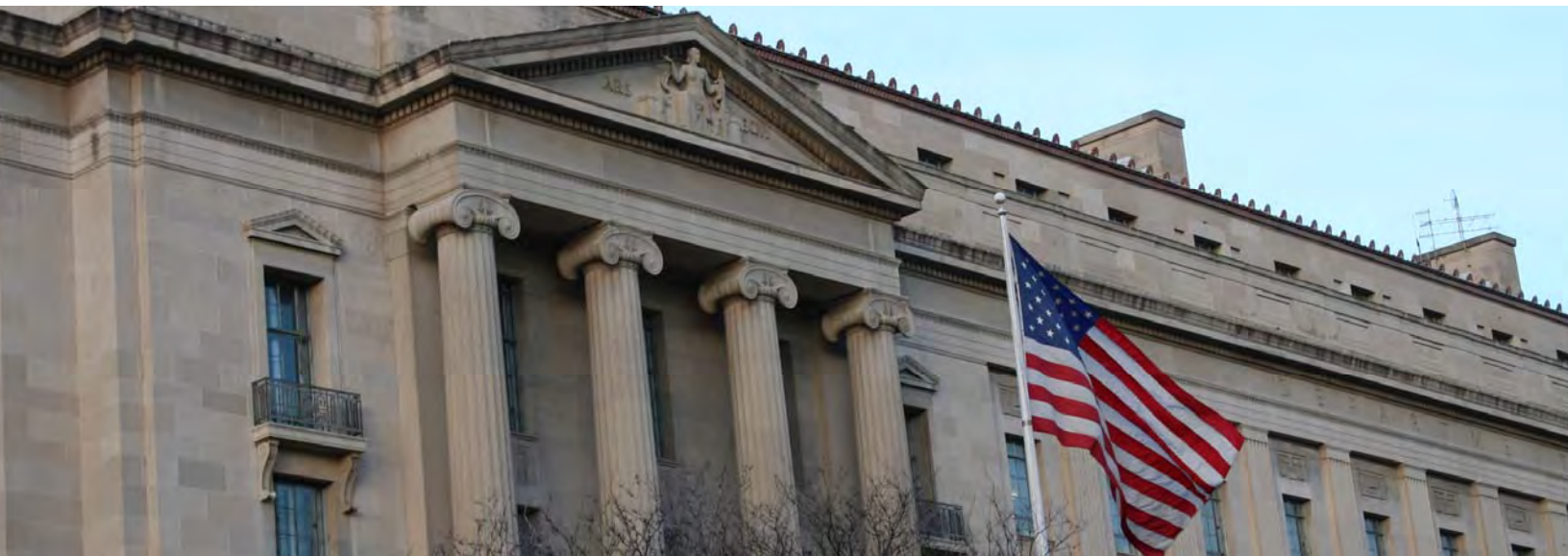




# Office of the Inspector General U.S. Department of Justice

**OVERSIGHT ★ INTEGRITY ★ GUIDANCE**



## **Review of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' Implementation of the Frontline Initiative**



# Executive Summary

*Review of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives  
Implementation of the Frontline Initiative*

## Introduction

The mission of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is to protect communities from violent criminals and criminal organizations and to combat the illegal use and trafficking of firearms, the illegal use and storage of explosives, acts of arson and bombings, acts of terrorism, and the illegal diversion of alcohol and tobacco products.

During fiscal year 2013, ATF implemented its Frontline business model initiative (Frontline), the purpose of which was to standardize ATF operations and to address a number of ongoing management concerns identified in previous Office of the Inspector General (OIG) reports, including insufficient oversight of field division operations. Through Frontline, ATF intended to enhance oversight and accountability, standardize its mission, revise its policies to better align with Department of Justice priorities and procedures, and measure operational effectiveness and accomplishments.

In developing Frontline, ATF leadership identified existing practices that it wanted every field division to implement and emphasized an enhanced role for intelligence support in ATF's field divisions. A central component of Frontline is the Domain Assessment process through which each field division identifies the violent crime environment in its area of responsibility and, through an all-source intelligence-driven approach, develops investigative strategies to focus on the most violent crimes and criminals.

OIG conducted this review to assess ATF's implementation of Frontline and the effectiveness of the initiative.

## Results in Brief

As intended, ATF's implementation of Frontline resulted in positive steps toward standardizing best practices across field divisions and focusing its limited resources on DOJ priorities; it also addressed systemic weaknesses such as the need for consistent oversight of field operations. However, we found areas for continued improvement, such as internal intelligence sharing and effective data collection. We also identified several management challenges that may limit Frontline's effectiveness and growth across ATF, including ensuring effective communication of Frontline's purpose to ATF employees.

*ATF Has Enhanced Its Operational Functions and Use of Resources Through Frontline, but Outdated Policies and Limited External Partner Participation Could Constrain Frontline's Effectiveness*

Through Frontline, ATF took steps to improve its operations by enhancing oversight and accountability, standardizing practices across field divisions, and improving resource allocation. Frontline's Domain Assessment process gave field divisions more autonomy to identify and prioritize the elements of ATF's Strategic Plan that are most relevant to their areas of responsibility while also providing ATF leadership with an oversight tool to hold staff accountable to the division goals.

Frontline also established an enhanced role for ATF's field division-level intelligence function, now called Crime Gun Intelligence Centers (CGIC). This resulted in placing or hiring skilled intelligence personnel in the field, as well as more proactive, in-depth intelligence work. However, we found that ATF's policies and guidance have not kept up with the CGICs' evolving role and, in some cases, outdated guidance may limit the development of individual CGICs.

Although Frontline emphasizes better use of ATF's intelligence capabilities, we found that ATF must enhance external partner engagement to fully exploit the intelligence it generates. Specifically, ATF refocused its use of the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN), shifting it from a purely forensic tool to a proactive investigative tool. However, the intelligence derived from ATF's NIBIN and firearms tracing programs is likely incomplete because these tools require comprehensive participation of state and local law enforcement partners, which we learned does not always occur. We identified room for improvement in ATF's promotion of the adoption and use of NIBIN and firearms tracing to its external partners.



# Executive Summary

*Review of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives  
Implementation of the Frontline Initiative*

## *A Lack of Frontline Performance Metrics and Insufficient Data Hinders ATF's Ability to Assess Its Effectiveness*

Although ATF has performance metrics associated with its overall strategic plan, ATF did not develop specific metrics to assess the overall impact of Frontline. We found that ATF data that could indicate Frontline's effect were inconclusive, incomplete, or potentially inaccurate. We also found that ATF does not consistently collect information to track outcomes and assess the effectiveness of external partnerships and interactions. In addition, ongoing challenges in working with external law enforcement partners and plans to address these challenges are not consistently documented. Further, informal outreach to firearms and explosives industry members and the positive impacts of that outreach are not captured in ATF metrics. The lack of complete data and documentation limits ATF's ability to identify trends, challenges, and best practices and to hold staff accountable for their work.

## *ATF's Implementation of Frontline Was Not Fully Effective Due to Ineffective Communication, Insufficient Training, the Lack of a Formal Implementation Plan, and the Absence of Compliance Reviews*

While the concept of Frontline was a positive step, we found that ATF's messaging about Frontline did not effectively convey its purpose or expectations to staff. ATF initially introduced Frontline to employees through town hall meetings with headquarters and field division

personnel and included a Frontline segment in training for new employees at the ATF Academy. Through our interviews, however, we learned that ATF staff did not understand Frontline's purpose or that the changes they observed were part of the business model. Additionally, field division supervisors did not consistently receive training on the purpose or technical development of Domain Assessments.

We also found that ATF has not implemented a formal review process to assess Frontline performance and ensure that field divisions follow their Domain Assessments. For example, we found that staff did not always follow the Accountability Roles and Responsibilities laid out in the Frontline Manual. Furthermore, we identified inefficiencies in the development and execution of the Domain Assessments, potentially leading to less effective planning, oversight, and headquarters-level consolidation of information. This further limits ATF's ability to improve its processes.

## **Recommendations**

We make five recommendations to improve ATF's implementation and use of Frontline. Our recommendations include updating guidance and ensuring staff accountability to standards, further developing performance metrics and the Domain Assessment process, improving training related to Frontline, and establishing internal evaluation processes.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Background

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is the federal agency charged with enforcing the *Gun Control Act of 1968* and the *National Firearms Act*, the two primary laws enacted by Congress to address firearms violence.<sup>1</sup> Since 2003, ATF also enforces the *Safe Explosives Act*, which expanded the scope of explosives regulations administered by ATF.<sup>2</sup> In January 2003, ATF moved to the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ, Department) from the U.S. Department of the Treasury (Treasury) pursuant to the *Homeland Security Act of 2002*.<sup>3</sup> After ATF's transfer to the Department, the DOJ Office of the Inspector General (OIG) conducted several reviews that identified systemic management and structural issues, including those found during ATF's Operation Fast and Furious. ATF leadership also recognized the need to standardize its mission concepts and reinforce organizational discipline to ensure that ATF was more focused and effective in its fight against violent crime. In fiscal year (FY) 2013, ATF implemented the Frontline Initiative (Frontline), a business model intended to incorporate ATF's best practices into a unified plan that focuses ATF's efforts to assess problem areas, dedicate resources, and measure outcomes. According to ATF's senior executives, Frontline was also established to change ATF's operational culture in the conduct of its investigations while combating violent crime and regulating the firearms and explosives industry.

## ATF's Missions, Functions, and Organizational Structure

ATF's mission is to protect communities from violent criminals and criminal organizations by investigating and preventing crimes involving the illegal use and trafficking of firearms, the illegal use and storage of explosives, acts of arson and bombings, acts of terrorism, and the illegal diversion of alcohol and tobacco products. ATF also regulates the manufacture, importation, and retail sale of firearms and explosives. ATF operates primarily through two components: criminal enforcement and industry operations. The criminal enforcement component is responsible for criminal law enforcement investigations and is composed of Special

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Gun Control Act of 1968*, Congress required individuals and companies engaged in the firearms business to be licensed and established legal restrictions on who could possess firearms. 18 U.S.C. §§ 921-931 codified the *Gun Control Act*.

<sup>2</sup> ATF's authority to regulate the explosives industry began with the *Organized Crime Control Act of 1970*, codified by 18 U.S.C. §§ 841-848, which established licensing and permitting requirements, defined categories of people denied access to explosives, and authorized ATF to inspect licensees. The *Safe Explosives Act* expanded these provisions and amended portions of 18 U.S.C. §§ 841-845.

<sup>3</sup> The *Homeland Security Act* divided ATF's mission and functions into two agencies: ATF, which transferred to DOJ, and the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, which remained with Treasury. See "ATF History Timeline," [www.atf.gov/our-history/atf-history-timeline](http://www.atf.gov/our-history/atf-history-timeline) (accessed February 5, 2019).

Agents and investigative support staff. The industry operations component is ATF's regulatory enforcement component and is composed of Industry Operations Investigators and support specialists.

ATF's executive leadership includes a Director, Deputy Director, and 8 Assistant Directors responsible for overseeing more than 5,000 employees and conducting ATF's functions.<sup>4</sup> The Office of Field Operations, led by an Assistant Director, 3 regional Deputy Assistant Directors, 1 Deputy Assistant Director for Industry Operations, and 1 Deputy Assistant Director for Programs, manages the criminal enforcement and industry operations missions across ATF's 25 field divisions.<sup>5</sup> See [Appendix 3](#) for ATF's organizational structure.

### **Frontline Business Model**

According to ATF's acting Director, in late 2011 ATF established a working group of experienced Special Agents and attorneys to assess ATF's mission and to build a new business model, which they eventually named Frontline. In addition to addressing systemic issues identified in previous OIG reports as well as a need to standardize ATF's mission concepts and reinforce organizational discipline, the working group's goal was to merge the criminal enforcement and industry operations missions under a single business model and to create standardized business practices with clear expectations and accountability. ATF's former Director implemented Frontline in December 2012 as the foundation to effect these changes. To assist in standardization and accountability, the former Director said ATF drew upon the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) domain assessment process as a model for a major piece of Frontline.<sup>6</sup> Frontline also outlined the need and process for collaboration through partnerships with DOJ, state and local law enforcement components, and U.S. Attorney's Offices. The acting Director and former Director recognized that changing ATF's operational culture was the biggest challenge ATF faced in implementing Frontline. Figure 1 below depicts ATF's Frontline business model.

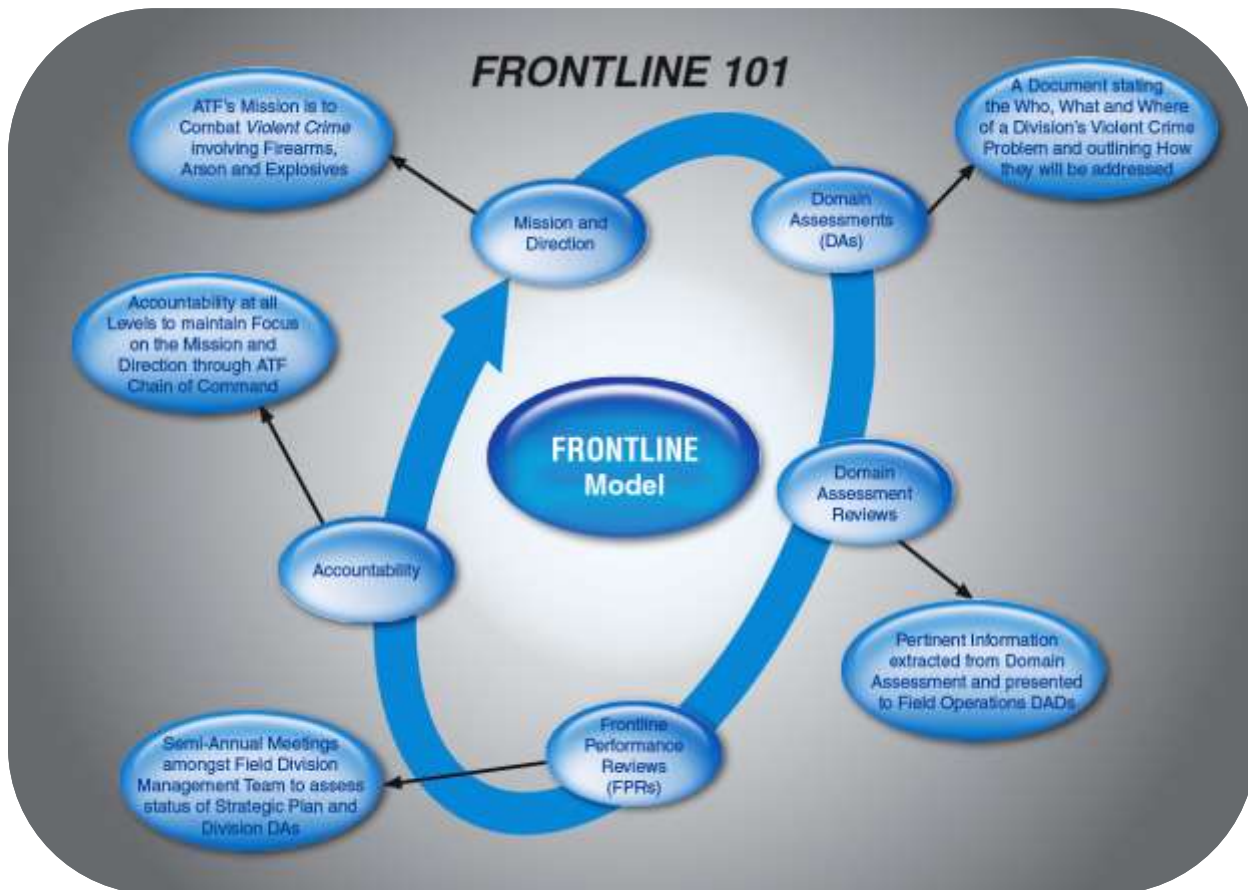
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<sup>4</sup> During the period of our review, ATF did not have a U.S. Senate-confirmed Director. B. Todd Jones served as acting Director from August 31, 2011, until his Senate confirmation as ATF's Director on July 31, 2013. On March 31, 2015, Director Jones resigned and Deputy Director Thomas Brandon has been serving as the acting ATF Director since. In this report, we refer to Jones as the former Director and Brandon as the acting Director.

<sup>5</sup> ATF has three geographic regions: West, Central, and East. Each regional Deputy Assistant Director for Field Operations is responsible for 7–10 field divisions and provides criminal enforcement mission guidance to the field divisions. The Deputy Assistant Director for Industry Operations provides industry operations guidance to all 25 field divisions. ATF's field divisions are located throughout the continental United States and territories such as Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

<sup>6</sup> According to FBI's Domestic Investigations and Operations Guide, FBI's domain management is the systematic process by which FBI develops cross-programmatic awareness and leverages its knowledge to enhance its ability to proactively identify threats, vulnerabilities, and intelligence gaps; discover new opportunities for needed intelligence collection and prosecution; and provide advance warning of national security and criminal threats.

**Figure 1**  
**The Frontline Business Model**



Note: Figure 1 identifies ATF's mission and direction, as well as Frontline's components such as Domain Assessment; semiannual performance reviews; increased accountability; and, by association, oversight, throughout ATF. The Frontline Business Model also includes an enhanced role for field-level intelligence and emphasizes ATF-identified best practices, which are not represented in this figure. We discuss the Frontline components below.

Source: ATF Frontline Manual, second edition

ATF also created the Frontline Branch within the Firearms Operations Division of the Office of Field Operations.<sup>7</sup> Led by a Supervisory Special Agent and staffed with four full-time Special Agent Program Managers, the Frontline Branch monitors field division Domain Assessments and oversees ATF's investigative and

<sup>7</sup> Near the completion of our fieldwork, ATF informed us that it had reorganized the Frontline Branch, placing it under ATF's Field Management Staff and merging it with the Investigative Support Branch to create the Frontline Investigative Support Branch. Although we did not assess the Frontline Investigative Support Branch's new roles and functions, the Assistant Director for Field Operations told us that the new branch was more operationally engaged to assist the regional Deputy Assistant Directors.



enforcement efforts.<sup>8</sup> ATF further defines the Frontline Branch roles in its Frontline Manual (see [Appendix 4](#) for more information). We discuss ATF's Frontline Manual and Domain Assessments below.

## Frontline Manual

In FY 2013, ATF released the first edition of the Frontline Manual (Manual) followed by a revised second edition in September 2015.<sup>9</sup> According to the Manual, Frontline establishes "a standardized way of operating through the use of strong leadership, transparency, accountability at all levels, and streamlined measurements of effectiveness and accomplishments." The Manual also establishes the Frontline components. For example, the Manual identifies the Domain Assessment as Frontline's central component and the focal point in achieving accountability within ATF. Other Frontline components include performance reviews; enhanced intelligence collection and use through Crime Gun Intelligence Centers (CGIC); using what ATF identifies as best practices, such as enhanced operational oversight; and emphasizing the importance of communication and collaboration between ATF and its external partners, including U.S. Attorney's Offices (USAO) and state and local law enforcement. In addition to establishing Frontline's components, the Manual defines core responsibilities and basic standards for CGIC operations, as well as roles and responsibilities to enhance accountability for other staff positions.

