

Ashcroft Announces Gun Purchase Initiatives; FBI, INS Must ID Illegal Immigrants; Background Check System to Be Upgraded

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Body

Attorney General John D. **Ashcroft** **announced** plans yesterday to curb **gun purchases** by **illegal immigrants** and criminals while streamlining transactions for legal **gun** buyers.

Ashcroft ordered the **FBI** and the Immigration and Naturalization Service to revamp their computer **systems** to identify noncitizens who try to buy firearms through federally licensed **gun** dealers. **Illegal immigrants** and those **in** the United States on temporary visas are prohibited from buying **guns** under federal law, although some **in** the latter group can buy firearms for hunting **in** some circumstances, officials said.

"These more thorough procedures will help ensure that **guns** do not fall into the hands of **illegal aliens**," **Ashcroft** said. "**Illegal aliens** who seek to buy **guns** unlawfully will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

Ashcroft also **announced** plans to **upgrade** the nation's **background check system** to provide immediate approval or denial for **gun purchases in** nine out of 10 cases. Under current law, a person is allowed to buy a weapon if federal officials do not provide a response within three days.

The attorney general also **announced** a \$ 141 million **initiative** to help states improve their computerized criminal records over the next four years -- a measure that would help weed out felons trying to buy firearms -- and another program to add 94 federal prosecutors focused on **gun** crimes among juveniles.

The measures earned mixed reviews from **gun** control groups, many of which have been highly critical of **Ashcroft** because of his close ties to the National Rifle Association and his views on **gun** control.

"It's definitely a step **in** the right direction," NRA spokesman Andrew Arulanandam said. "It cleans up a lot of the mess **in** the **system**."

Americans for **Gun** Safety, a moderate **gun** control group that has sought to occupy a middle ground on firearms issues, praised the **background check** advance as long overdue. The group recommended similar steps **in** a report issued last month.

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"The dirty little secret is that the records necessary to approve or deny firearms purchases are a mess," said Jonathan Cowan, president of the group's foundation. "Our poor records are a gaping loophole that allows criminals, terrorists, illegal aliens and wife beaters to slide through a background check."

But other groups said the measures do not go far enough to prevent access to firearms by criminals or potential terrorists. They argued that Ashcroft is focusing on speed over accuracy.

"He's really doing nothing to fix the problem," said Matthew Nosanchuck, legislative policy director for the Violence Policy Center. "The priority seems to be getting guns into people's hands as quickly as possible instead of taking the time to ensure that prohibited persons aren't slipping through the system."

Ashcroft came under fire in December after he ordered the FBI to stop comparing the names of suspected terrorists against federal gun purchase records. Gun control groups said Ashcroft, an NRA member, was interpreting the law too narrowly.

Ashcroft reiterated his position yesterday that such checks are prohibited under federal law. He said the Justice Department would review proposed changes to allow such record searches, though he stopped short of saying whether he would endorse them.

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