

Beat: News

TACKLING THE INCREASING THREAT OF 3D PRINTED GUNS

Homeland Security Today

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USPA NEWS - "The team leader of Europol's Analysis Project Weapons and Explosives, Martin van der Meij, said at the conference that there is a growing number of 3D printed weapons being seized in investigations across Europe and that the threat is very much on Europol's radar."

"An international network of experts on 3D printed firearms will be created, tasked with keeping law enforcement agencies abreast of developments in 3D printed firearms."

The announcement was made at the International Conference on 3D Printed Firearms, which was organized by Europol and the Dutch National Police on May 24 and 25. Some 120 law enforcement professionals, ballistic experts, forensic scientists, policy makers and academia specialists from 20 countries gathered to address the latest challenges facing law enforcement in their efforts to tackle this current and future threat.

In addition to the creation of a global network of experts, conference participants also concluded that connection and cooperation between law enforcement and the private sector is needed to identify and monitor the developments around 3D printed firearms. The main policy recommendations of participants and other developments around 3D printed firearms will be put into a factsheet, which will be distributed to partners and policy makers worldwide.

There is very real reason for policy makers to implement measures to counter the threat from 3D printed weapons. In 2019, two people were shot dead in Halle, Germany, by a perpetrator using a homemade weapon, based on a blueprint downloaded from the internet to partly manufacture the weapon with a 3D printer. In April 2021, the Spanish National Police raided and dismantled an illegal workshop in the Canary Islands which was producing 3D printed weapons. A month later, two men and one woman were arrested in the United Kingdom as part of an investigation into right-wing terrorism. All three were charged with possessing components of 3D printed weapons.

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The threat is increasing across the Atlantic too. Earlier this year, Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) announced the results of an investigation into 3D printed firearms manufacturing. This case, which dates back to September 28, 2021, began at an international mail processing center in Ontario. CBSA border services officers were processing postal shipments and intercepted a suspicious package, destined for southeastern Manitoba from the United States. Upon closer examination, they found that the shipment contained undeclared firearm components, including metal parts and inserts most commonly used to reinforce the plastic frame of a 3D-printed handgun. As part of the investigation, house searches resulted in the seizure of 3D printed guns and a 3D printer.

The impact of 3D printed firearms may of course be more strongly felt in countries where gun controls are generally tighter than in the United States, especially in Europe, as standard firearms are not as easily obtainable. Only a limited number of 3D printed firearms have been used in crimes in the U.S. However, as gun control debate resurfaces, legislators and policy makers should be mindful of the threat of home-made devices, especially now that 3D printers are less expensive than they were when the Department of Homeland Security warned they would be impossible to contain. 3D printed firearms could be obtained by those precluded from owning a traditional gun, and can (but by law should not) be made without metal, making them an attractive alternative for criminals wanting to evade detection.

In December 2021, the Office of Inspector General at the U.S. Department of Justice issued a report examining Bureau of Alcohol,

Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) monitoring of 3-D firearm printing technology. OIG found that ATF needs standardized procedures to identify and evaluate 3-D printed firearms, dedicated protocols or guidance to ensure proactive monitoring of this evolving technology, and necessary communication with stakeholders. ATF stated at the time that it had not identified 3-D printing of firearms as a priority area to monitor.

However it agreed with OIG's recommended actions to help ensure that 3-D printed firearms are not trafficked, do not fall into the hands of prohibited persons, and comply with existing federal laws.

Specifically, these recommendations called for:

- * Updating ATF policies and procedures to include monitoring and evaluating 3-D printed firearms, and to include a preliminary risk assessment tool within its updated policies and procedures for ATF's firearms technology division to properly weigh the potential threat posed by specific 3-D printed firearms.
- * Implementing ATF's planned internal and external communication and collaboration strategy regarding 3-D printed firearm issues, including convening a formal working group with relevant stakeholders.
- * Building on ATF's established lines of communication with the firearms industry to keep abreast of technological developments pertaining to 3-D printed firearm detectability and, as appropriate, operational functionality.
- * Establishing expanded protocols to more effectively collect data on recovered firearms made entirely using 3-D printers and "hybrid" firearms made with a 3-D printed frame or receiver. This action may include modification of ATF's case management or firearm tracing systems to permit specific designation of such recovered firearms.

ATF is working to meet these recommendations and expects to have completed all activity by the end of Fiscal Year 2024.

OIG's findings and the creation of the expert network and other policy recommendations borne from the international conference on 3D printed firearms are timely, not just for Europe but globally as criminals seek to find new ways to circumvent prevention and detection."

Source: Homeland Security Today, Kylie Bielby

About the author

"Kylie Bielby has more than 20 years' experience in reporting and editing a wide range of security topics, covering geopolitical and policy analysis to international and country-specific trends and events. Before joining GTSC's Homeland Security Today staff, she was an editor and contributor for Jane's, and a columnist and managing editor for security and counter-terror publications." (ref: hstoday.us)

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

United Press Association, Inc.

3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168

Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA

(702) 943.0321 Local

(702) 943.0233 Facsimile

info@unitedpressassociation.org

info@gna24.com

www.gna24.com