### *Domain Assessment*

The Domain Assessment is a central component of Frontline because it is the field division or field office's operational plan for the next fiscal year. Each field division and associated field office develops an annual Domain Assessment to provide an overview of the division's area of responsibility, demographics, office profiles, resources, priorities, its analysis of the division and office's criminal environment, and its future operating strategies.<sup>10</sup> The field divisions and field offices prepare their Domain Assessments in accordance with headquarters-

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<sup>8</sup> ATF established the roles, responsibilities, and staffing of the Frontline Branch in a 2012 memorandum to the Assistant Director for Field Operations. See Essam Rabadi, Chief, Firearms Operations Division, ATF, memorandum for Assistant Director for Field Operations, Minor Organizational Change Proposal, October 4, 2012. During our review, a Supervisory Special Agent Branch Chief led the Frontline Branch with a staff of one Industry Operations Program Manager, two Management Analysts, and a Program Manager.

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise specified, we refer to the Manual's second edition in this report.

<sup>10</sup> Domain Assessments replaced the annual Industry Operations Operating Plans, which had provided each field division with specific directives for completing both mandatory and discretionary inspections. Mandatory inspections are inspections that ATF deems significant due to statutory requirements, public safety inspections, *Safe Explosives Act* compliance inspections, firearms and explosives application inspections, certain types of recall inspections, ATF magazine inspections, and inspections of firearms manufacturers/importers. Discretionary inspections are other activities not designated as mandatory.

provided templates and instructions.<sup>11</sup> The field divisions and field offices then use headquarters- and locally derived intelligence, including intelligence from state and local law enforcement entities, to identify the area's unique violent crime environment; develop strategies to address issues; and guide inspection, investigative, and enforcement activities for the upcoming fiscal year.<sup>12</sup> Each field office sends its prepared Domain Assessment to its respective field division leadership for review and comment before the field division submits the Domain Assessment to its respective regional Deputy Assistant Director for approval.

#### *Frontline Performance Reviews*

Field divisions measure their progress toward achieving their Domain Assessment goals through Frontline Performance Reviews conducted at the middle and the end of the fiscal year. Each field division Special Agent in Charge (SAC) prepares a short memorandum outlining the division's status and accomplishments with respect to its Domain Assessment priorities and objectives. The regional Deputy Assistant Directors review each of the memoranda and may discuss with field division SACs matters such as changing priorities or redistributing resources to meet ATF's national objectives. At the end of the fiscal year, each field office prepares an End-of-Year Summary Review as part of its annual Domain Assessment. Similar to the midyear Frontline Performance Review, the End-of-Year Summary Review describes the specific criminal enforcement or industry operations office's contributions toward meeting its Domain Assessment priorities and objectives.

#### *ATF's Existing Intelligence Resources and Use of Its Identified Best Practices Expanded Under Frontline*

ATF's Frontline Manual states that actionable intelligence and crime information should drive investigations and discretionary inspections and that intelligence should help establish investigative priorities. It also states that ATF employs an "all-source intelligence-driven model" to enhance proactive

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<sup>11</sup> The Frontline Branch annually updates the instructions that guide the development of Domain Assessments. During our fieldwork, ATF employed three Domain Assessment types: Criminal Enforcement, Industry Operations, and Field Division/CGIC.

The Criminal Enforcement and Industry Operations Domain Assessments each contain similar sections, such as a group "snapshot" overview, assessment of the field office's progress toward meeting its previous year's Domain Assessment goals, and the field office's Priorities/Strategic Plan for the coming fiscal year. The Criminal Enforcement Domain Assessment also includes statistical information about the previous fiscal year, such as types of investigations completed, expenditures, and the number of firearms recovered and traced. The Field Division/CGIC Domain Assessment includes a year-end summary for each field office and the CGIC. Additionally, the Field Division/CGIC Domain Assessment identifies the CGIC's strategic plan for the coming fiscal year. If changing circumstances warrant, the field divisions may change its Domain Assessment goals and priorities throughout the year.

<sup>12</sup> ATF headquarters-derived intelligence includes items such as Federal Explosives and Firearms Licensee information, National Integrated Ballistic Information Network data, firearms tracing data, and FBI's Uniform Crime Data maps.

investigative efforts. Intelligence-led policing is a collaborative law enforcement approach combining problem-solving policing, information sharing, and police accountability with enhanced intelligence operations. ATF's model is all-source intelligence driven rather than intelligence led. It is a collaborative effort that uses intelligence assets to analyze multiple-source information to identify persons responsible for criminal activity. As such, Frontline includes an "enhanced and robust" intelligence role for ATF's CGICs. Below, we describe some of ATF's existing resources that were incorporated into Frontline.

### Crime Gun Intelligence Centers

Prior to Frontline, each ATF field division had an intelligence group, which provided intelligence and analytical support to field division criminal enforcement and industry operations. These intelligence groups derived their guidance from ATF's Intelligence Program Order (Order), which defined their structures, functions, and responsibilities.<sup>13</sup> Upon Frontline's implementation, ATF rebranded its intelligence groups as CGICs. In addition to providing intelligence and analytical support, CGICs identify the most violent offenders or groups, violent gun crime areas, and sources of crime guns. CGICs identify "at risk" Federal Firearms Licensees and develop, analyze, and disseminate investigative leads. The CGICs also derive their primary guidance from the Order's assigned duties, as well as from the Frontline Manual. Specifically, the Manual highlights 5 of the Order's 16 duties and defines them as CGIC Core Responsibilities and Basic Standards (Guidelines). According to the Manual, these Guidelines provide nationwide consistency among the CGICs and serve as a foundation for expanded intelligence capabilities (see the text box below).

In 2016, ATF issued a Crime Gun Intelligence Performance Metrics memorandum that defined the CGICs' critical components, identified essential elements, and proposed performance measures.<sup>14</sup> In 2017, ATF assessed its CGICs to evaluate their operations and staffing.<sup>15</sup> The evaluation criteria included the number of intelligence leads that resulted in criminal prosecution and whether each CGIC had a written collection plan that identified, collected, and maintained ATF intelligence, such as firearms trace results and leads from ATF's National Integrated

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<sup>13</sup> The Order was still in effect during the time of our review and referred to the Field Intelligence Group, the predecessor of the Crime Gun Intelligence Center. ATF Order 3800.2, Intelligence Program, March 1, 2012.

According to the Order, the intelligence group staffing requirements included a supervisor, Special Agent Intelligence Officers, Industry Operations Intelligence Specialists, Joint Terrorism Task Force representatives, Intelligence Research Specialists, Investigative Analysts or Assistants, and specialty intelligence program contractors or Task Force Officers.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Gleysteen, Assistant Director for Field Operations, ATF, memorandum for All Special Agents in Charge, Crime Gun Intelligence Performance Metrics, February 4, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> OIG did not evaluate ATF's CGIC assessment; rather, we reviewed ATF's results for comparison to our fieldwork evaluations.

Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN). According to ATF officials we interviewed, when ATF compared its 2017 CGIC assessment to its 2014 intelligence group assessment, three themes emerged: (1) a lack of leadership stability, (2) a lack of established CGIC task forces, and (3) a lack of intelligence collection plans. While ATF's assessment found that some CGICs were performing well, it also identified ways to improve the functioning of all of its CGICs. For example, it suggested that ATF implement a system based on ATF-identified CGIC best practices from the highest performing CGICs as a priority for all CGICs to follow.

#### Expanded Use of Agency-identified Best Practices

As part of Frontline, ATF established a unified plan that incorporates the use of what it considers its best practices.<sup>16</sup> These include more effective use of its proprietary technologies, such as NIBIN and firearms tracing, and concepts such as enhanced operational oversight and communication and collaboration with external partners.<sup>17</sup> We discuss these items below:

- **NIBIN Program.** ATF established NIBIN in 1999 to reduce firearms violence by targeting, investigating, and facilitating the prosecution of shooters and their sources of crime guns.<sup>18</sup> NIBIN "provides investigators with the ability

**CGIC Core Responsibilities and Basic Standards**

1. Support the field division's criminal investigations and industry operations by collecting, evaluating, and analyzing information to produce "finished" tactical and operational intelligence products and other analytical services, striving for intelligence-led investigations and inspections.
2. Manage the flow of information/intelligence into and out of the division.
3. Function as a "clearinghouse" for information arriving from numerous ATF enforcement programs, conduct analysis, and generate actionable intelligence leads/referrals.
4. Establish relationships with federal, state, and local intelligence partners, including fusion centers.
5. Oversee criminal intelligence collection in concert with the division collection plan, Domain Assessment, and/or collection priorities.

Source: ATF Frontline Manual, second edition

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<sup>16</sup> ATF also incorporated aspects of the Violent Crime Reduction Partnership and the Victim Witness Assistance program into Frontline. Through the Violent Crime Reduction Partnership, law enforcement leaders coordinate missions, strategies, tactics, and intelligence to effectively prioritize and maximize the impact on violent crime. The Victim/Witness Assistance Program preserves the rights of victims and witnesses and helps them cope with the impact of crime. Assessing these programs was not within the scope of our review.

<sup>17</sup> The scope of our review did not include assessing the NIBIN or firearms tracing processes. However, we discuss the program applications as they relate to Frontline's intelligence-driven focus and external partner participation.

<sup>18</sup> ATF administers NIBIN for federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies that collect and submit ballistic evidence to local NIBIN collection sites operated by either ATF or a partner state or local crime laboratory. Law enforcement agencies can use the NIBIN system to match images from other crime scenes to develop previously unknown connections.

to compare their ballistics evidence against evidence from other violent crimes on a local, regional and national level, thus generating investigative links that would rarely be revealed absent the technology.”<sup>19</sup> Under Frontline, in FY 2013, ATF reorganized the NIBIN program into the Office of Field Operations to improve its responsiveness to operational needs. ATF also designated NIBIN as a leads generator and changed its function from forensics to investigation.

- **Firearms Tracing Program.** ATF’s National Tracing Center “assists domestic and international law enforcement agencies by tracing the origin of firearms that have been recovered in criminal investigations.”<sup>20</sup> When a law enforcement agency recovers a firearm at a crime scene, it can request information through ATF’s eTrace system in order to develop investigative leads.<sup>21</sup> Law enforcement agencies can use this information to link a suspect to a firearm in an investigation and to identify potential firearms traffickers.
- **Operational Oversight.** As part of Frontline, ATF sought to enhance its operational oversight by changing policies and by developing analytical tools and reports. For example, ATF updated its Monitored Case Program (MCP), which was designed to identify and mitigate risks inherent to ATF’s mission in order to clarify its purpose, streamline the reporting process and procedures, and formalize MCP criteria to better coordinate ATF resources.<sup>22</sup> ATF also added more oversight steps, such as requiring supervisors to approve the opening of new investigations to ensure that the investigations align with Domain Assessment priorities. In addition, ATF developed the Frontline Analytics Dashboard and the Quarterly Status Report to increase ATF headquarters’ operational oversight across field division operations.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> ATF, “Fact Sheet–National Integrated Ballistic Information Network,” May 2018, [www.atf.gov/resource-center/fact-sheet/fact-sheet-national-integrated-ballistic-information-network](http://www.atf.gov/resource-center/fact-sheet/fact-sheet-national-integrated-ballistic-information-network) (accessed February 5, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Pursuant to the *Gun Control Act of 1968*, the Attorney General designated ATF as the sole federal agency authorized to trace firearms. ATF may trace a firearm for a law enforcement agency involved in a bona fide criminal investigation. ATF, “Fact Sheet–eTrace: Internet-based Firearms Tracing and Analysis,” May 2018, [www.atf.gov/resource-center/fact-sheet/fact-sheet-etrace-internet-based-firearms-tracing-and-analysis](http://www.atf.gov/resource-center/fact-sheet/fact-sheet-etrace-internet-based-firearms-tracing-and-analysis) (accessed February 5, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Firearms tracing through eTrace is the systematic tracking of a recovered firearm from its manufacturer or importer and subsequent introduction into the distribution chain (wholesaler/retailer) to an unlicensed purchaser. The Internet-based system allows law enforcement agencies to submit electronic firearms trace requests, monitor the progress of traces, retrieve completed trace results, and query firearms trace-related data, all in real time.

<sup>22</sup> MCP includes 18 case type criteria for determining when to submit an MCP report to headquarters. If an investigation or inspection meets one or more of these criteria, a field division must submit an MCP initial briefing paper to its regional Deputy Assistant Director for Field Operations or Deputy Assistant Director for Industry Operations for review.

<sup>23</sup> The Frontline Analytics Dashboard, originated in FY 2011, collects data to assist supervisors and managers in planning and evaluating efforts to reduce violent crime. The dashboard also provides summarized data and graphical displays about the status and outcomes of field division- or office-level investigations and inspections. The dashboard information also populates Quarterly Status Reports, which the Office of Strategic Management briefs to ATF’s executive leadership.

- **Communication and Collaboration.** Frontline emphasizes the importance of communication and collaboration with ATF's external partners. According to ATF, it uses external partnerships in all aspects of its criminal enforcement and industry operations mission areas to maximize its effectiveness in preventing violent crime.

## **Previous OIG and Government Accountability Office Reviews of ATF Management and Organizational Structure**

Between FY 2012 and FY 2017, OIG issued several reports, which are summarized in [Appendix 2](#) of this report and which identified management and organizational structure concerns within ATF. More specifically, those OIG reports concluded that ATF headquarters lacked substantive monitoring and oversight of sensitive ATF operations. Findings included insufficient operational oversight, insufficient coordination with USAOs and other federal enforcement agencies, an organizational culture that lacked an emphasis on risk management, and the need for ATF to better use data or intelligence to make decisions. The former ATF Director told us that problems OIG identified in our report on ATF's Operation Fast and Furious, which we issued in September 2012, stemmed from a breakdown in leadership, accountability, and communication. In addition, he recognized the need for ATF to align with DOJ priorities and to make changes not only to the way ATF communicates internally and externally but also to ATF's operational culture in the conduct of its investigations while at the same time addressing violent crime and regulating the firearms and explosives industry.

In addition to OIG's reviews, in 2014 the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) examined changes in ATF's priorities for criminal law enforcement investigations since FY 2003, staffing challenges ATF had faced since FY 2003, and whether ATF had sufficient data to monitor the timeliness and outcomes of its delayed-denial investigations.<sup>24</sup>

### **Scope and Methodology of the OIG Review**

OIG assessed ATF's implementation of Frontline and its effectiveness in accomplishing ATF's mission to reduce violent crime, protect the public, and regulate the firearms and explosives industry. Our fieldwork occurred from April 2017 through February 2018 and consisted of document reviews, data analysis, interviews, and site visits. In order to assess and evaluate changes resulting from Frontline's implementation, our data analysis covered FY 2009 through FY 2012, the pre-Frontline period, and FY 2013 through FY 2016, the post-Frontline period. We interviewed ATF officials, including the former Director and current acting Director, and field division leadership and staff. We also

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<sup>24</sup> GAO, *Enhancing Data Collection Could Improve Management of Investigations*, GAO-14-553 (June 2014). GAO noted that ATF had begun evaluating Frontline's efforts in March 2014 and did not yet have a period for completing the evaluations; therefore, it was too early for GAO to assess how well Frontline was helping ATF assess the effectiveness of its investigations in addressing violent crime.

See [Appendix 1](#) for more information on delayed denials.

interviewed ATF's partners in USAOs and local police departments at each site we visited. See [Appendix 1](#) for a more detailed description of the review's methodology.

## **RESULTS OF THE REVIEW**

In response to OIG findings in our previous reports, as described above, and to facilitate the changes necessary to best support ATF's mission, in FY 2013 ATF implemented the Frontline Initiative (Frontline), a business model intended to incorporate ATF's best practices into a unified plan that focuses ATF's efforts to assess problem areas, dedicate resources, and measure outcomes. While OIG did not assess how well Frontline responded to the specific recommendations that we made in our prior reports, we believe that ATF's implementation of Frontline is a positive step toward addressing the systemic management and structural issues we identified in those reports, as well as the internal challenges that ATF identified. However, we found areas for improvement regarding ATF's effectiveness in accomplishing its mission to reduce violent crime, protect the public, and regulate the firearms and explosives industries through Frontline. In the following sections, we discuss Frontline's impact on ATF's operations, ATF's ability to measure the effectiveness of Frontline, and additional actions ATF can take to implement Frontline more effectively.

### **ATF Has Enhanced Its Operational Functions and Use of Resources Through Frontline, but Outdated Policies and Limited External Partner Participation Could Constrain Frontline's Effectiveness**

We found that with Frontline's implementation ATF has taken steps to improve operations through standardized planning requirements, has enhanced its oversight and accountability tools, and has refocused its intelligence efforts to better leverage its proprietary technologies. According to ATF's Assistant Director for the Office of Strategic Intelligence and Information, ATF became more intelligence and data driven because of Frontline, resulting in ATF's ability to better focus on developing and targeting high-impact violent criminals with the greatest negative impact on a community. However, we found that ATF's intelligence policies were outdated because they did not reflect ATF's renewed focus and that ATF personnel did not follow policy requirements when responding to referrals. We also found that limitations in ATF's state and local law enforcement partners' capabilities, such as budget constraints and personnel challenges, may limit the effectiveness of ATF's investigative technologies and that ATF needs more partner engagement. We believe that without current mission directives and partner participation in ATF technologies and associated processes, ATF's ability to maintain Frontline as an effective intelligence-driven policing model could be limited.

#### *Frontline Contributed to Increased Headquarters and Field Division Management Oversight of ATF Operations*

ATF leadership told us that Frontline's purpose was to change the operational culture through enhanced leadership oversight and mission accountability, standardization of practices across field divisions, and improved resource allocation. Specifically, ATF instituted requirements for criminal enforcement and enhanced previous requirements for industry operations planning. We found that supervisory



and non-supervisory criminal enforcement and industry operations staff identified changes within ATF, such as an improved use of intelligence, better internal coordination and communications, and increased headquarters oversight.

#### ATF's Domain Assessment Process Provided Improvements to Oversight and Accountability

As a central component of Frontline, the Domain Assessment "outlines the challenges, priorities, and methods to combat violent crime problems specific to each field division."<sup>25</sup> The Domain Assessment focuses the field division or field office's investigations associated with the most violent crimes and criminals and serves as the operational plan for the upcoming fiscal year. Additionally, it provides headquarters oversight into the field's planned operations and serves as an accountability tool to assess operations and inspections that the field division or field office completed during the previous year.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the annual Domain Assessment, Frontline requires that each field division submit a midyear Frontline Performance Review memorandum to headquarters describing the field division's progress toward meeting the goals described in the Domain Assessment.

Overall, we found that the implementation of Domain Assessments under Frontline has resulted in a more intelligence-driven and risk-based investigation and inspections process. We found that for industry operations field offices, Domain Assessments replaced the Annual Industry Operations Operating Plans, which had outlined ATF headquarters-directed mandatory and discretionary inspections for each field office.<sup>27</sup> Under Frontline, industry operations offices are afforded more control in the development of their discretionary inspections. While inspections are still based on ATF-developed national-level intelligence, industry operations offices now apply their local intelligence to prioritize these inspections.

