

## 3 Are Charged With Selling 'Ghost Guns,' Including Assault-Style Rifles

Many of the weapons were untraceable so-called ghost guns assembled from components, authorities said. One defendant tutored buyers on their use.

By **Hurubie Meko**

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4 MIN READ

Three men were charged Wednesday with selling firearms and drugs to undercover investigators as they attempted to create a pipeline for unregistered weapons from Massachusetts to New York.

One of the defendants, who had worked at a major firearms manufacturer, used his knowledge to teach buyers how to use the illegal guns, many of which were so-called ghost guns assembled from parts, according to New York prosecutors. Ghost guns lack serial numbers and are deliberately untraceable.

The men, Eduardo Hernandez, 29, of Queens, Euclides Castillo, 30, of Davenport, Fla., and Jose Garcia, 46, of Westfield, Mass., were charged in a 123-count indictment that included counts of criminal sale of a firearm, criminal sale of a ghost gun, criminal possession of a weapon, criminal sale of a controlled substance and other charges.

The 16-month joint investigation by city, state and federal agencies began in March 2021 and centered on Mr. Hernandez, Attorney General Letitia James of New York said at a briefing in her Manhattan office on Wednesday.

Mr. Hernandez sold a total of 14 guns and more than 560 grams of cocaine — with a street value of about \$25,000 — to investigators, she said. Several of the sales were made from his residence in southeast Queens.

Mr. Garcia also sold five firearms directly to investigators in Port Chester in Westchester County, according to Ms. James. Both men obtained the guns in Massachusetts, she said, and brought them to New York to sell.

Mr. Castillo, who investigators discovered had once worked for Smith & Wesson, a gun manufacturer in Springfield, Mass., was present for some sales and used his knowledge of how to assemble and troubleshoot the firearms to instruct potential buyers, she said.

“These dangerous weapons were being peddled in neighborhoods where families live and children play,” Ms. James said.

Several of the firearms intercepted by investigators were AR-15-style rifles, which have been used in mass shootings across the country. Investigators also recovered nine 9-millimeter semiautomatic pistols, eight of which were ghost guns, and six high-capacity magazines.

If convicted, Mr. Hernandez faces up to 45 years in prison, while Mr. Garcia could get 15 and Mr. Castillo seven.

More than 7,000 illegal firearms were recovered in the city last year, according to Keechant Sewell, commissioner of the New York Police Department, marking a 27-year high. Over 1,300 firearms have been seized so far this year, she said at the news conference.

The number of ghost guns seized in New York City has greatly increased in recent years, according to data from the Police Department. In 2018, officers recovered 17 ghost guns, a number that grew to 463 last year.

At the news conference, New York Mayor Eric Adams renewed his call from last year for the federal government to revoke the firearms license of Polymer80, a Nevada-based industry leader that sells gun components.

Although the number of illegal guns being seized has increased, “we’re seeing a continuous reproduction,” he said.

“Someone with a 3-D printer could sit inside their home and print out a device of death,” Mr. Adams said.

Ghost guns, which can be put together at home from parts and are unregistered firearms, can be assembled in under an hour, according to Everytown for Gun Safety.

Because they can’t be traced, they’re appealing “to bad actors” and individuals who are not able to legally purchase guns, Ms. James said. And in recent years, Ms. James has gone after the manufacturers of ghost guns in courts.

In 2022, state and city officials in New York filed two lawsuits that sought to halt the proliferation of ghost guns under a new state law intended to hold the gun industry accountable for shootings. The lawsuits were filed six days after the Supreme Court struck down a New York law that had strictly regulated the public carrying of guns.

Ms. James sued 10 gun distributors who she said sold “tens of thousands of illegal, unfinished frames and receivers to New Yorkers that were then converted into unserialized, untraceable handguns and assault-style weapons, known as ghost guns.”

This year, her office filed a motion to immediately stop the distributors from selling and shipping parts to consumers in New York while the case was pending in court. The motion was granted last week.

Wednesday's charges came a week after a raid by the city's Police Department on a luxury co-op in the Yorkville neighborhood on the Upper East Side in which the police seized gun parts and drug-related materials, as well as pressure cookers and chemicals that authorities said could be used to make explosives.

In December, the attorney general's office and the New York State Police announced a 438-count indictment that charged three men with trafficking ghost guns, including assault weapons, handguns and semiautomatic pistols. That investigation led to the seizure of 57 firearms, 51 of which were ghost guns.

More in New York

Across the state, 10,500 guns were recovered in 2022, Steven A. Nigrelli, acting superintendent of the State Police, said at the news conference. He added that the provision of ghost guns has turned into a "cottage industry."

Police Chief Is Charged With Sexually Assaulting 2 Female Employees

Jonah E. Bromwich contributed reporting.

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