In addition, prior to Frontline, criminal enforcement field offices were not required to develop an annual plan. Frontline now requires criminal enforcement field offices to develop a Domain Assessment that aligns with ATF's strategic goals and addresses the local criminal enforcement needs and priorities based on

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<sup>25</sup> Ronald B. Turk, Assistant Director for Field Operations, ATF, memorandum for All Special Agents in Charge, Domain Assessments Due–New Process in Place, August 1, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Prior to our review, ATF required its headquarters directorates to review and provide written proposals to the Office of Field Operations on how each directorate could best support each field division in meeting its established priorities. In a 2016 memorandum, ATF eliminated this requirement beginning with the FY 2017 Domain Assessment cycle. See Michael Gleysteen, Assistant Director for Field Operations, ATF, memorandum for All Assistant Directors, Change to Frontline Manual (Domain Assessment Written Proposals), August 12, 2016. According to the Assistant Director for Field Operations, the headquarters directorates did not have time to read all of the documents and did not provide written feedback. He stated that Field Operations now communicates a field division's needs to the respective Assistant Director as they arise and during twice-weekly staff meetings.

<sup>27</sup> Mandatory inspections are inspections that ATF deems significant due to statutory requirements, public safety inspections, *Safe Explosives Act* compliance inspections, firearms and explosives application inspections, certain types of recall inspections, ATF magazine inspections, and inspections of firearms manufacturers/importers. Discretionary inspections are other activities not designated as mandatory.

intelligence within their area of responsibility. Frontline also requires criminal enforcement Special Agents to obtain supervisory approval prior to opening an investigation in order to ensure that the work is in line with their Domain Assessment.

### ATF Instituted Additional Oversight Tools

In addition to implementing the Domain Assessment and Frontline Performance Reviews under Frontline, ATF continued to adjust its Monitored Case Program to identify and mitigate risks within ATF's operations. In FY 2011, ATF developed a Frontline Analytics Dashboard to collect performance data for supervisors and managers to apply in their planning and evaluation efforts to reduce violent crime. The dashboard also provides summarized data and graphical displays about the status and outcomes of investigations and inspections at the field division or office level that is used during Quarterly Status Report briefs with ATF executive leaders.<sup>28</sup> Leadership at both ATF headquarters and in field divisions told us that they believed these oversight and accountability efforts also enhanced communications within ATF by, for example, encouraging both headquarters and field division staffs to collectively discuss plans to assess and validate required resources and identify risks and associated mitigation factors before plans are executed.

While we found that Frontline did improve oversight and accountability, we also found areas for continued improvement, including the need to update intelligence guidance and to better promote the use of NIBIN and firearms tracing to ATF's external partners.

*Although ATF Continued to Enhance Its Intelligence Functions, Frontline's Effectiveness May Have Been Limited Because ATF's Intelligence Policy Is Outdated and ATF Personnel Did Not Follow Referral Requirements*

According to the Frontline Manual (Manual), the new business model established an enhanced role for ATF's Crime Gun Intelligence Centers (CGIC) to provide intelligence and investigative analyses to support the field divisions in their fight against violent crime. We found that ATF assessed and refined its CGICs in an effort to streamline its internal functions and mission support to the field divisions. As part of this process, we found that ATF improved CGIC staffing with experienced intelligence personnel and conducted assessments to evaluate the CGICs. However, we also found that ATF's intelligence policy and associated guidance did not represent how the CGICs have actually operated since ATF implemented Frontline. Further, we found that field staff failed to follow ATF's referral policies, which may limit its intelligence-driven policing process.

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<sup>28</sup> Quarterly Status Reports are summaries of ATF's progress toward meeting set performance targets based on its strategic goals and objectives. At Quarterly Status Report briefings, ATF senior leadership will discuss and address any potential concerns identified by the data.

## ATF Addressed CGIC Staffing Challenges to Improve Intelligence Operations

The Manual also describes ATF's CGICs as an integral part of Frontline's intelligence-driven policing model. The CGICs' role in Frontline is to provide actionable intelligence and crime information that drives criminal enforcement investigations and industry operations inspections. ATF's acting Director told us that his first priority was to get the CGIC intelligence functions right in order to make Frontline successful. As part of this approach, ATF recognized the need for a more qualified and experienced CGIC staff.

According to ATF staff, some intelligence groups prior to Frontline were staffed with underperforming personnel and functioning as reactive intelligence centers that provided intelligence support only when requested rather than proactively developing intelligence. ATF's acting Director told us that to change the mentality and reactive culture of these groups ATF began hiring trained and experienced intelligence professionals, including former military service members with training and experience in military intelligence, as Intelligence Research Specialists to staff the CGICs.<sup>29</sup> ATF also began to staff its CGICs with high performing and experienced Special Agents and Industry Operations Investigators.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, ATF's Assistant Director for the Office of Strategic Intelligence and Information told us that ATF created an Intelligence Research Specialist Academy to develop unique criminal intelligence and information training to support ATF's criminal and industry operations missions. Further, ATF provided training to CGIC industry operations staff. Because of these staff changes and newly developed training, Special Agents told us, the CGICs were more proactive in mission intelligence support and Special Agents were more willing to use the CGICs to drive their investigations or inspections, as Frontline intended.

## Despite Continued Development of the CGICs, a Lack of Current Guidance May Limit ATF's Intelligence-driven Process

In addition to staffing enhancements, Frontline also included "a more enhanced and robust role for ATF's CGICs" to provide focused intelligence and analytical support to the field divisions' priorities.<sup>31</sup> During our site visits, we found

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<sup>29</sup> Intelligence Research Specialists are ATF's primary intelligence personnel that provide analytical support for investigations and inspections occurring within their field division. We analyzed ATF's Intelligence Research Specialist workforce data from FY 2009 through FY 2016 and found a 29 percent increase in the number of positions, from a low of 112 in FY 2009 to a high of 144 in FY 2016. In FY 2017, ATF added an additional 28 positions, or 19 percent more, compared to FY 2016. We did not assess their experience level or military intelligence background as part of our review.

<sup>30</sup> ATF integrated Industry Operations Investigators into the CGICs as Industry Operations Intelligence Specialists as a way to better integrate industry operations and criminal enforcement to maximize efforts to exploit and link all available data from criminal investigations and industry operations. Industry Operations Intelligence Specialists bring industry operations knowledge and expertise into the CGICs' mission.

<sup>31</sup> ATF Order 3800.2, Intelligence Program, March 1, 2012.

that field division CGICs conducted both intelligence support and criminal enforcement investigations, such as investigations of firearms trafficking. ATF staff told us that this new hybrid model, combining intelligence support and targeted criminal enforcement, was effective in supporting their mission. However, ATF lacks formal guidance to support and sustain this hybrid model. For example, we found that ATF's 2012 Intelligence Program Order (Order) defined an intelligence support role only for intelligence groups.<sup>32</sup> The Order specifically states that intelligence groups support criminal investigations and industry operations through intelligence products and other analytical services. The Order further states that the intelligence groups "are not typical criminal enforcement offices" and "will not be assigned collateral duties that prohibit or interfere with the primary responsibility of conducting designated criminal intelligence activities."<sup>33</sup> The Order also designates intelligence group Special Agents as Intelligence Officers and prohibits them from assuming "case agent responsibilities for actual criminal investigations."<sup>34</sup> ATF's Assistant Director for the Office of Strategic Intelligence and Information told us that it was an oversight for ATF to fail to update the Order to define the CGICs' investigative role under Frontline. We believe that without clear, updated guidance from headquarters, the CGICs, which perform a critical function as part of Frontline's intelligence-driven focus, may evolve inconsistently based on individual field division leadership and varying experience levels of CGIC personnel.<sup>35</sup>

#### Despite Improvements, ATF Still Had a "No Response" Rate Over 60 percent for Internal Referrals

In a 2004 OIG review, we found that ATF needed to improve its coordination efforts between Industry Operations Investigators and Special Agents. Specifically, we noted that 12 of 18 Industry Operations Investigators said that they rarely referred information gathered during Federal Firearms Licensee inspections to criminal enforcement because they did not believe that Special Agents would follow up. Since our 2004 review, we found that ATF has updated its policies, including the Frontline Manual, to emphasize the importance of tracking internal referrals

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<sup>32</sup> The Frontline Manual reinforces the intelligence support roles of the CGIC and highlights select responsibilities as delineated in the Order.

Our review of the Order focused on the intelligence group and associated sections; we did not assess ATF's compliance with each part of its intelligence program policy. For more information on our methodology, see [Appendix 1](#).

<sup>33</sup> ATF Order 3800.2.

<sup>34</sup> ATF Order 3800.2.

<sup>35</sup> ATF's 2017 CGIC assessment also identified these inconsistencies, citing confusion over assigning Special Agents to the CGICs. ATF found that 8 of 26 CGICs were "deficient" and needed "substantial attention" based on their "baseline performance on [CGIC] critical elements." ATF executives told us that ATF was implementing improvement plans for these underperforming CGICs. We discuss ATF's 2017 CGIC assessment in the [Introduction](#).

from industry operations to criminal enforcement, through the CGICs, and that all referrals now require a response.<sup>36</sup>

We analyzed ATF's internal referral response data and found that ATF is not meeting its referral response and tracking requirements as defined in the Frontline Manual. In comparing the 4 years prior to Frontline's implementation (FY 2009–FY 2012) to the 4 years since Frontline's implementation (FY 2013–FY 2016), we found that the "no response" rate decreased from 77.8 percent to 61.0 percent.<sup>37</sup> We are concerned that during our review period ATF still had a high "no response" rate despite improved CGIC staffing and Frontline's emphasis on referral response and tracking requirements.<sup>38</sup> A high "no response" rate indicates that some viable referrals may not receive follow-up, which could result in missed investigative leads.

Additionally, our analysis showed a 24.4 percent decrease in the average number of industry operations referrals after Frontline's implementation: pre-Frontline referrals averaged 1,943 per year, whereas post-Frontline referrals averaged 1,469. Although there was a decrease in overall referrals submitted, the number of accepted referrals remained relatively constant. Despite the smaller referral pool, Special Agents and Industry Operations Area Supervisors told us they believed that the quality had improved because referrals were more actionable. Special Agents told us that referrals were more developed and relevant to the field divisions' priorities, which allowed them to initiate casework upon receiving the referral. According to one CGIC supervisor, his CGIC industry operations staff trained Industry Operations Investigators to help them understand the big picture and promote relevant and actionable referrals that match the Domain Assessment. See Figure 2 below for trends in industry operations referral responses.

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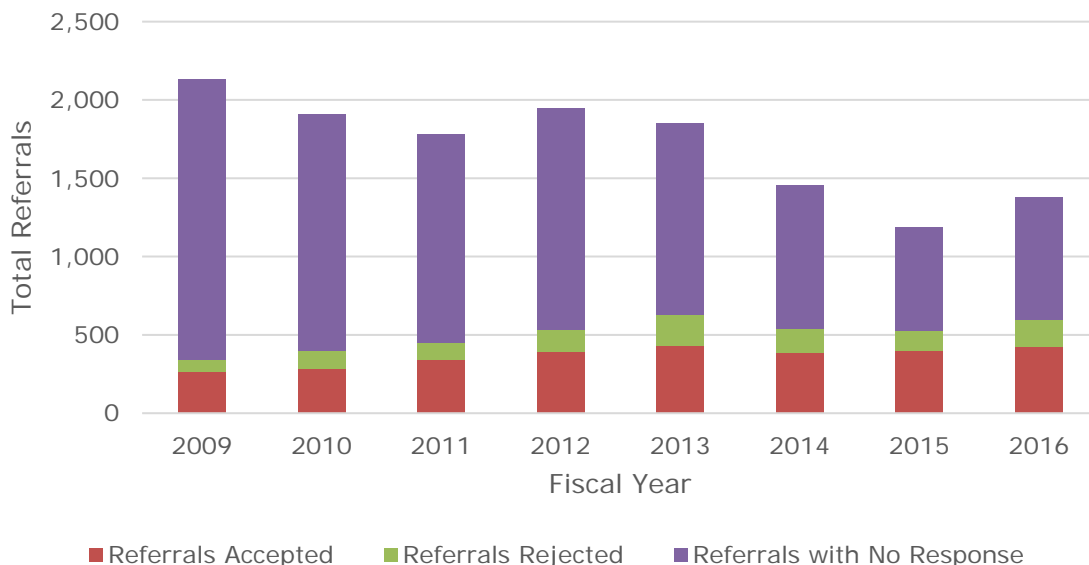
<sup>36</sup> An internal referral occurs when criminal enforcement, industry operations, and the CGIC exchange information within the field division. For example, an Industry Operations Investigator, having discovered information during the course of a regulatory inspection that may involve criminal and/or civil violations, refers it through his or her Area Supervisor to the CGIC. The Industry Operations Manual, Frontline Manual, and Intelligence Order describe requirements for the handling of internal referrals, including responses and tracking.

<sup>37</sup> A "no response" rate indicates the proportion of referrals for which ATF did not provide an "accepted" or "rejected" disposition in its case management system. ATF's Case Management System, Industry Operations Referrals data field, lists four possible entries: "accepted," "rejected," "other," or "no response."

<sup>38</sup> The Chief of the Office of Strategic Management told us that the no-response rate was still high because ATF's current case management system did not require a disposition. He further added that when ATF's new case management system is brought online it will address these problems by requiring staff to complete an action before closing it out.

**Figure 2**

**Industry Operations Referral Responses, FY 2009–FY 2016**



Note: ATF’s referral data includes four response statuses: “accepted,” “rejected,” “other,” and “no response.” We excluded the “other” response status from our analysis because a submission of “other” denotes that the referral is for informational purposes only and does not require acceptance or rejection.

Source: ATF referral data

Although industry operations staff told us that the integration of an Industry Operations Investigator into the CGIC improved awareness of referral outcomes, they also told us that they still did not receive updates from criminal enforcement groups on the outcome of referrals that ultimately became criminal cases. Industry operations staff told us that they wanted more feedback on referrals so they could continue to improve future referrals. Similarly, a former CGIC supervisor also told us that the Special Agents within the criminal enforcement groups did not provide information on outcomes when his CGIC sent referrals to them. The former CGIC supervisor told us that, to address this problem, his field division developed an accountability model to ensure that criminal enforcement groups followed up on referrals, requiring the Special Agent to brief the CGIC staff on the status and progress of the referral to help them develop better quality referrals in the future.

In sum, we found that ATF has taken steps to enhance its CGICs through improved staffing and expanded mission sets. However, we believe that a lack of formal and current intelligence guidance may perpetuate inconsistencies across ATF’s CGICs. When coupled with low referral response rates, this may lessen Frontline’s effectiveness as an intelligence-driven policing model. Furthermore, we believe that holding staff accountable for referral responses is critical for improving future referrals as well as ensuring that responsible staff review referrals for potential criminal intelligence that could improve criminal investigations, consistent with Frontline’s intent. During our fieldwork, ATF executives told us that ATF plans to make additional CGIC improvements, such as updating best practices, policies,

procedures, and performance measures, following an outside contractor's review of the CGICs. In response to a working draft of this report, ATF reported that the contractor had completed its CGIC operations assessment and would deliver a report to ATF in December 2018.

*Improving External Partner Participation in ATF Technologies Is Critical for Frontline's Future Success*

Under Frontline, ATF has made some improvements in its use of technology and data to better support ATF operations and accomplish its mission. However, we determined that ATF must improve and increase its external law enforcement partners' participation in ATF technologies to support Frontline's intelligence-driven policing model. This includes promoting the comprehensive and timely use of both the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) and firearms tracing.<sup>39</sup> ATF manages both the NIBIN and firearms tracing programs and uses these proprietary technologies to connect violent crimes, develop investigative leads, and prioritize discretionary industry operations inspections.

NIBIN is a network of dedicated forensic machines through which law enforcement can link shell casings collected from different crime scenes that otherwise may not be connected. According to ATF executives, including the acting Director, and staff, ATF's NIBIN program evolved concurrently with Frontline as a way to make NIBIN more responsive to ATF operations and help accomplish ATF's goals and priorities. For example, under Frontline ATF reorganized the NIBIN program, shifting it from a purely forensic tool to an investigative leads generator. The Chief of NIBIN Site Operations told us that NIBIN leads can be identified more quickly than NIBIN hits.<sup>40</sup> The increased use of NIBIN leads assists Special Agents in advancing their investigations by identifying potential shooters more quickly. Our analysis of NIBIN leads and hits data showed that confirmed hits averaged 7,341 per year between FY 2009 and FY 2016. In comparison, during FY 2016 there were over 19,000 NIBIN leads. We found that during FY 2016 the number of

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<sup>39</sup> Comprehensive use of NIBIN involves the process of collecting and submitting all evidence suitable for entry into NIBIN, regardless of the crime. Evidence includes both cartridge cases recovered from crime scenes and test fires from recovered crime guns. ATF established a 48–72 hour turnaround for entering evidence into NIBIN in order to identify potential NIBIN leads and provide relevant and actionable intelligence to investigators.

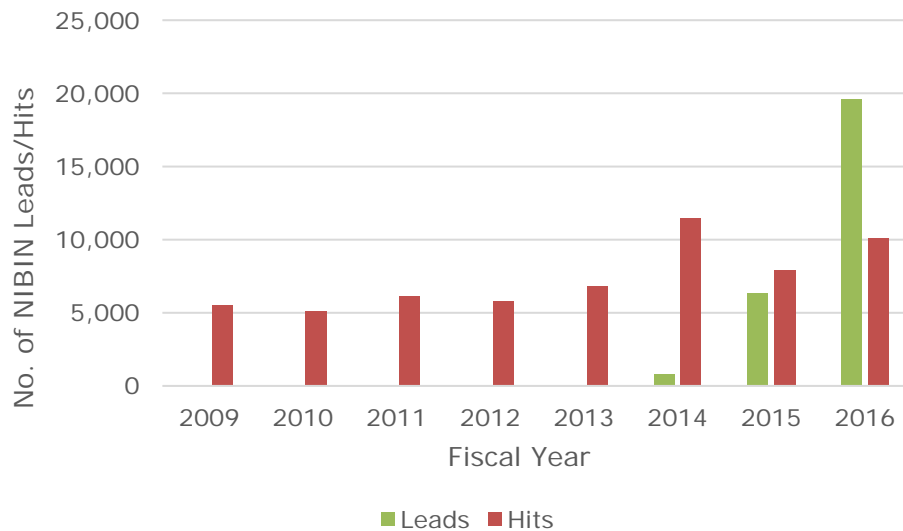
Comprehensive firearms tracing is the systemic tracking of all recovered crime guns to the last known purchaser. Law enforcement agencies can request and analyze firearms traces using ATF's eTrace system. ATF set timeliness goals for completing urgent traces at less than 24 hours and for routine traces within 5 days on average. ATF considers comprehensive collection and timeliness as critical steps to NIBIN's success.

<sup>40</sup> A NIBIN lead occurs when the NIBIN system links two shell casings and a technician reviews the images on a screen monitor. Although not a "confirmed" hit, often a lead undergoes a peer review by two different technicians or Forensic Examiners to determine a match.

A NIBIN hit occurs when the NIBIN system links two shell casings and a Forensic Examiner confirms a match by looking at both through a microscope. External factors, such as the locations of the shell casings in different jurisdictions or local police department rules that govern the evidence chain of custody, may delay this process. Prosecutors may use NIBIN hits in court, either as evidence to obtain a search or arrest warrant or in courtroom testimony.

NIBIN leads was nearly double the number of hits. This significantly higher number of NIBIN leads means that ATF had more information about potentially linked crimes to identify and target the most active violent offenders. See Figure 3 for NIBIN investigative leads and hits from FY 2014 through FY 2016.

**Figure 3**  
**Number of NIBIN Investigative Leads and Hits**  
**FY 2014–FY 2016**



Notes: ATF began collecting data on leads in FY 2014. Since each collection site self-reports its data, these totals may not accurately reflect the total number of leads generated each year.

Source: ATF NIBIN data

ATF’s NIBIN program relies on external partners, including state and local law enforcement, to collect and submit evidence in order to significantly broaden the amount of available evidence and better develop potential NIBIN leads and hits. However, we found that constraints such as budget and personnel shortages, lack of technical expertise, and differing operational techniques and practices, may limit external law enforcement partners’ ability to effectively participate in the program.<sup>41</sup> For example, a field division CGIC supervisor told us that a local police department was not meeting ATF’s preferred NIBIN timeliness standards due to internal personnel constraints and evidence processing policies. Similarly, a field division Special Agent in Charge (SAC) told us that in the past the field division’s

<sup>41</sup> A 2005 OIG report found concerns with a backlog in NIBIN evidence data entry due to external partner staffing shortages, conflicts in priorities, and a large amount of evidence submitted. OIG concluded that ATF could improve participation by better promoting the use and benefits of NIBIN to law enforcement agencies and by improving partner agency involvement in promoting the NIBIN program to other law enforcement agencies in their area. DOJ OIG, [The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives’ National Integrated Ballistic Information Network Program](#), Audit Report 05-30 (June 2005).



law enforcement partners entered evidence into NIBIN only when a case involved an injured victim; the SAC cited local police department laboratory staffing shortages as the reason for this limited practice.

To improve external partner participation in NIBIN, ATF has promoted the adoption and use of its technologies and processes to its external partners. For example, as part of an Enhanced Enforcement Initiative (EEI) to combat an increase in violent crime, ATF deployed its NIBIN mobile laboratory van to assist the local police department.<sup>42</sup> During the deployment, ATF operated the mobile laboratory with expanded hours to demonstrate that a change in the police department's business practices could improve the police department's timeliness and potential success. We also found that as a result of ATF's NIBIN program reorganization and improved responsiveness to ATF's intelligence-driven operations, some NIBIN partners followed ATF's lead and moved their NIBIN programs out of their forensic laboratories. The Chief of NIBIN Site Operations and an Assistant Police Chief told us that these moves improved the partners' NIBIN timeliness and reduced their backlogs, which allowed quicker dissemination and follow-up of NIBIN leads. We also found that ATF established the National Correlation Center to assist partners that lacked Forensic Examiners and has assisted local police departments in drafting grant requirements to establish CGICs.<sup>43</sup> Because of these efforts, ATF and its partners receive more timely and actionable NIBIN leads that could help law enforcement apprehend more violent offenders and prevent them from committing more violent gun crimes.

Another example of ATF's reliance on external partners is in its firearms tracing program, which provides for "systematic tracking of a recovered firearm from its manufacturer or importer and subsequent introduction into the distribution chain (wholesaler/retailer) to an unlicensed purchaser."<sup>44</sup> ATF applies tracing data to assist in developing investigative leads by determining the firearm's prior ownership as well as identifying trafficking trends and prioritizing high risk Federal Firearms Licensees (FFL).<sup>45</sup>

During our interviews, staff expressed concerns about the completeness of firearms tracing data. For example, one Director of Industry Operations stated that only 15 percent of local police departments within his field division's area of

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<sup>42</sup> EEIs, formally known as "Surges," provide enhanced strategic and tactical support tailored to address an identified violent crime problem, as well as a framework to sustain a comprehensive, integrated, and intelligence-driven enforcement effort.

<sup>43</sup> In FY 2016, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, in partnership with ATF, established the National CGIC Initiative grant. See DOJ Bureau of Justice Assistance, "National Crime Gun Intelligence Center Initiative FY 2016 Limited Competition Grant Announcement," [www.bja.gov/funding/NationalCrimeGun16.pdf](http://www.bja.gov/funding/NationalCrimeGun16.pdf) (accessed February 5, 2019).

<sup>44</sup> ATF, "Fact Sheet—eTrace: Internet-based Firearms Tracing and Analysis," May 2018, [www.atf.gov/resource-center/fact-sheet/fact-sheet-etrace-internet-based-firearms-tracing-and-analysis](http://www.atf.gov/resource-center/fact-sheet/fact-sheet-etrace-internet-based-firearms-tracing-and-analysis) (accessed February 5, 2019).

<sup>45</sup> ATF determines whether to classify an FFL as "high risk" based on a series of risk indicators such as a high number of guns used in crimes being traced back to the licensee, numerous multiple sales by an FFL to a single individual, thefts or losses of firearms, and location in a high-crime area.

responsibility conducted firearms tracing, which could result in underestimating the overall risk in the field division. He told us that if more police departments were to trace firearms, he believed that ATF could improve its intelligence for identifying higher risk FFLs and reducing firearms trafficking. To increase participation, his division held information sessions with local police departments to promote the value of gun tracing as an investigative tool. Although we did not review police department participation in comprehensive firearms tracing, we believe that ATF must remain cognizant of the limitations of using incomplete information in Frontline's intelligence-driven, risk-based decision making process.

In sum, we found that ATF has enhanced its intelligence-driven model through improvements to its proprietary technology; however, to be fully effective and efficient, these technologies rely on external partner involvement. We believe that ATF's efforts to increase external partners' participation in its programs can be further advanced through improving communications; sharing best practices; and conducting targeted outreach activities, such as informational seminars, to highlight the effective use of ATF's proprietary investigative technologies in fighting violent crime.<sup>46</sup>

In response to a working draft of this report, ATF reported that it has developed a Crime Gun Intelligence Best Practices Guide to assist state, local, federal, and tribal law enforcement agencies in implementing a crime gun intelligence program as part of a comprehensive violent crime strategy. ATF also reported that it distributed 22 new NIBIN machines to state and local partners in FY 2018 and that 16 of the new machines were used to establish new NIBIN sites.<sup>47</sup>

### **A Lack of Frontline Performance Metrics and Insufficient Data Hinders ATF's Ability to Assess Its Effectiveness**

While ATF has performance metrics linked to a strategic plan that address its work as a whole, we found that ATF does not have performance metrics specifically for Frontline.<sup>48</sup> We also found that data ATF could use to measure Frontline's effectiveness may be incomplete and, in some cases, collected inconsistently or not collected at all. ATF senior headquarters officials told us that because Frontline is the process ATF uses to achieve its mission, Frontline's effectiveness should be measured by the success of the organization as a whole. They also emphasized the importance of impact rather than numerical targets and of understanding the

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<sup>46</sup> We asked ATF executives about ongoing headquarters-level outreach. They told us that ATF engages with partners at professional law enforcement forums and individual police departments to promote the value of crime gun intelligence and its NIBIN program. They also told us that ATF has expanded its National Crime Gun Intelligence Governing Board and developed new Minimum Required Operating Standards for its NIBIN sites to promote continued partner participation. The National Crime Gun Intelligence Governing Board, which consists of representatives from ATF and external law enforcement partners, establishes policies, standardizes best practices, and provides subject matter expertise on national issues relating to crime gun intelligence.

<sup>47</sup> OIG did not assess ATF's newly developed Crime Gun Intelligence Best Practices Guide nor the introduction of new NIBIN machines as part of this review.

<sup>48</sup> We did not evaluate the ATF Strategic Plan's performance metrics as part of our review.

causes of changes in the data. We believe that the lack of metrics to examine the Frontline business model itself, as well as existing data limitations, may inhibit ATF's ability to understand how Frontline advances leadership priorities and to hold staff accountable.

*The Available Data to Evaluate Frontline's Effectiveness Is Often Insufficient*

Frontline reemphasized reducing violent crime by targeting the most violent offenders. Some ATF staff told us they had noticed a number of changes to their work, including the prioritization of violent crime cases, more proactive cases, fewer adoptive cases, stronger cases referred for prosecution, and better use of technology. However, we found that ATF data that could support possible indicators of Frontline's successes were sometimes inconclusive, incomplete, potentially inaccurate, or not available.

Data That ATF Could Use Is Sometimes Inconclusive

In interviews, ATF staff cited cases accepted and declined for prosecution as possible indicators of Frontline's success; but we concluded that ATF's data cannot distinguish whether it was Frontline or another factor that affected the statistics. In ATF field divisions we visited, we found that staff recognized the importance of obtaining U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO) support for their cases. The staff met with USAO counterparts to discuss specific cases, evidence thresholds, emerging issues, and priorities with the intent of getting the most impactful cases accepted for prosecution. While staff we interviewed at both ATF field divisions and USAOs said they thought ATF's cases had become "stronger" and therefore more likely to be accepted, our review of national case acceptance and declination rates showed only small improvements between pre-Frontline years (FY 2009–FY 2012) and post-Frontline years (FY 2013–FY 2016). Nationally, the average case acceptance rate increased from 81.4 percent to at least 82.8 percent.<sup>49</sup>

Almost all ATF field divisions had a decrease in their case declination rates between pre-Frontline and post-Frontline years, with some field divisions seeing up to an 11 percentage point decrease.<sup>50</sup> However, case acceptance and declination rates can be influenced by a number of factors, including the types of crimes committed, changes in USAO resources and priorities, and individual working relationships. Therefore, ATF could not use acceptance and declination rates alone as an indicator of Frontline's effect and, without targeted data, cannot point to any particular aspect of Frontline that may be contributing to the improved percentages.

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<sup>49</sup> As of November 2017, 1,108 cases recommended for prosecution between FY 2009 and FY 2016 were still pending USAO acceptance or declination. If the USAOs ultimately accept any of these cases, the acceptance rate will increase further.

<sup>50</sup> One field division decreased its declination rate from 24.3 percent to 13.2 percent—a change of 11.1 percentage points. As of November 2017, this field division had 41 cases recommended for prosecution between FY 2013 and FY 2016 still pending USAO acceptance or declination. If the USAOs ultimately decline all remaining pending cases, the declination rate will have decreased from 24.8 to 14.9 percent—a difference of 9.9 percentage points.

If the decreases in declination rates are within ATF's control, ATF is more likely to sustain these decreases if it has a better understanding of their cause.

### Limitations in ATF's Case Management System Contribute to Difficulties in Measuring Frontline's Effect on ATF Investigations

We found that some of the data that ATF collects might not accurately capture ATF's work because of limitations in ATF's case management system. For example, we found that ATF's data cannot demonstrate ATF's use of NIBIN and firearms tracing as the primary intelligence drivers for an investigation. As discussed previously, ATF has made improvements in its use of technology to support Frontline's emphasis on intelligence-driven operations. However, the Chief of the Office of Strategic Management told us that while ATF can identify the number of investigations that used NIBIN, ATF cannot determine from its data when NIBIN was used during the course of the investigation. Specifically, the data cannot identify whether ATF initiated an investigation as a direct result of a NIBIN lead or used NIBIN later in the course of investigation. Without more detailed data, ATF's ability to measure the impact and effectiveness of its technologies on Frontline's intelligence-driven approach is limited.

As another example, although several ATF and USAO staff told us that they thought ATF's work had become more proactive, the data available to support that view was limited and possibly inaccurate. In a January 2012 policy memorandum issued prior to Frontline's implementation, the Assistant Director for Field Operations established case type definitions for proactive, reactive, and adoptive cases.<sup>51</sup> According to ATF data, from FY 2013 through FY 2016, cases that ATF initiated averaged 35 percent proactive, 42 percent reactive, and 23 percent adoptive.<sup>52</sup> Over this same period, as the proportion of reactive cases increased, the proportion of proactive cases decreased by the same amount. See Table 1 below for cases initiated by type between FY 2013 and FY 2016.

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<sup>51</sup> Proactive cases, initiated by ATF, focus on active and ongoing violations of law. Reactive cases, also initiated by ATF, focus on an incident or suspected violation that has already occurred. Adoptive cases begin as a state or local case, which ATF then accepts into the federal justice system for processing after making an arrest. See W. Larry Ford, Assistant Director, Office of Field Operations, ATF, and James McDermond, Assistant Director, Office of Strategic Intelligence and Information, ATF, memorandum for All Special Agents in Charge, New Case Type Policy and Addition of Case Type Codes to N-Force, January 26, 2012.

<sup>52</sup> This analysis does not include National Instant Criminal Background Check System delayed-denial cases in the counts of reactive cases. For more information, see the [Data Collection and Analysis](#) section of Appendix 1.

**Table 1**  
**Cases Initiated by Type, FY 2013–FY 2016**

Case Types Initiated	2013		2014		2015		2016		Average	
	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%
Adoptive	4,779	23%	4,052	22%	4,473	21%	5,720	24%	4,756	23%
Proactive	7,905	39%	6,906	37%	6,883	33%	8,038	34%	7,433	35%
Reactive	7,718	38%	7,836	42%	9,779	46%	10,204	43%	8,884	42%
<b>Total</b>	20,402	-	18,794	-	21,135	-	23,962	-	21,073	-

Notes: Percentages in the table may not total 100 percent due to rounding. Reactive cases do not include mandatory National Instant Criminal Background Check System delayed-denial cases. We could not assess whether there was a change in the proportion of case types corresponding with Frontline’s implementation because ATF did not collect complete case type data prior to 2013.

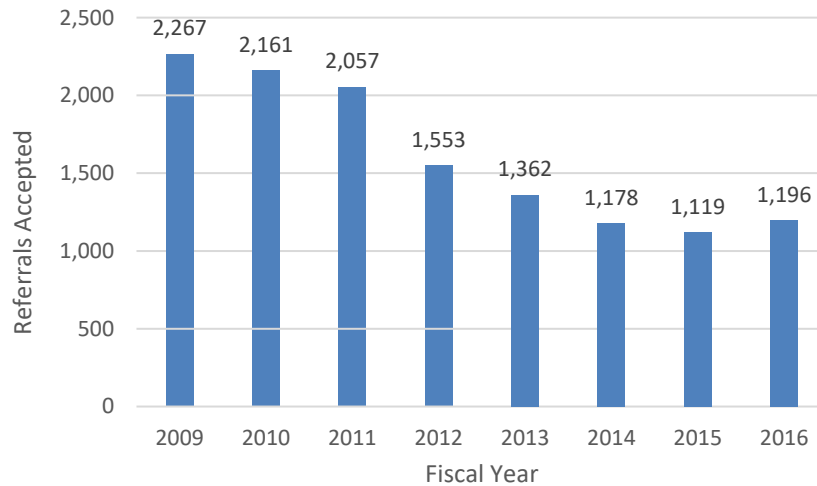
Source: OIG analysis of data derived from ATF’s case management system

While the case types are recorded in ATF’s case management system in order to allow ATF management to better assess and manage the types of cases worked, we found that the case type data might not accurately represent ATF’s proactive cases. ATF’s case type policy notes that staff may redesignate a reactive or adoptive case as a proactive case at any time if the investigation expands to include new or additional violations or suspects. The Chief of the Office of Strategic Management told us that, in his experience, Special Agents “pick and stick” with their original case type designation; he said that while it is the supervisor’s responsibly to ensure that the Special Agents are keeping their case management entries up to date, it may not always happen. He also stated that ATF’s case management system could not track subsequent case type changes. Because of this, the data may underrepresent the proportion of ATF’s proactive cases, providing inaccurate information to ATF managers and decision makers.

Non-Mandatory Manual Entry of Information Results in Incomplete Data

We found that reliance on manual entry was a recurring challenge with data derived from ATF’s case management system. For a number of metrics, the data may be incomplete because it relies on optional, manual input by Special Agents. For example, we analyzed state and local law enforcement referrals accepted by ATF before and after Frontline’s initiation. As shown in Figure 4 below, the number of state and local law enforcement referrals that ATF accepted during FY 2012 decreased 25 percent from FY 2011 and remained lower after Frontline’s implementation.

**Figure 4**  
**Referrals From State and Local Law Enforcement**  
**Accepted by ATF, FY 2009–FY 2016**



Source: Data derived from ATF’s case management system

Also, the decrease in accepted referrals corresponds with the issuance of the case type policy memorandum, which stipulated that adoptive cases must “fit into an identifiable strategic goal within the office.”<sup>53</sup> The memorandum also stated that accepted referrals should generally be limited except in specific scenarios, such as a lack of applicable felony violations at the state level or a connection between the defendant and another ATF investigation. We believe that this decrease in accepted referrals could suggest a decrease in adoptive cases, corresponding with ATF’s emphasis on its proactive priorities.<sup>54</sup> However, data on referrals from state and local law enforcement is collected in a non-mandatory field in ATF’s case management system and therefore may be incomplete.

Two Intelligence Research Specialists told us that, in order for the case management system to count their work in supporting a case, the case agent must manually indicate in a non-mandatory field that he or she received CGIC support. Several first-line supervisors expressed similar concerns that ATF’s data did not accurately represent their groups’ work. One Group Supervisor told us that when he caught data errors he asked his staff to go back and fill in missing information. Another Group Supervisor told us that, in his experience, Special Agents often found completing tabs in the case management system tedious. He believed that it is important to explain to the Special Agents how those extra steps fit into the bigger picture and how ATF leadership uses the data to justify resource requests.

<sup>53</sup> Ford and McDermond, memorandum for All Special Agents in Charge, January 26, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> ATF began collecting data on the number of adoptive cases in FY 2012; because of this, OIG could not identify trends in adoptive cases prior to 2012 or compare the number of adoptive cases opened before and after Frontline’s initiation.

We believe that incomplete data entry could underrepresent the work done by ATF field offices and its value to the field division.<sup>55</sup>

### *ATF Did Not Consistently Document External Partner Coordination Challenges*

The Frontline Manual states that communication and collaboration with external partners, including USAOs and state and local law enforcement, is crucial to the success of its law enforcement mission. While coordination with external partners is not new to ATF, Frontline identified it as a baseline best practice for all ATF field divisions. Staff at ATF, the USAO, and state and local law enforcement agencies we visited spoke positively about their working relationships. However, we found that ATF does not adequately document its external coordination, including challenges with partners or results of outreach activities, such as those discussed above, which would assist in division- and headquarters-level planning and effectiveness measurements.

We found that the criminal enforcement Domain Assessments inconsistently captured field divisions' coordination with their USAO partners between FY 2013 and FY 2017. Regional Deputy Assistant Directors for Field Operations told us that they expect the SACs in their regions to communicate and coordinate priorities with the USAOs, with one Deputy Assistant Director explicitly saying that the SACs should document in the Domain Assessment the results of these efforts. However, we found that the criminal enforcement Domain Assessment instructions have not consistently identified this as a requirement. The FY 2013 instructions stated that it was "required" that the field divisions "discuss domain assessment findings and plans with all [U.S. Attorneys] in [their] area of responsibility (seek buy-in not approval)."<sup>56</sup> Between FY 2014 and FY 2016, the instructions required field offices to describe only their "working relationships" with federal judicial districts in their area. ATF's FY 2017 instructions advise that the criminal enforcement field office should consider its relationship with the USAO, among other things, when assessing whether its goals and priorities for the upcoming year are realistic. However, the instructions did not require a discussion of external partnerships, partner priorities, or the field offices' plans to address conflicting priorities in the upcoming year. A former field division SAC told us that when his partner USAO was not accepting many of the field division's cases, he raised the issue directly with the regional Deputy Assistant Director. Although the SAC acknowledged that a field division SAC should document this type of information in a Domain Assessment, he said he could not recall whether he included it in his Domain Assessment at the time.

In contrast, we found that the FY 2017 Field Division/CGIC Domain Assessment instructions required the CGICs to document their work with both the USAOs and the state and local police departments, as well as to address challenges encountered. For example, the Prosecution section required the CGICs to document

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<sup>55</sup> ATF executives told us that ATF's new case management system would make a number of data entry fields mandatory and would include checks to ensure that staffs enter data correctly.

<sup>56</sup> FRONTLINE Domain Assessment–XYZ Field Division Template 3.2, 2013.

their work with the USAO and the District Attorney's Office when developing prosecution guidelines for CGIC investigations.<sup>57</sup> Other examples include the NIBIN and Comprehensive Firearms Tracing sections, which required the CGICs to document their efforts to encourage state and local law enforcement partners' timely collection and submission of evidence into NIBIN and ensure law enforcement partners' eTrace accounts are active. The Field Division/CGIC Domain Assessment instructions specifically asked preparers to address the problems that inhibit comprehensive collection of ballistic evidence and the steps taken to remedy them. However, like the individual criminal enforcement group Domain Assessments, the sections of the Field Division/CGIC Domain Assessment devoted to the field division as a whole did not require any discussion of coordination with the USAO or state and local law enforcement. This could have limited division- and headquarters-level planning and identification of effective solutions to relationship challenges.

We also found that the Domain Assessment instructions did not include a requirement to discuss communication and coordination challenges with other federal law enforcement agencies.<sup>58</sup> ATF executives told us that ATF engages with other federal agencies, particularly with respect to information sharing, through the Office of Strategic Intelligence and Information. However, two CGIC staff told us that they have experienced challenges with information sharing among federal law enforcement agencies since Frontline's implementation. While a number of Domain Assessments that we reviewed did refer to other federal law enforcement agencies, it was typically in the context of task force participation or assigned Task Force Officers.

ATF executives also told us that they were not sure why ATF removed the requirement to discuss external partner working relationships from the Domain Assessment. They cited several possible reasons, including concerns about identifying external partner challenges in a document that they then share with the partner. The Assistant Director for Field Operations stated that the Domain Assessment was probably not the right place to memorialize conflicts or concerns. Instead, the ATF executives said they believed that this information should be elevated and discussed at other points. For example, ATF executives told us that they planned to implement an expanded end-of-year Frontline Performance Review that would include a formal review meeting between the SAC, Deputy Assistant Director, and Assistant Director, stating that this would be a place to discuss partner challenges. They also identified meetings with the newly established Frontline Investigative Support Branch as another place to address those concerns. While we believe these actions could potentially identify solutions to challenges associated with external partnerships, ATF had not established these review processes at the time of our fieldwork.

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<sup>57</sup> As discussed earlier in the report, some of ATF's CGICs have an investigative mission that would refer cases for prosecution.

We did not conduct interviews at local District Attorney's Offices as part of our review.

<sup>58</sup> Prior OIG reviews identified coordination with other federal agencies as a concern. See [Appendix 2](#) for more information.



*Frontline Documentation Did Not Adequately Capture the Results of Industry Operations Outreach and External Support Efforts*

Along with conducting criminal law enforcement investigations, ATF is responsible for regulating the firearms and explosives industries. We found that, despite ATF's intention to bring the criminal enforcement and industry operations elements together under one business model, Frontline documentation did not adequately address the role of industry operations' external support and outreach. Although ATF industry operations staff viewed communication and outreach to firearms and explosives industry members as an important part of their work, the Frontline Manual did not address ATF's communication with industry members. However, one ATF Assistant Director stated that the Frontline mindset that would lead a Special Agent to build relationships with local police would be the same when developing relationships with firearms and explosives industry members.

We found that, while Industry Operations Investigators worked closely with industry members during inspections and were available to respond to questions, ATF did not have metrics to track this communication in order to hold staff accountable for that work or to understand the impact of the interactions. One Director of Industry Operations told us that Industry Operations Investigators spent a significant amount of time building rapport with industry members, which resulted in the industry members being comfortable contacting ATF if they suspected that criminal activity was occurring. However, ATF's metrics focused on the completion of inspections and did not adequately account for time spent on rapport building. Further, ATF did not capture the successes that resulted from communication and outreach with industry members, such as an FFL calling ATF to report a suspicious purchase, unless it led to a criminal referral. One Industry Operations Investigator told us that she received a call from an FFL who wanted to manufacture firearm receivers but was unsure whether ATF would classify them as firearms.<sup>59</sup> She was able to inform the FFL that ATF would classify the receivers he planned to manufacture as firearms, and therefore the receivers were required to have serial numbers and other mandatory markings.<sup>60</sup> This communication prevented the FFL from unknowingly selling untraceable firearms, which could hinder crime gun

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<sup>59</sup> The *Gun Control Act of 1968*, in 18 U.S.C. § 921(a)(3), defines a firearm to include, in part, "...the frame or receiver of any such weapon [any weapon (including a starter gun) which will or is designed to or may readily be converted to expel a projectile by action of an explosive]...." Federal regulation at 27 C.F.R. § 478.11 defines a firearm frame or receiver as "that part of a firearm which provides housing for the hammer, bolt or breechblock, and firing mechanism, and which is usually threaded at its forward portion to receive the barrel." ATF stated that it has long held that items which have not reached the "stage of manufacture" to be a firearm frame or receiver, based on the objective characteristics of the item, do not meet the definition of a firearm under the *Gun Control Act*.

<sup>60</sup> According to ATF, the *Gun Control Act of 1968*, in 18 U.S.C. § 923(i), generally requires that any licensed importer and licensed manufacturer identify any firearm manufactured or imported by a serial number and other markings as prescribed by regulation on the receiver or frame of the weapon. The definition of firearm includes a firearm frame or receiver in section 921(a)(3), therefore any frame or receiver of a firearm must be marked accordingly. See also 27 C.F.R. § 478.92.

investigations and threaten public safety. ATF's current metrics would not have captured this interaction, its outcome, or its impact.

In addition, we found that ATF's Industry Operations Field Office Domain Assessments required its field divisions to conduct and enumerate formal outreach activities.<sup>61</sup> However, the Domain Assessment instructions did not require the field offices to report the content, audience, or potential impact of the events, which could limit field offices' ability to demonstrate how the events fit into their overall strategy or assess the effectiveness of the outreach for future planning. Several ATF industry operations staff expressed concern that certain headquarters-mandated outreach events may be less relevant for their geographical areas. For example, two Directors of Industry Operations told us that they questioned the value of gun show informational booths. One said that most gun show interactions were with the public, rather than with industry members. The other believed that the division could accomplish more effective outreach to industry partners with seminars and requested permission from ATF headquarters to conduct seminars in place of gun shows. We believe that allowing field offices to tailor and justify their planned outreach activities based on their Domain Assessments would enable industry operations groups to maximize their effectiveness within their unique environments and allow ATF headquarters to identify and share effective outreach practices across field divisions.

ATF headquarters senior officials emphasized the importance of going beyond numbers and metrics, using them as starting points for conversations about root causes of problems and potential solutions. We found that the SACs and Directors of Industry Operations interacted regularly with their respective Deputy Assistant Directors for Field Operations and that ATF headquarters staff reached out to the field divisions to discuss potential concerns identified in the strategic plan performance metrics. However, we believe that gaps in data collection, whether in performance metrics or in Domain Assessments, may hinder ATF's ability to identify the concerns to drive those conversations.

ATF intended Frontline to promote accountability; to streamline measurements of effectiveness; and, through the Domain Assessments, to identify priorities, challenges, and strategies to best execute ATF's mission. However, given the data limitations we identified, we question how successfully ATF can assess the efficacy of the changes Frontline promoted, plan around challenges with partner agencies, identify trends or best practices in external relationships, and ultimately hold staff accountable for decisions made in those areas.

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<sup>61</sup> ATF-mandated outreach activities have varied across the fiscal years. The FY 2017 Domain Assessment instructions required each field division to conduct two firearms or explosives seminars and three gun show informational booths. The FY 2016 instructions required only two firearms or explosives seminars per field division. Instructions before FY 2016 did not include mandatory outreach, but they did prompt the preparer to discuss planned outreach to industry organizations.

## **ATF's Implementation of Frontline Was Not Fully Effective Due to Ineffective Communication, Insufficient Training, the Lack of a Formal Implementation Plan, and the Absence of Compliance Reviews**

Through Frontline, ATF seeks to enhance oversight and accountability, standardize its mission, revise its policies to better align with DOJ priorities and procedures, and measure operational effectiveness and accomplishments. However, we found that the initial steps taken to communicate Frontline's purpose, intent, and expectations to staff, as well as subsequent developmental training, were not effective or did not exist. We also found that ATF did not have a formal implementation plan or an internal inspection process for ensuring compliance with Frontline during its implementation and beyond. ATF's ineffective messaging and lack of internal reviews impeded its ability to gain employees' full acceptance of the changes and to assess Frontline's effectiveness.

### *ATF Did Not Effectively Communicate Frontline's Purpose, Intent, and Expectations to Staff*

ATF leadership told us that Frontline's purpose was to change the operational culture through enhanced leadership oversight and mission accountability and standardization of practices across field divisions. Additionally, Frontline's purpose was also to develop and align ATF's Strategic Plan with Departmental policies and procedures and to improve resource allocation. ATF leadership, including its former Director and current acting Director, as well as senior officials associated with the working group that created Frontline, told us they recognized that ATF employees might see Frontline as just "another headquarters initiative" to be "waited out, passed on, or skipped over." During interviews, supervisory staff identified the challenges of obtaining field staff buy-in for Frontline's approach and expressed skepticism due to prior initiatives and programs, such as the Crime Impact Program and Violent Crime Reduction Partnership, which no longer exist. Several Group Supervisors told us that Frontline was not really a new initiative but was just another program under a different name; some called Frontline ATF's "new buzzword." Although working group representatives we interviewed recognized the importance of messaging and training to develop acceptance at all levels across ATF, we found that ATF ineffectively communicated the message and Frontline's purpose and that sustained training to reinforce awareness and understanding for incoming supervisors was nonexistent.

### Initial Frontline Messaging Was Ineffective

We found that ATF's overall communication of Frontline's purpose, intent, and staff expectations was ineffective despite the development of a Frontline Manual (Manual) and several initial informational briefs, town halls, and roll calls. According to a working group representative, ATF did not introduce Frontline to the ATF staff until the Frontline Manual was completed. We also found that, as the primary instructional tool for Frontline, the Manual lacked a clear explanation of the purpose and intent for Frontline.

Additionally, we found that the four PowerPoint presentations that ATF used as part of its initial informational briefings during in-person town hall and roll call sessions lacked a clear message as to why ATF had created Frontline. Three of the four briefings did not discuss or explain the need to merge and standardize ATF operational missions under a single business model or the need for a shift in operational culture to effect change. In addition, only three of the four briefings provided general information on Frontline and only two of these three briefings (one each for a "Special Agent Perspective" and an "Industry Operations Investigator Perspective") provided some expanded information on Frontline and its core components, such as the Domain Assessment, Frontline Performance Review, and ATF's intelligence groups.

Although ATF titled the Special Agent Perspective and Industry Operations Investigator Perspective briefings as "What is Frontline," we found that the Industry Operations Investigator Perspective provided more information on Frontline's primary changes. However, it did not explain the purpose of the initiative and the reason ATF created the new business model. The Industry Operations Investigator Perspective highlighted the changes in the field division's industry operations priority development through improved use of its intelligence groups and risk analysis, described an increased need for communication and collaboration with the criminal enforcement groups, and emphasized the importance of referrals tailored to the needs of the criminal enforcement groups. It also identified the Domain Assessment as a tool to assess mission accomplishments. Lastly, the briefing described a portion of the Industry Operations Investigator and Area Supervisor roles under Frontline.

By contrast, the Special Agent Perspective identified only broad points of Frontline and its components, such as the Domain Assessments, performance reviews, and the intelligence groups, without explaining these components in any detail. In addition to the briefing's lack of explanation for the purpose and reason for Frontline, we found that it also lacked sufficient information about the Domain Assessment's purpose and use, and simply directed Special Agents to the ATF Intranet homepage to view an aid for developing a Domain Assessment, which is a critical part of Frontline. Lastly, although the briefing highlighted roles of the Special Agent, it did not identify roles for the criminal enforcement Group Supervisor.

ATF's acting Director and other senior headquarters officials told us that Frontline was required training for all new Special Agents and Industry Operations Investigators at the ATF National Academy. According to ATF's Deputy Assistant Director for Human Resources and Professional Development, ATF's National Academy first provided Frontline training to its Special Agent Basic Training class in 2015. Although ATF could not produce copies of the training, the Deputy Assistant Director for Human Resources and Professional Development told OIG that there were no substantial modifications to the National Academy's Frontline training since Frontline's implementation in FY 2013. However, in reviewing a portion of ATF's FY 2018 National Academy new recruit briefing, dated June 2017, we found that ATF included a basic Frontline overview that generally provided more information on Frontline's purpose, intent, and intelligence-driven approach to combat violent crime than both of the initial Industry Operations Investigator and Special Agent Perspective briefings.

In general, nearly all headquarters and field division staff that we interviewed recalled having received some initial briefings during Frontline's implementation and noted subsequent changes within ATF. However, we found that staff was unsure whether these changes resulted from policy changes due to external reviews, such as OIG's work, or whether they resulted from Frontline's implementation. Furthermore, staff still questioned Frontline's purpose and intent and referred to Frontline as "business as usual." For example, some criminal enforcement staff we interviewed told us that Frontline simply put into writing what ATF had been doing for years. As discussed in the preceding sections, we found that Frontline was not "business as usual"; rather, it changed ATF's processes to emphasize operational oversight and accountability, as well as the use of intelligence to identify and conduct its mission priorities. To increase staff buy-in and reduce skepticism, we believe that ATF must undertake a more effective messaging campaign and more clearly articulate Frontline's purpose and intent.

In OIG's interview with ATF executives, the executives maintained that although ATF may not have had a formal Frontline implementation plan, informing staff of Frontline's implementation and purpose was always a priority within ATF. However, they said that they also recognized the need for ATF to continue to improve its messaging and to be consistent to mitigate staff's resistance to change.

#### Sustained Frontline Training to Reinforce Awareness and Understanding for Incoming Supervisors Was Insufficient

ATF identifies the Domain Assessment as the central component of Frontline. However, we found that ATF failed to develop or produce sustained and effective training for new supervisors to reinforce their understanding of Frontline, including the Domain Assessment's purpose and development process. Among the senior criminal enforcement and industry operations staff that we interviewed, we found that most of their Frontline and Domain Assessment awareness training was informal, through on-the-job training and discussions with peers and supervisors. We asked 16 first- and second-line supervisors how they received training on Frontline and Domain Assessment development. Only four stated that they had received formal training during ATF's supervisor course, which we discuss below. Of the remaining 12 supervisors, 8 told us that they had learned about Frontline and Domain Assessments through informal discussions with their supervisors, 3 said that they had never received Domain Assessment training, and 1 supervisor told us that she had taken it upon herself to learn about Frontline and the Domain Assessment.

We also found that there was insufficient Frontline and, specifically, Domain Assessment process training provided during ATF's supervisor course.<sup>62</sup> We

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<sup>62</sup> ATF's Human Resource Professional Development Advanced Training Unit develops and conducts the training for the supervisor course. The ATF National Academy is not responsible for this training.

reviewed three Frontline briefings used during the ATF supervisor course.<sup>63</sup> We found that one briefing, provided to both Special Agent and Industry Operations Investigator supervisors, outlined a rudimentary Frontline process flow (see Figure 1 in the [Introduction](#)) and provided discussion points, including in a Domain Assessment. The second briefing was specifically for Industry Operations Investigator Supervisors.<sup>64</sup> Although this briefing provided more background information, neither briefing provided any depth as to why the Domain Assessment was important, how field division or ATF headquarters would use it, or how to develop it. The third briefing we reviewed pertained to Special Agents only.<sup>65</sup> Although this briefing discussed “key topics” for field operations, similar to the previous two briefings described above, it did not include a substantive discussion of Domain Assessments, their purpose, or their application to field operations.

Based on our interviews and document reviews, we found that ATF’s Domain Assessment training for field supervisors was ineffective. While the templates and instructions that ATF’s Frontline Branch provided were useful for formatting a written assessment, they did not provide sufficient details as to the Domain Assessment’s purpose, intent, value, and use at both the field divisions and ATF headquarters. Some Supervisory Special Agents told us that they viewed Frontline’s Domain Assessments as merely another ministerial task to perform. One Supervisory Special Agent told us that although he had received both Frontline and Domain Assessment training during the supervisor course, he could not recall details from the training. He also said that he did not understand the purpose of the Domain Assessment until he arrived at a duty assignment with a SAC who was engaged in Frontline and Domain Assessment development. Most Special Agents and Industry Operations Investigator supervisors agreed that they needed more Domain Assessment training so that staffs know how and why a Domain Assessment is prepared and how ATF will use it. We also found that non-supervisory staff were responsible for developing Domain Assessments in the absence of their supervisor and that most did not have any training.

Given ATF leadership’s emphasis on Frontline and its core component, the Domain Assessment, we believe that ATF should review overall Frontline messaging

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<sup>63</sup> ATF provided three briefings in total; ATF superseded the two briefings created in 2015 with the briefing titled Field Operations Key Topics: August 2017. New supervisors were receiving this briefing during our review period.

<sup>64</sup> Based on information ATF provided to OIG, ATF developed and used a specific Industry Operations Investigator Supervisor Course briefing whereas the criminal enforcement Group Supervisor Course continued to use an earlier brief that applied to both Special Agent/Industry Operations Investigator supervisors. ATF’s “Key Topics” briefing superseded both of these earlier supervisor briefings.

<sup>65</sup> According to ATF, during our review period it did not have an Industry Operations Investigator Supervisor briefing. ATF was developing a specific Industry Operations Investigator Supervisor briefing for the new Industry Operations Investigator course beginning in August 2018.

and training, particularly Domain Assessment process training, to more effectively define requirements and staff expectations.<sup>66</sup>

#### *ATF Does Not Have an Inspection Process to Assess Frontline or Its Utility*

As discussed earlier, Frontline emphasizes, among other things, oversight and accountability across ATF through revised policies, new products and tools, and enhanced internal communications. For example, ATF requires each field division to submit a Frontline Performance Review memorandum to document ongoing progress toward meeting its stated priorities. Although the SACs and the regional Deputy Assistant Directors review progress, we found that ATF does not have an internal inspections process to determine whether the field office's or field division's established goals and priorities are appropriate to ATF's mission and then to determine whether they are adhering to those goals and priorities. We also found that some offices were not performing some of their required Frontline mission assignments and some headquarters and field staffs were not following their roles and responsibilities. We believe that these shortcomings limit ATF's efforts to increase the agency's accountability under Frontline.

#### ATF Does Not Inspect Compliance with Frontline Requirements

Frontline Domain Assessments establish a field division's or field office's investigative focus and operational plan. However, we found that ATF does not have an inspections process to assess whether field divisions or field offices open criminal cases in accordance with their Domain Assessment. The first edition of the Frontline Manual provided that ATF's Inspection Division was to review the types of investigations on which the field division had focused and to compare them against the Domain Assessment.<sup>67</sup> The Chief of the Firearms Operations Division told us that ATF originally incorporated that internal inspection process into the Manual to ensure Frontline's increased accountability and longevity. However, ATF removed the inspection requirement when it issued the second edition of the Manual in

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<sup>66</sup> The ATF Assistant Director for Field Operations told us that ATF is developing a multi-phase training curriculum that focuses on the "why" and "how-to" of Frontline. According to the Assistant Director, training was to start with Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC) supervisors and staff at the CGIC conference in FY 2018, followed by training for Special Agents, Industry Operations Investigator staff, and then ATF-wide staff training. In a follow up response, ATF stated that the scheduled training did not occur at the FY 2018 CGIC conference as planned; it is now scheduled for FY 2019.

We reviewed the CGIC Supervisor/Staff training slides and found that the slides did not provide a Frontline overview describing Frontline's purpose or intent. However, the slides did provide a thorough discussion on the intelligence aspects of Frontline, including the application of ATF technologies.

<sup>67</sup> In April 2014, with the creation of ATF's Oversight and Review Division within the Office of Professional Responsibility and Security Operations, the Inspection Division became the Inspection Branch. The Inspection Branch reviews specific financial process, property, evidence, and investigations/inspection reporting identified as posing significant risks for ATF in order to ensure compliance with laws, regulations, and published ATF policies and procedures.

2015.<sup>68</sup> Both the Oversight and Review Division Chief and an Inspections Specialist told us that they did not review case specifics to assess compliance with field divisions' Domain Assessments. We believe the lack of case-specific review and comparison to the field divisions' Domain Assessments reduces accountability and oversight, in contrast to ATF's vision for Frontline.

According to the Manual, all field divisions and their associated field offices must submit their individual Domain Assessments to ATF headquarters. Although we were told that the field division SACs and their respective regional Deputy Assistant Directors discuss the Domain Assessments through regular communications by phone, in-person meetings, and during SAC conferences, we found that most field office supervisors did not receive similar feedback from ATF headquarters on their Domain Assessments.<sup>69</sup> We asked 23 field division leaders who submit a Domain Assessment to ATF headquarters what type of feedback they received and from whom. Sixteen of the 23 field division leaders (70 percent) told us that they did not receive direct feedback from their respective regional Deputy Assistant Director. Only seven leaders told us that they received feedback from their regional Deputy Assistant Director; however, they said feedback occurred informally and minimally.

We found that ATF's field divisions also lack an internal review process for their own Domain Assessments. During our interviews with field division staff, several Supervisory Special Agents told us that once they develop the Domain Assessment, the criminal enforcement group rarely, if ever, discusses or refers to it during the year. One supervisor said that he did not believe that the Domain Assessment was important for his subordinate Special Agents and that it was for the ATF executives. Two other Supervisory Special Agents told us that the Domain Assessment was "more work" and that they prepared the document because their supervisors directed them to do so. One of these supervisors told us that the Domain Assessment meant nothing to "street agents." The Assistant Director for Field Operations said he could not understand why supervisors would not involve their staff in the Domain Assessment development process, but he said that ATF could easily correct this deficiency. As noted above, we believe that ATF must

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<sup>68</sup> No ATF executive could explain to us why ATF removed the Inspections chapter from the Manual. However, they suggested that it could have been more oversight than intentional.

<sup>69</sup> All three regional Deputy Assistant Directors told us that they do not provide their SACs with formal feedback on Domain Assessments. One regional Deputy Assistant Director told us that the feedback process should be more formal in order to memorialize the responses.

ATF headquarters executives told us that they have developed a new performance review process that will include formal headquarters feedback and assign more responsibilities to the Frontline Investigative Support Branch to assist the regional Deputy Assistant Directors in performing analyses and developing trends.

The Assistant Director for Field Operations told us that the new CGIC Domain Assessment process would be more specific to the operations and strategies of the CGICs. Additionally, the Assistant Director told us that ATF would remove the end-of-year performance assessment from the Domain Assessment and make it a standalone performance document similar to the midyear performance review. The Domain Assessment would then be composed of the strategic plan for the upcoming fiscal year.



improve its messaging regarding the value and importance of the Domain Assessments to the Frontline initiative.

### Some Offices and Staff Did Not Follow Established Frontline Roles and Responsibilities

In addition to ATF's lack of an internal review process, we found that some aspects of ATF operations were not performing their assigned Frontline mission and respective position responsibilities, which could affect ATF's ability to increase accountability as ATF intended. According to one Assistant Director, accountability was more reactive prior to Frontline's implementation, occurring because of an incident that already had happened, rather than proactively describing individual responsibility for certain actions. However, we found that ATF officials and staff had conflicting views of the Frontline Branch's responsibility to ensure accountability and provide support for ATF operations.

According to a 2012 memorandum from the Chief of the Firearms Operations Division, the Frontline Branch was responsible for monitoring the field division Domain Assessments, as well as overseeing ATF's investigative and enforcement efforts to combat violent crime.<sup>70</sup> The Manual identifies seven Frontline Branch roles that include both operational support and administrative functions.<sup>71</sup> However, we found that ATF staff had conflicting interpretations as to the Frontline Branch's functions and we also determined that the Frontline Branch provided more administrative support than operational support. A Deputy Assistant Director for Field Operations described the Frontline Branch as a clearinghouse for collecting and disseminating information, as well as assisting field offices with Enhanced Enforcement Initiative (EEI) pre-deployments, which are designed to provide strategic and tactical operational support where needed. In addition, although the Manual states that the Frontline Branch is to provide assistance with EEI pre-deployments, the Frontline Branch Chief told us that EEIs are not the Frontline Branch's responsibility, but rather the responsibility of ATF's Special Operations Division and Special Response Team Branch. He also told us that the Frontline Branch's major role is to oversee the Domain Assessment process through the development of templates and instructions and to serve as the conduit for collecting the midyear Frontline Performance Reviews, tasks which are more administrative than operational. Two of the five SACs we interviewed also told us that they believed that the Frontline Branch was mostly administrative in nature and served as a collection point for the Domain Assessments and Midyear Performance Reviews, rather than providing any operational support. Although assisting with Domain Assessment development is a stated responsibility of the Frontline Branch, a majority of first- and second-line supervisors told us that they had minimal to no contact with the Frontline Branch. Some first-line supervisors said they would first seek advice and assistance from their supervisor if they had questions concerning the Domain Assessment development process.

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<sup>70</sup> Essam Rabadi, Chief, Firearms Operations Division, ATF, memorandum for Ronald Turk, Assistant Director, Field Operations, Minor Organizational Change Proposal, October 4, 2012.

<sup>71</sup> See [Appendix 4](#) for a list of Frontline Branch roles.

At the time of our review, ATF officials acknowledged that the Frontline Branch's functions might need improvement. Specifically, all three regional Deputy Assistant Directors told us that they wanted more involvement and coordination between the Frontline Branch and the field divisions. Other senior officials, in addition to the regional Deputy Assistant Directors, told us that the Frontline Branch should take on more operational support functions, such as providing enhanced regional analysis and violent crime trend analysis to assist the Office of Field Operations.

In addition to the Frontline Branch at ATF headquarters not fulfilling its operational support functions, we also found that some field operations were not following the accountability roles and responsibilities prescribed in the Frontline Manual. For example, the Manual requires that Investigative Assistants, Industry Operations Investigators, and Special Agents actively participate with their supervisor to plan the Domain Assessment. We found that while a majority of industry operations staff was included in the Domain Assessment development process, most of the criminal enforcement staff was not. We also found that supervisors selectively involved staff, informed staff only after supervisors had completed the assessment, or involved their Special Agents informally and only when requesting year-end statistics to describe accomplishments.

We also found that Special Agents and Industry Operations Investigators were not always aware of the Domain Assessments of the groups with which they worked. The Manual requires that Special Agents, Investigative Assistants, Intelligence Research Specialists, and Industry Operations Investigators be aware of the Domain Assessments for the criminal enforcement and industry operations groups they work with. We asked seven Special Agents and five Industry Operations Investigators whether they reviewed the Domain Assessments of the respective groups they worked with; four out of seven Special Agents and all five Industry Operations Investigators stated that they did not. One Industry Operations Investigator stated that she believed it was not required. One SAC and one Director of Industry Operations said they did not expect their Special Agents or Industry Operations Investigators, respectively, to know about their groups' Domain Assessment or the assessments of other groups. According to the Frontline Manual, being aware of the Domain Assessments of other groups fosters understanding and stimulates communication and unity across all organizational levels.

#### Domain Assessment Inefficiencies

In addition to the divisions' lack of an internal review process, we found inefficiencies in the development and execution of Domain Assessments. We reviewed 53 Domain Assessments across the 4 field divisions we visited and found them to be voluminous, which could impede ATF headquarters' ability to synthesize operational trends effectively. For example, a regional Deputy Assistant Director for Field Operations with 8 field divisions would have to review 512 pages of year-end performance data to analyze and identify trends within his or her region. (See the text box below for OIG's analysis of a sample field division's Domain

Assessment.) We also found that rather than synthesizing data from the individual field offices, the Field Division/Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC) Domain Assessments contained statistical data and end-of-year information redundant with data and information already listed in the associated Field Office Domain Assessments, with little or no analysis as to how that data affected the field division's overall operations. For example, 94 percent of the Field Division/CGIC Domain Assessments that we reviewed contained consolidated statistics and summarized year-end performance information already listed in the associated Field Office Domain Assessments.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, we found that the Field Division/CGIC Domain Assessments did not list the field division's overall strategic plan for the upcoming fiscal year.

### **Field Division Domain Assessment Analysis**

For a sample field division with 9 offices, we found the following:

- 9 total Domain Assessments encompassed 101 pages;
- 92 pages contained data;
- 64 pages (70 percent) were year-end statistics and performance review information; and
- 28 pages (30 percent) identified the upcoming year's strategic plan for the CGICs and field offices.

A regional Deputy Assistant Director with 8 field divisions (each having 9 offices) in his or her region would have to review 72 separate Domain Assessments encompassing 512 pages of performance review data to identify trends within that region.

Source: Sample field division Domain Assessment

All three of ATF's regional Deputy Assistant Directors told us that they wanted a more efficient process to synthesize and summarize individual field division and inter-regional Domain Assessments to provide better analysis for future operations. A SAC told us that there was a need for better consolidation of the Domain Assessments to assist the regional Deputy Assistant Directors in visualizing field division goals and objectives.

Despite the voluminous amount of information collected at the field division level, we also found that the end-of-year summary review portion of the overall Domain Assessments did not include a full year's worth of performance data. According to the Manual, the Frontline Branch must receive all Domain Assessments no later than September 1 in order for the regional Deputy Assistant Directors to review and approve them for the upcoming fiscal year. Thirteen supervisors, including two SACs and two Directors of Industry Operations, and non-supervisory staff members told us that the September 1 deadline caused incomplete year-end statistical data because mission accomplishment statistics for at least 30 days of the end-of-fiscal-year activity may not be included. According to a senior field division supervisor, there is no follow-up mechanism to address actual year-end

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<sup>72</sup> A review of 4 Field Division/CGIC Domain Assessments yielded 85 pages of data. Of these 85 data-filled pages, 80 pages (or 94 percent) contained consolidated field office statistical and end-of-year summaries. The remaining five data-filled pages (or 6 percent) contained the strategic plan for the CGIC only.

The CGIC Domain Assessment is included in the overall Field Division/CGIC Domain Assessment. Each field office is required to submit a Domain Assessment for each new fiscal year.

accomplishments once a field office submits its new fiscal year Domain Assessment and the field division's respective regional Deputy Assistant Director approves it. A Supervisory Special Agent told us that he would backdate his end-of-year summary review to account for the accomplishments not included in the preceding year's overall assessment.

In sum, while ATF officials told us that Frontline had built oversight and accountability into ATF's strategic process, we believe that ATF's ineffective Frontline messaging failed to achieve staff understanding and acceptance of an operational culture change, which could impact ATF's ability to effect accountability and mission oversight throughout ATF. Further, ATF's lack of sustained training affected new supervisors' understanding of the Domain Assessment process, a core component of Frontline. In addition, as noted above, ATF does not have an internal inspection process for Frontline and is unable to assess the effectiveness of its process. We believe that a continuous internal review and evaluation process of Frontline and its requirements would assist ATF in monitoring its progress and better identify potential risks and develop solutions before they become major failures.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusion**

During FY 2013, ATF implemented its Frontline business model to effect an operational change to its culture by standardizing internal and external operations. ATF intended to accomplish this change through leadership, oversight, and accountability and by measuring mission effectiveness and accomplishments. A central component of Frontline's process is for each field division to identify its unique violent crime environment and, through an all-source intelligence-driven approach, develop investigative strategies to focus on the most violent crimes and criminals. We found that ATF has taken proactive steps to improve operational oversight and accountability and to enhance its intelligence functions. However, we identified several areas that ATF must improve upon to ensure Frontline's success in combating violent crime.

First, while ATF continued to enhance its intelligence functions by staffing its Crime Gun Intelligence Centers (CGIC) with more-experienced intelligence professionals and using its proprietary technologies to focus its limited resources in combating violent crime, outdated intelligence policies and low internal referral rates affected ATF's ability to ensure that its CGICs were successful in Frontline's intelligence-driven policing model. We found that ATF's intelligence policies have not kept pace with the criminal enforcement investigative roles adopted by some CGICs. We also found that coordination between ATF's criminal enforcement and industry operations missions was still ineffective and criminal enforcement staff failed to respond to over 60 percent of industry operations referrals. Additionally, as part of Frontline, ATF relies on external law enforcement partners to assist in targeting violent offenders. While we acknowledge that these partners have resource limitations that may affect their full participation in crime-fighting programs, we believe that ATF must continually develop new ways to engage its law enforcement partners and increase their participation.

Second, while ATF has performance metrics linked to its strategic plan, it did not create metrics to assess Frontline-driven changes with respect to fighting violent crime. We found that ATF data that could support possible indicators of Frontline's effect were sometimes inconclusive, incomplete, potentially inaccurate, or not available. Additionally, Frontline emphasized communication and coordination with external law enforcement partners and industry members. However, ATF has not developed metrics or documentation that adequately captures the effectiveness of those interactions. We believe that without established Frontline measurements of success, ATF cannot assess Frontline's effectiveness in supporting ATF's mission. A lack of measures could also limit ATF's ability to hold staff accountable for external communications, address coordination challenges, or identify best practices in outreach.

Third, while ATF's leadership acknowledged that changing its operational culture would take time and would prove to be the most challenging aspect to Frontline's implementation, its ineffective messaging and lack of sustained training

failed to achieve and maintain employees' acceptance that Frontline would lead to a meaningful change. We found that ATF's messaging of Frontline failed to address why ATF needed a change and what it expected from its staff. Additionally, ATF did not develop training on its Domain Assessment process to assist new supervisors in understanding its purpose, use, and proper development to maximize its effect in fighting violent crime. We believe that a continuous, formal messaging process would assist in furthering Frontline's implementation and that, by providing formal training to new supervisors on Frontline's Domain Assessment process, ATF can more effectively change its operational culture and gain acceptance of the Frontline business model at all staff levels.

Finally, we found that ATF removed its Frontline inspections requirements and did not have an ATF-wide internal control process to assess compliance with Frontline requirements or the effectiveness of its Domain Assessments. We believe that the lack of an ATF headquarters review process places ATF at risk for future accountability failures. Further, we believe that ATF should assess its Domain Assessment cycle process for efficiencies and utility.

## **Recommendations**

To improve ATF's implementation of the Frontline business model, we recommend that ATF:

1. Update and maintain the Intelligence Program Order and Crime Gun Intelligence Center mission guidance to reflect current intelligence functions and structure, and ensure staff accountability for all standards, including referral responsiveness.
2. Define and develop performance metrics to assess Frontline-driven operational changes and document the work performed and results of external law enforcement outreach and communication efforts.
3. Reevaluate and develop National Academy Frontline training modules for new recruits and sustainment training for current staff that communicates Frontline's purpose, intent, and staff expectations.
4. Develop new-supervisor training specific to the Domain Assessment process.
5. Develop headquarters-level processes to evaluate compliance with Frontline requirements, and assess the Domain Assessment process to improve its development and execution in the field divisions and allow better trend identification by headquarters leadership.

## METHODOLOGY OF THE OIG REVIEW

For this review, OIG analyzed the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' (ATF) implementation of Frontline and its effectiveness in accomplishing ATF's stated mission. We did not assess whether Frontline was responsive to management concerns identified in previous OIG reports. Our fieldwork, conducted from April 2017 through February 2018, included data collection and analysis, interviews, site visits, and policy and document reviews. The following sections provide additional information about our methodology.

### Standards

OIG conducted this review in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation* (January 2012).

### Data Collection and Analysis

OIG used ATF data from FY 2009 through FY 2016 to assess and evaluate the changes resulting from Frontline's implementation. When comparing pre-Frontline years to post-Frontline years, we applied ATF data in the following manner: pre-Frontline includes data from FY 2009 through FY 2012; post-Frontline includes data from FY 2013 through FY 2016.<sup>73</sup>

We analyzed ATF's data for internal referrals between industry operations and criminal enforcement. We analyzed this data to assess whether Frontline had changed ATF's internal response rates. We also analyzed data on external referrals from state and local law enforcement partners accepted by ATF field divisions to understand how adoptive referrals changed from pre- to post-Frontline years. In addition, we analyzed ATF workforce data to identify the population of Special Agents, Industry Operations Investigators, and Intelligence Research Specialists. We focused particularly on changes to Intelligence Research Specialist hiring; this data also included FY 2017.

We also reviewed ATF case and defendant data to determine the number of cases and defendants ATF field divisions recommended to their respective U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO). In addition, we analyzed cases and defendants that the USAOs identified as pending, accepted, and declined. The data we received was current as of November 2017, and a portion of the referred cases was still pending acceptance or declination. Because of this, we also calculated the "worst case" declination rates that would result if every pending case was ultimately declined to

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<sup>73</sup> Where indicated, OIG may have applied ATF data beyond FY 2016 to show continued gains or improvements. Additionally, some ATF data was not available due to ATF developing new data metrics collection methods. In these instances, OIG indicated the scope of the data applied.

understand whether changes observed in the declination rate would continue to hold true.

In addition, we analyzed case type data to understand the breakout of ATF's proactive, reactive, and adoptive casework. For the purposes of this analysis, we removed National Instant Criminal Background Check System delayed-denial cases from the counts of reactive cases.<sup>74</sup> National Instant Criminal Background Check System delayed-denial cases represent approximately half of ATF's reactive firearms cases, but they are mandatory work. ATF Order 3140.1 requires local field offices to investigate and generally recover firearms transferred because of a delayed denial.

For ATF's proprietary technology, we analyzed data related to the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN), including the number of NIBIN leads and hits.<sup>75</sup> NIBIN leads data covered FY 2014 through FY 2016, when ATF began reporting leads data as a result of changing NIBIN from a forensics tool to a leads generator. We used the data to compare leads and hits following ATF's changes to the NIBIN program.

## **Interviews**

We conducted 73 in-person and telephone interviews with more than 100 individuals across ATF, USAOs, and local police departments.

### *ATF Interviews*

We interviewed ATF headquarters officials, including the former and acting ATF Directors as well as ATF's Chief of Staff and the Assistant Directors from the Office of Field Operations, Office of Strategic Intelligence and Information, and Office of Enforcement Programs and Services. We interviewed seven Deputy Assistant Directors, which included four from the Office of Field Operations, two from the Office of Human Resources and Professional Development, and one from the Office of Management. We interviewed the Chiefs of the Frontline Branch, the Field Management Staff, the Office of Strategic Management, the Oversight and Review Division, NIBIN Site Operations, the ATF Academy (acting), the Risk Management Office, and the Firearms Operation Division. We also interviewed an Inspections Branch Program Manager. At the conclusion of our fieldwork, we interviewed the Assistant Directors for Field Operations, Office of Strategic Intelligence and Information, Office of Enforcement Programs and Services, and Office of Professional Responsibility and Security Operations, as well as the Chief of

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<sup>74</sup> A National Instant Criminal Background Check System delayed denial is an attempted firearms purchase during which the background check takes longer than 3 full business days but ultimately the check reveals that the purchaser is prohibited from purchasing the firearm. The firearms dealer may or may not have transferred the firearm in such cases, since a dealer is required to postpone a firearms transfer for only the 3-day period.

<sup>75</sup> As discussed in the [Results of the Review](#), A NIBIN lead occurs when the NIBIN system links two shell casings. A NIBIN hit occurs when the NIBIN system links two shell casings and a Forensic Examiner confirms a match by looking at both through a microscope.



the Office of Strategic Management, to gain additional insights to our initial findings and recommendations. We included their responses in the [Results of the Review](#).

During our four site visits, we interviewed the Special Agents in Charge (SAC), Assistant Special Agents in Charge, and Director of Industry Operations. We also interviewed first-line supervisors for criminal enforcement, industry operations, and the Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC) groups. Additionally, we interviewed non-supervisory Special Agents, Industry Operations Investigators, and CGIC staff, including Intelligence Research Specialists and Industry Operations Intelligence Specialists.

#### *External Partner Interviews*

During our site visits, we interviewed some of ATF's external law enforcement partners from the local USAOs and police departments. We interviewed an acting U.S. Attorney, an Assistant U.S. Attorney, and two Criminal Chiefs. At the local police departments, we interviewed a Deputy Commissioner; an Assistant Police Chief; and local police officers, including a Task Force Officer currently supporting ATF.

#### **Site Visits**

From May through September 2017, we conducted in-person site visits at four ATF Field Divisions: Baltimore, Dallas, Denver, and Phoenix. We also conducted a telephone interview with the SAC, Kansas City Field Division. We selected these sites based on size and location; implementation and application of the CGIC as an ATF model; as well as previously known challenges, specifically the field division's role in Operation Fast and Furious.

We also visited some of ATF's partners from the local USAOs and police departments. We visited four USAO districts: District of Maryland, District of Colorado, Northern District of Texas, and District of Arizona. We also visited four local police departments: Baltimore, Denver, Dallas, and Phoenix. We selected these external partners based on their proximity to and relationship with the field divisions we visited.

#### **Policy and Document Reviews**

We reviewed policies, guidance, and documents related to ATF's implementation of Frontline. To understand ATF's Frontline business model, we reviewed the Frontline Manual, first and second editions, and various memoranda related to Frontline's implementation. We also reviewed informational and training briefings presented to ATF staff and new recruits attending ATF's National Academy. To gain understanding and to conduct follow-on analysis of the Domain Assessment cycle, we reviewed the Domain Assessment Templates and Instructions, midyear Frontline Performance Reviews, and the Domain Assessments of the field divisions we visited for FY 2013 through FY 2018. We also reviewed ATF's annual Industry Operations Operating Plans from FY 2008 through FY 2011 to assess how they differed from the new Domain Assessment requirement.

We also reviewed ATF's Strategic Plan; Congressional Budget Submissions; Quarterly Status Reports; and various ATF orders, handbooks, and guides, including the Monitored Case Program Order and the Intelligence Program Order. Finally, we reviewed ATF's CGIC performance metrics memorandum and the 2017 CGIC assessment.

## PREVIOUS OIG REVIEWS OF ATF MANAGEMENT AND STRUCTURE

In reviewing OIG’s reports on ATF released between 2012 and 2017, we found that in some form, Frontline addresses many of the issues identified in the previous OIG reports, including increased oversight, improved partnerships with law enforcement partners and the U.S. Attorney’s Offices (USAO), and an emphasis on “risk-based” mindset. Specifically, we reviewed 10 previous OIG reports, focusing on the management and structural issues identified in those reports and by an “X” in Table 2. We summarize the reports below.

**Table 2**  
**Issues Identified in Past OIG Reviews of ATF**

Concerns Identified	1. Fast and Furious	2. Explosives Inspections	3. Federal Firearms Licensees	4. Guns & Ammo	5. Income-Generating Operations	6. Kingery	7. Fast and Furious Follow-up	8. Storefronts	9. Osorio and Barba	10. Confidential Informants
Inadequate headquarters oversight	X				X	X	-	X		
Inadequate divisional oversight and communication	X				X	X	-	X	X	
Insufficient coordination with USAO	X				X	X	-		X	
Insufficient coordination with other law enforcement	X					X	-		X	
Insufficient internal controls	X			X	X		-			X
Risk to public safety	X					X	-		X	
Inadequate use of data/intelligence		X					-	X		X
Inadequate documentation/tracking		X	X	X	X		-	X	X	X

Notes: We used shortened report titles in the column headings. The corresponding full report titles are in the numbered summaries below. *A Review of the Department of Justice’s and ATF’s Implementation of Recommendations Contained in the OIG’s Report on Operations Fast and Furious and Wide Receiver* (Item 7 in the table) did not identify new concerns.

Source: OIG analysis

1. [\*A Review of ATF's Operation Fast and Furious and Related Matters\*](#) (September/November 2012)

This review examined ATF's Operations Fast and Furious (2009–2011) and Wide Receiver (2006–2007).<sup>76</sup> During both operations, ATF allowed suspected "straw purchases" (in which individuals illegally purchased firearms on behalf of other persons prohibited from possessing firearms) to proceed without arrest or interdiction in favor of pursuing larger, international firearms trafficking cases. Law enforcement officials later tied the firearms illegally purchased and trafficked during Operation Fast and Furious to the murder of a U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agent in December 2010.

The review identified several systemic issues. For example, OIG found that the international reach of the investigations should have qualified them as "sensitive." However, ATF did not substantively review or monitor the investigations, which illustrated the shortcomings of ATF's case initiation and oversight processes. OIG also found that USAO attorneys and supervisors did not afford Operation Wide Receiver the attention that a proactive, complex firearms trafficking investigation warranted; therefore, they missed opportunities to minimize the investigations' threat to public safety. Additionally, OIG found coordination and information sharing issues between ATF and the Drug Enforcement Administration and between ATF and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, even noting some resistance to coordinated investigations. OIG concluded that the extent to which ATF policy allowed straw purchases to continue without supervisory review reflected a lack of internal controls, inadequate assessment of the risk to public safety, and failure to adapt tactics or devise ways to interdict and seize firearms without exposing the broader investigation.

OIG made six recommendations to the Department in this report. As of November 2018, OIG had closed five of the recommendations and one remained in resolution.<sup>77</sup> A follow-up review, Item 7 below, examined ATF's implementation of the recommendations.

2. [\*Review of ATF's Explosives Inspection Program\*](#) (April 2013)

This review examined the efficiency and effectiveness with which ATF conducted regulatory inspections of Federal Explosives Licensees.<sup>78</sup> While the review found that ATF generally conducted its required explosives inspections and had procedures in place to ensure it did so consistently, the review also identified several areas for improvement, including better documentation of inspections and

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<sup>76</sup> DOJ OIG, *A Review of ATF's Operation Fast and Furious and Related Matters*, Oversight and Review Division (O&R) Report (September 2012, reissued November 2012).

<sup>77</sup> An OIG recommendation is considered resolved when the component has agreed with the recommendation and is in the process of planning for or making corrective actions. A recommendation is closed once OIG determines that the component's actions have sufficiently addressed the recommendation's intent.

<sup>78</sup> DOJ OIG, *Review of ATF's Explosives Inspection Program*, Evaluation and Inspections (E&I) Report I-2013-004 (April 2013).

better use of data. OIG also identified the opportunity for ATF to conduct more in-depth analyses of the inspection results it had already collected in order to identify and address changing trends in the explosives industry proactively rather than reactively.

OIG made seven recommendations to, among other things, improve ATF's ability to monitor its progress toward completing inspections mandated by the *Safe Explosives Act* and to better position ATF to identify and respond to risks or trends emerging in its explosives inspection program. All seven recommendations are closed.

3. [Review of ATF's Federal Firearms Licensee Inspection Program](#) (April 2013)

This follow-up review examined changes made to the Federal Firearms Licensee (FFL) regulatory inspection processes.<sup>79</sup> The review found that ATF had made several improvements, including standardizing policies and procedures for inspections, instituting gathering of pre-inspection intelligence, conducting more in-person inspections, giving divisions some discretion to prioritize "high-risk" FFLs, and establishing outreach goals. However, OIG identified several areas for improvement, including the need for better tracking of high-risk FFLs.

OIG made four recommendations to ATF to ensure that ATF could meet its operating plan requirements, perform timely FFL cyclical compliance inspections, adequately track which high-risk inspections meet operating plan priorities, and process revocations in an appropriately prompt manner. All four recommendations are closed.

4. [Review of ATF's Actions in Revoking the Federal Firearms License of Guns & Ammo](#) (September 2013)

This review examined whether ATF had followed its administrative actions policy for FFLs throughout the revocation process in a case involving the FFL "Guns & Ammo."<sup>80</sup> The review found that ATF's New Orleans Field Division did not comply with ATF's administrative action policy and failed to fully document certain decisions. OIG made five recommendations to ATF to ensure that it provides greater oversight and training regarding administrative action cases. All five recommendations are closed.

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<sup>79</sup> DOJ OIG, *Review of ATF's Federal Firearms Licensee Inspection Program*, E&I Report I-2013-005 (April 2013).

<sup>80</sup> DOJ OIG, *Review of ATF's Actions in Revoking the Federal Firearms License of Guns & Ammo*, E&I Report I-2013-008 (September 2013).

5. [\*Audit of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' Use of Income-Generating, Undercover Operations\*](#) (September 2013)

This audit examined whether ATF properly authorized and provided adequate management and oversight of income-generating undercover operations, also called "churning investigations."<sup>81</sup> The audit identified a serious lack of oversight at both field division and headquarters levels. It also identified a lack of oversight and controls to ensure that ATF tracked, safeguarded, and protected from misuse assets used in churning investigations. Additionally, the audit found that requests for churning authorization often did not contain required information, including documentation of the U.S. Attorney's approval of the tactic and agreement to prosecute any meritorious case that developed.

The audit made 16 recommendations to ATF and 1 recommendation to the Office of the Deputy Attorney General (ODAG) to assist them in ensuring that staff properly authorize and manage churning investigations. All 17 recommendations are closed.

6. [\*A Review of ATF's Investigation of Jean Baptiste Kingery\*](#) (October 2014)

This review examined ATF's investigation of Jean Baptiste Kingery between 2008 and 2011.<sup>82</sup> ATF Special Agents had suspected that Kingery planned to transport hand grenade parts to Mexico for manufacture into explosive devices. ATF intercepted and marked grenade components intended for Kingery in 2009 and 2010 and attempted to determine whether he was taking the components to Mexico; but ATF did not recover the components. ATF then tried to use Kingery as a confidential informant (CI); but, after ATF found him to be "unworkable" as an informant, ATF did not charge or indict him for almost a year. ATF later identified grenades recovered in Mexico that bore markings of the type ATF had used on the components delivered to Kingery. The review found that the Kingery investigation suffered some of the same flaws as Operation Fast and Furious, including poor supervision at the division level and insufficient headquarters oversight, insufficient USAO oversight, and insufficient consideration of risk to public safety. It also highlighted ATF's resistance to coordination with other federal law enforcement entities.

OIG made one recommendation, that ODAG, ATF leadership, and the Attorney General's Advisory Committee engage with leadership at the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and Customs and Border Protection to develop and improve relationships between the agencies. As of November 2018, this recommendation was on hold, pending OIG action.

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<sup>81</sup> DOJ OIG, *Audit of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' Use of Income-Generating, Undercover Operations*, Audit Report 13-36 (September 2013).

<sup>82</sup> DOJ OIG, *A Review of ATF's Investigation of Jean Baptiste Kingery*, O&R Report 15-01 (October 2014).

7. [\*A Review of the Department of Justice's and ATF's Implementation of Recommendations Contained in the OIG's Report on Operations Fast and Furious and Wide Receiver\*](#) (February 2016)

This follow-up review examined the progress made on the recommendations from *A Review of ATF's Operation Fast and Furious and Related Matters*, issued in September 2012 and summarized in Item 1 above.<sup>83</sup> Of the six recommendations made in the original report, three related directly to ATF. The follow-up review found that the Department and ATF had taken the following actions:

- **Recommendation 1: ATF Policy Review.** ATF completed a comprehensive evaluation of its policies on law enforcement operations and investigative techniques between 2011 and 2014. Similarly, ODAG completed a review of a subset of ATF's policies. As a result of the review, ODAG issued two risk assessment guidance memoranda for the Department.<sup>84</sup>
- **Recommendation 2: ATF Case Review Procedures.** The Department reviewed ATF's procedures to ensure that they sufficiently evaluated "sensitive matters." One of the initiatives highlighted was the Monitored Case Program (MCP), which set reporting requirements for cases that met certain risk criteria. OIG identified areas of concern with MCP and recommended specific MCP reporting template modifications. OIG also identified other areas for continued improvement, including the development of inspection procedures to evaluate leading risks to ATF. The report stated that OIG could close the recommendation after ATF made additional revisions to the MCP report templates to further improve risk evaluation and develop inspection procedures to evaluate leading risks to the agency as identified from a comprehensive risk assessment.
- **Recommendation 3: Gun Trafficking Enterprise Investigations.** In March 2013, ATF codified its firearms transfer policy in an agency order, which stated that, "the agent, considering primarily public and officer safety, must take all reasonable steps to prevent the firearm's criminal misuse." ATF developed and implemented mandatory training on how to develop enterprise/conspiracy cases involving firearms while abiding by ATF's firearms transfer order.<sup>85</sup>

These three recommendations are closed.

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<sup>83</sup> DOJ OIG, *A Review of the Department of Justice's and ATF's Implementation of Recommendations Contained in the OIG's Report on Operations Fast and Furious and Wide Receiver*, O&R Report 16-01 (February 2016).

<sup>84</sup> Deputy Attorney General James M. Cole, memorandum for multiple addressees, Sensitive Investigative Activities Requiring Committee Review, March 11, 2013, and memorandum for multiple addressees, Baseline Risk Assessment and Mitigation Policies for Law Enforcement Operations in Criminal Matters, December 7, 2013.

<sup>85</sup> ATF initially pointed to the Frontline strategy as resolution for this recommendation, but OIG did not believe that ATF had provided guidance for enterprise/conspiracy cases according to the recommendation.

8. [\*A Review of ATF's Undercover Storefront Operations\*](#) (September 2016)

This review evaluated ATF's use of undercover storefront operations, aiming to identify any systematic deficiencies in ATF's storefront policies and to evaluate the effectiveness of MCP as an oversight tool.<sup>86</sup> The review determined that ATF had not devoted sufficient attention to how it was managing undercover storefront operations and had a "lax organizational culture that failed to place sufficient emphasis on risk management." The review also found, in some instances, a lack of field division supervisor engagement in operations, as well as a lack of guidance and supervision from ATF headquarters, including insufficient risk reporting in the storefront operation proposal process and MCP. In addition, the storefronts produced no actionable intelligence, ATF's capacity to preserve intelligence was limited, and intelligence staff were not aware of centralized databases.

OIG made 13 recommendations to improve, among other things, planning, oversight, and evaluation of undercover storefront investigations. As of November 2018, 12 recommendations were closed and 1 recommendation directed at the Department remained in resolution.

9. [\*A Review of Investigations of the Osorio and Barba Firearms Trafficking Rings\*](#) (March 2017)

The cases included in the review are of traffickers of two firearms that were used in an attack on Immigration and Customs Enforcement Special Agents in Mexico that resulted in the death of one Special Agent and the serious injury of another in February 2011.<sup>87</sup> The review focused on whether ATF had improperly failed to seize firearms destined for Mexico or to timely investigate and arrest the subjects involved in the trafficking of those firearms. Except in one instance in the Osorio case, the review did not find a general failure to seize firearms where there was a legal basis and opportunity to do so. However, the review identified challenges, including a lack of communication with the USAO and insufficient information sharing, both within ATF and between ATF and other federal law enforcement agencies. OIG did not make any recommendations in this report since the recommendations made in the *Review of ATF's Operation Fast and Furious and Related Matters* (Item 1 above) addressed the same deficiencies.

10. [\*Audit of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' Management and Oversight of Confidential Informants\*](#) (March 2017)

This audit evaluated ATF's policies and practices for identification, approval, and oversight of CIs.<sup>88</sup> The audit found that, while ATF's CI policies aligned with

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<sup>86</sup> DOJ OIG, *A Review of ATF's Undercover Storefront Operations*, O&R Report 16-06 (September 2016).

<sup>87</sup> DOJ OIG, *A Review of Investigations of the Osorio and Barba Firearms Trafficking Rings*, O&R Report 17-01 (March 2017).

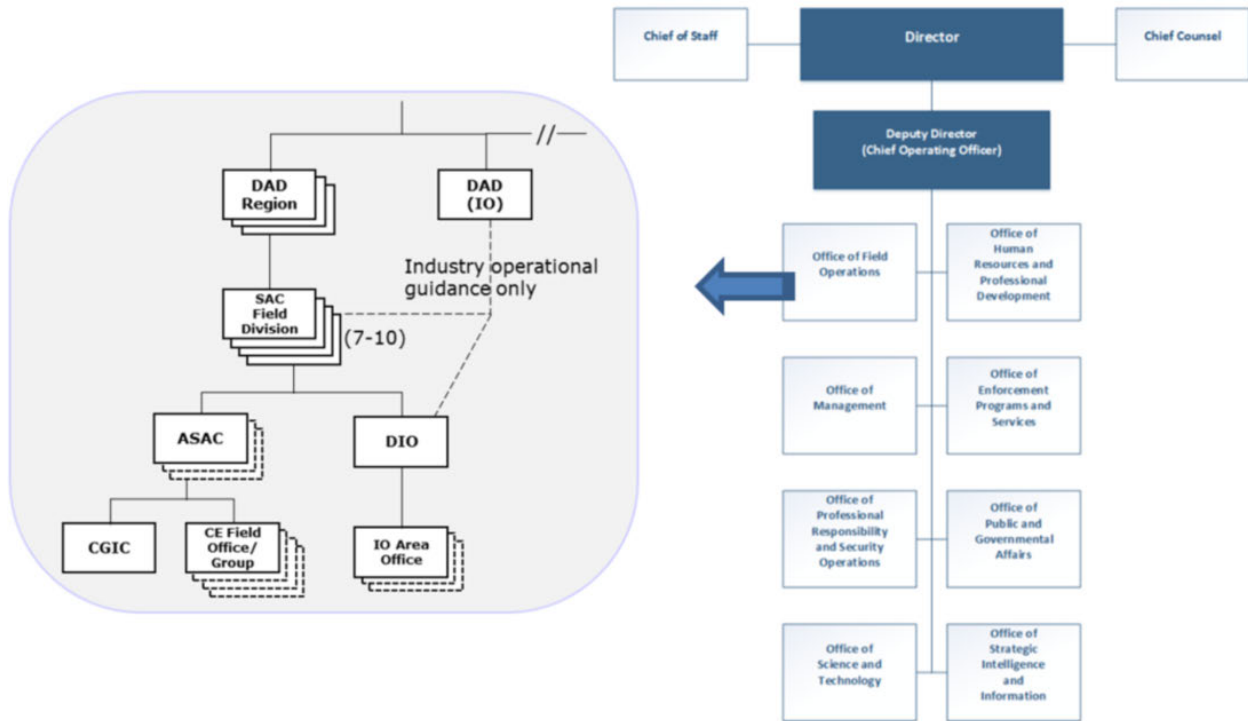
<sup>88</sup> DOJ OIG, *Audit of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' Management and Oversight of Confidential Informants*, Audit Report 17-17 (March 2017).



Department guidelines, management and recordkeeping of the CI program needed improvement. There were also issues with administrative oversight, particularly of high-risk CIs. The audit also found that ATF's Inspection Branch had conducted compliance-based reviews of the field divisions and identified issues related to the CI program, but that ATF did not use the reviews to identify potential program-wide improvements.

OIG made five recommendations to help ATF address deficiencies in its CI program and improve its ability to sufficiently identify, assess, and mitigate the risks involved with using CIs. As of January 2019, three recommendations were closed and two remained in resolution.

## ATF'S ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



Key: ASAC=Assistant Special Agent in Charge; CGIC=Crime Gun Intelligence Center; CE=Criminal Enforcement; DAD=Deputy Assistant Director; IO=Industry Operations; SAC=Special Agent in Charge.

Notes: The left-side chart depicts a condensed structure of the Office of Field Operations, showing only the interactions of the regional Deputy Assistant Directors for Field Operations and the Deputy Assistant Director for Industry Operations within a generic field division. It does not show the Deputy Assistant Director for Programs and its associated elements. While there is only one CGIC per field division, there is no set number of criminal enforcement or industry operations field offices per field division.

Sources: ATF, "Organization Structure," April 26, 2018, [www.atf.gov/about/organization-structure](http://www.atf.gov/about/organization-structure) (accessed February 5, 2019); OIG analysis

Each field division is led by a Special Agent in Charge and has a Director of Industry Operations and Assistant Special Agents in Charge that provide mission direction and guidance within each field division's assigned geographic area of responsibility.<sup>89</sup> In addition to the field division leadership and administrative support elements, each field division is composed of multiple criminal enforcement and industry operations field offices and one Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC). A Special Agent called a Group Supervisor leads the criminal enforcement field

<sup>89</sup> At the time of our review, two Directors of Industry Operations shared duties across two field divisions: one for the Washington and Baltimore Field Divisions and one for the New York and Newark Field Divisions. The number of Assistant Special Agents in Charge assigned to each field division ranged from one to three.

office and the CGIC. An Industry Operations Investigator called an Area Supervisor leads the industry operations field offices.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> ATF also refers to a criminal enforcement field office as a group when it is co-located with a field division.

### FRONTLINE BRANCH ROLES

- Promote ATF's standardized business model, support development of intelligence-driven strategies, and coordinate deployment of focused enforcement tactics (Enhanced Enforcement Initiatives (EEI)).
- Coordinate with field divisions that request an EEI. This includes working with the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network, Violent Crime Analysis Branch, and National Tracing Center in preparing crime gun intelligence data for the EEI.
- Coordinate intelligence data/resources from Enforcement Program and Services, Field Operations, the Office of Strategic Intelligence and Information, and the Office of Strategic Management to share with the field as part of pre-assessment packets, which they distribute to the field for the preparation of Domain Assessment submissions.
- Create helpful tools (e.g., diagrams, templates, samples) for the field to help with Domain Assessment preparation.
- Review annual Domain Assessments from the field and distribute to the Deputy Assistant Director for Field Operations for review and concurrence. Once the Deputy Assistant Director for Field Operations approves the Domain Assessment, the Frontline Branch distributes it to the appropriate headquarters directorates so that they may support the direct needs of each field division.
- Ensure that the Office of Strategic Management provides quarterly Oracle Business Intelligence Enterprise Edition reports to each field division.<sup>91</sup> The reports contain a structured presentation of data extracted from the case management system and the Oracle tool. Field divisions formalize the Frontline Performance Review process at midyear and incorporate it into their Domain Assessments at the end of the fiscal year.
- Answer any questions about Frontline for all of ATF, including reviewing Domain Assessments before submission and suggesting best practices for writing the assessments. Throughout the year, the Frontline Branch will offer training on the new business model.

Source: Frontline Manual, second edition

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<sup>91</sup> ATF's Oracle Business Intelligence Enterprise Edition mines data from various ATF sources, including its case management system and the Federal Licensing Center systems for firearms and explosives.

**ATF'S RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT REPORT**

U.S. Department of Justice

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco,  
Firearms and Explosives*Deputy Director*

FEB 04 2019

Washington, DC 20226

www.atf.gov

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8310MEMORANDUM TO: Inspector General  
U.S. Department of JusticeFROM: Deputy Director  
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives

SUBJECT: OIG Review of ATF's Implementation of the Frontline Initiative.

This memorandum responds to the recommendations contained in the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) report titled "Review of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' Implementation of the Frontline Initiative." We welcome OIG's constructive comments and appreciate the opportunity to respond.

Background: ATF began to develop the Frontline business model in late 2011 as part of a comprehensive review of its operational and management structure. This review was largely prompted by ATF's recognition of systemic, organizational weaknesses that had been highlighted by Congressional inquiries into specific investigations and tactics. These investigations clearly lacked sufficient oversight from senior ATF leadership, and reflected an erosion of organizational discipline that had incrementally developed following ATF's return to the Department of Justice (DOJ) in 2003. Historically, ATF had allowed its field divisions substantial independence in structuring operations to address local conditions and priorities. Unfortunately, ATF's re-integration into DOJ lacked a comprehensive mechanism for aligning ATF's operational structure with Department priorities. Over time, the combination of local field division independence and a lack of comprehensive strategic integration with DOJ priorities resulted in inconsistent operational practices, priorities and accountability across field divisions, and ATF's senior leadership failed to recognize the organizational risks posed by this structure.

## **ATF Response to the OIG's Review of ATF's Implementation of the Frontline Initiative**

Frontline was developed to be a holistic solution to address both the internal organizational weaknesses ATF had developed, and to provide a process to better integrate ATF with DOJ priorities. As such, Frontline was not developed simply as a revised organizational strategy, but rather to be a new and comprehensive business model for ATF. An endeavor of this magnitude must be achieved incrementally and adaptively. Reflecting this reality, ATF's approach to implementing Frontline has been "crawl, walk, run." Frontline's immediate goals included standardizing best practices across field divisions and deploying mechanisms to focus limited organizational resources on DOJ's primary priority – public safety. As your report reflects, these primary objectives have been substantially accomplished, and ATF has realized substantial improvement in organizational accountability under Frontline. ATF recognizes, however, that Frontline implementation is a work in progress and far from complete. We are grateful for the thorough and thoughtful review of Frontline implementation conducted by OIG, and as we further outline below, concur with each of your report's recommendations.

### **Recommendation 1: Update and maintain the Intelligence Program Order and Crime Gun Intelligence Center mission guidance to reflect current intelligence functions and structure, and ensure staff accountability for all standards, including referral responsiveness.**

ATF concurs with this recommendation. Recognizing the need to enhance accountability of our Crime Gun Intelligence Centers (CGIC), in FY 2017 ATF engaged an outside contractor to conduct an assessment of CGIC operations. We received the contractor's report in December 2018 and are currently reviewing it. We intend to use the report's findings to update our best practices, policies, procedures and performance measures, including an update to ATF's Intelligence Program Order. ATF anticipates issuing the revised Order by the end of FY 2019.

### **Recommendation 2: Define and develop performance metrics to assess Frontline-driven operational changes and document the work performed and results of external law enforcement outreach and communication efforts.**

ATF concurs with this recommendation. ATF will define and develop additional specific metrics to assess further the overall impact of Frontline, beyond those currently captured in its Strategic Plan and Performance Management Index. ATF is currently taking action to improve the quality and completeness of its criminal and industry investigative and inspection data through several initiatives. These include: deployment of the Spartan Case Management System; establishment of an ATF Analytics Governance Board, and the implementation of an Enterprise Data Warehouse. Through these mechanisms, ATF will enhance its methods of collecting information to track outcomes and assess the effectiveness of external law enforcement and industry partnerships and interactions more consistently. In so doing, ATF will identify appropriate mechanisms to address and communicate ongoing challenges in working with external law enforcement and industry partners. ATF will expand upon the collection of anecdotal evidence, which suggests that there are beneficial effects of informal outreach to firearms and explosives industry members, and develop appropriate metrics for these activities. ATF believes that other factors not directly evaluated as part of this review also serve as indicators of Frontline adherence and performance. As part of its review and assessment of its

## **ATF Response to the OIG's Review of ATF's Implementation of the Frontline Initiative**

Crime Gun Intelligence program, ATF created and-deployed the NIBIN Enforcement Support System (NESS). NESS is a web-based application developed to help collect, analyze, refer, and track NIBIN and other investigative data. NESS will facilitate information sharing between ATF personnel and law enforcement partners and enhance the timely dissemination of intelligence information and analysis to ATF field personnel and partners. Prior to the creation of NESS, NIBIN sites did not have access to a unified, national data-tracking system, potentially missing key pieces of cross-jurisdictional intelligence.

### **Recommendation 3: Reevaluate and develop National Academy Frontline training modules for new recruits and sustainment training for current staff that communicates Frontline's purpose, intent, and staff expectations.**

ATF concurs with this recommendation. ATF will add training specific to Frontline to the Field Operations block of instruction at the ATF National Academy. This training block focuses on integrating classroom materials with "hands on" practical exercises. ATF believes that the Field Operations block of instruction is the optimal segment to incorporate Frontline training because it emphasizes application of the principles underlying Frontline to daily operations and is the segment of training for which trainees have historically demonstrated the most enthusiasm.

With respect to sustainment training for current staff, ATF has incorporated a Domain Assessment training block into the basic leadership course for first line supervisors, LS-201 (also described below in the response to Recommendation 4). In addition, LS-201 will include language reinforcing that a first line supervisor's understanding, implementation and monitoring of Frontline principles will be an element of their annual performance evaluation, and impress upon the students that their supervisors at the GS-15 and SES levels are likewise evaluated for compliance with Frontline. For non-supervisory staff, ATF's Advance Investigative Techniques (AIT) class has been revised to more strongly focus on Frontline principles and requirements, including effective target selection, making impact cases, and risk management. The AIT course is geared towards street agents, Intelligence Research Specialists and Industry Operations Investigators. Although this course was suspended due to funding limitations in Fiscal Year 2018, it will be provided in FY 2019.

### **Recommendation 4: Develop new-supervisor training specific to the Domain Assessment process.**

ATF concurs with this recommendation. ATF will provide instruction specific to the Domain Assessment process as part of the mandatory basic leadership course, LS-201, that new first line supervisors from all ATF job series are required to complete. In addition, a block on the Domain Assessment process will be integrated into future Leadership and Command Courses for GS-14 and GS-15 criminal investigators. The Leadership and Command Course is a strategic leadership course that is provided by ATF in conjunction with a cadre of instructors from the United States Army War College.

## **ATF Response to the OIG's Review of ATF's Implementation of the Frontline Initiative**

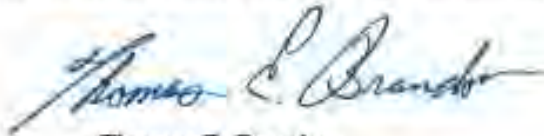
### **Recommendation 5: Develop headquarters-level processes to evaluate compliance with Frontline requirements, and assess the Domain Assessment process to improve its development and execution in the field divisions and allow better trend identification by headquarters leadership**

ATF concurs with this recommendation. On April 13, 2018, a new Frontline Performance Review and Domain Assessment Process was implemented. A detailed memo was sent to all Special Agents in Charge (SAC) detailing the changes to both the Frontline Performance Reviews and Domain Assessments (attached). As part of the new process, a "snapshot" of metrics for every criminal enforcement, crime gun intelligence center, and industry operations office is annually compiled and provided to the SACs and the Field Operations Executive Staff. The snapshot provides an overview of the work accomplished by every Field Office in ATF. The snapshot is then compared to the domain assessment to assist in evaluating each office's compliance with Frontline requirements. This allows the executive staff to identify trends occurring within a field office or a division and make adjustments to ensure effective application of Frontline.

Furthermore, as part of the new process, a meeting is held with the Assistant Director (AD) of Field Operations and each SAC to discuss the results of the previous fiscal year and the domain assessment for the upcoming year. This meeting allows the AD to closely examine each Division's compliance with the Frontline requirements and field operation priorities. This meeting also ensures that every SAC has a clear understanding of the expectations as well as a clearly defined plan for the upcoming year. Each meeting is documented and made a part of the overall year-end assessment.

In addition, as part of the inspection process, the Inspection Division will conduct a case analysis on selected cases to determine if those cases conform to the Field Office's Domain Assessment and are compliant with the overall Frontline priorities of the respective Field Division. The results of the case analysis will be included in the final inspection report and briefed to the field division management team as well as the executive staff.

Please let me know if I can be of further assistance on this or any other matter.



Thomas E. Brandon



## OIG ANALYSIS OF ATF'S RESPONSE

OIG provided a draft of this report to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) for its comment. ATF's response is included in [Appendix 5](#) to this report. OIG's analysis of ATF's response and the actions necessary to close the recommendations are discussed below.

**Recommendation 1:** Update and maintain the Intelligence Program Order and Crime Gun Intelligence Center mission guidance to reflect current intelligence functions and structure, and ensure staff accountability for all standards, including referral responsiveness.

**Status:** Resolved.

**ATF Response:** ATF concurred with the recommendation and stated that it is currently reviewing an outside contractor's assessment of Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC) operations. ATF plans to use the CGIC assessment results to update ATF best practices, policies, procedures and performance measures, as well as its Intelligence Program Order.

**OIG Analysis:** ATF's planned actions are responsive to our recommendation. By May 15, 2019, please provide a copy of the contractor's CGIC assessment. Also, please provide a copy of ATF's plan and projected timeline to update and implement its best practices, policies, procedures and performance measures, as well as its Intelligence Program Order, based on the contractor's assessment.

**Recommendation 2:** Define and develop performance metrics to assess Frontline-driven operational changes and document the work performed and results of external law enforcement outreach and communication efforts.

**Status:** Resolved.

**ATF Response:** ATF concurred with the recommendation and stated that it will define and develop specific metrics to assess the overall impact of Frontline. ATF is currently taking steps to improve the quality and completeness of investigative and inspection data, including the deployment of the Spartan Case Management System, establishment of an ATF Analytics Governance Board, and the implementation of an Enterprise Data Warehouse. ATF intends to use these mechanisms to assess outcomes and effectiveness of external outreach and interactions with industry members and external law enforcement partners. ATF further stated that it has deployed the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network (NIBIN) Enforcement Support System to help collect, analyze, refer, and track NIBIN and other investigative data, as well as facilitate timely information sharing between ATF and its law enforcement partners.

**OIG Analysis:** ATF's planned actions are responsive to our recommendation. By May 15, 2019, please provide ATF's plan and projected timeline for developing Frontline-specific metrics and explain how ATF will collect the data for these metrics through the use of the Spartan Case Management System, ATF's Analytics Governance Board, and the Enterprise Data Warehouse. Also, please provide any determinations made regarding appropriate mechanisms to address and communicate ongoing challenges with external partners and appropriate metrics for informal outreach activities. Finally, please provide documentation on the NIBIN Enforcement Support System and its deployment, including how ATF will assess its effects on information sharing among law enforcement partners. If any of these efforts are still underway, please provide a status report on your progress.

**Recommendation 3:** Reevaluate and develop National Academy Frontline training modules for new recruits and sustainment training for current staff that communicates Frontline's purpose, intent, and staff expectations.

**Status:** Resolved.

**ATF Response:** ATF concurred with the recommendation and stated that it will add Frontline training to the Field Operations block of instruction at the ATF National Academy. ATF will also add Domain Assessment training to its basic leadership course, reinforcing that first-line supervisors' understanding, implementation, and monitoring of Frontline principles will be an element of their annual performance evaluations and that ATF evaluates its supervisors for compliance with Frontline. In addition, ATF revised its non-supervisory staff Advanced Investigative Techniques class—intended for Special Agents, Intelligence Research Specialists and Industry Operations Investigators—to focus on Frontline principles and requirements, including effective target selection, making impact cases, and risk management.

**OIG Analysis:** ATF's planned actions are responsive to our recommendation. By May 15, 2019, please provide copies of Frontline training added to the Field Operations block of instruction at the ATF National Academy, Domain Assessment training provided in ATF's basic leadership course, and revisions to course materials associated with ATF's non-supervisory staff Advanced Investigative Techniques class, or a status report on your progress. Also, please advise as to when the courses will be implemented and how ATF will provide training for existing staff that have not attended the new training at the ATF National Academy, are not immediately eligible for the basic leadership course, and are in a professional staff series (non-criminal enforcement and non-Industry Operations Investigators).

**Recommendation 4:** Develop new-supervisor training specific to the Domain Assessment process.

**Status:** Resolved.

**ATF Response:** ATF concurred with the recommendation and stated that instruction on the Domain Assessment process will be part of the mandatory basic leadership course, a requirement for all new first-line supervisors. In addition, the Domain Assessment process will be integrated into future Leadership and Command Courses for GS-14 and GS-15 criminal investigators.

**OIG Analysis:** ATF's planned actions are responsive to our recommendation. By May 15, 2019, please provide copies of the instruction on the Domain Assessment process added to the basic leadership course or a status report on your progress. Also, please advise as to when this new instruction will be implemented.

**Recommendation 5:** Develop headquarters-level processes to evaluate compliance with Frontline requirements, and assess the Domain Assessment process to improve its development and execution in the field divisions and allow better trend identification by headquarters leadership.

**Status:** Resolved.

**ATF Response:** ATF concurred with the recommendation and stated that on April 13, 2018, ATF issued a memorandum outlining changes to its new Frontline Performance Review and Domain Assessment Process (Process) that will begin in fiscal year 2019.<sup>92</sup> In addition, ATF's Inspection Division will conduct selected case analyses to assess case conformity to the field office's Domain Assessment and compliance with the Frontline priorities of the respective field division.

**OIG Analysis:** ATF's planned actions are responsive to our recommendation. By May 15, 2019, please provide an update on the implementation of the new Frontline Performance Review and Domain Assessment process. In addition, please provide the ATF Inspection Division's methodology for assessing case conformity to field office Domain Assessments and compliance with Frontline priorities and advise as to when the Inspections Division will implement these efforts.

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<sup>92</sup> The April 13, 2018, memorandum requires Frontline Performance Reviews from each field office, rather than just one from the field division, and that they occur twice per year. The Process includes additional guidance and reporting instructions to criminal enforcement to identify primary enforcement objectives and industry operations offices to detail its methodology identifying industry members selected for inspection and how many inspections can be completed during the fiscal year. The Process also requires each Field Division CGIC to develop its own Domain Assessment detailing its mission composition as well as the methods it uses to disseminate and track referrals. Finally, the memorandum specifies that the Assistant Director for Field Operations will conduct a meeting with each Field Division Special Agent in Charge to discuss previous fiscal year results and the upcoming fiscal year's Domain Assessment in order to assess compliance with Frontline requirements and field operation priorities. See Assistant Director for Field Operations, ATF, memorandum to All Special Agents in Charge, New Frontline Performance Review and Domain Assessment Process, April 13, 2018.



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