Gun Culture

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What is a gun culture?

Gun culture is measured as the percentage of offences committed by guns, or a count of sensational crimes involving guns, or ease with which criminals get access, or just a political rhetoric in the hands of opposition? Whatever the definition, the perception of 'Gun Culture' is a sign of breakdown of law & order and security, and people lose confidence in the ability of the Government to protect its citizens, which is a failure of both moral and political authority. The expression 'gun culture' sounds like an oxymoron as gun signifies violence/ destruction (even in the context of protection it is by threat or injury) whereas a cultured society abjures violence. Gun culture is an idea or perception about the posture or usage of guns; it is difficult to define it in terms of statistics, and perception is more relevant than numbers as 'gun culture' can be looked at from different perspectives-perceptions of public, media and opinion-makers particularly political class on ideas like peace with or without guns and perception of violence with guns. The perception thresholds of peace or fear or politics-all the three are important factors.



Since it is an idea or perception there are indicators or aggravating or mitigating factors or characteristics to the idea of gun culture. Habitual or frequent use of firearms by criminals, even by police, as a tribe is one of the characteristics of gun culture because this term is a neutral one, as usage of a gun can take away life, no matter who uses it. No matter guns are used for agricultural purposes or self-protection or brandishing the gun as a status symbol can qualify as aggravating factors. Possession of air pistols can even trigger a perception of gun culture as common people cannot differentiate a real gun by the look of the barrel. Although the Second Amendment confers the right to possess and carry guns by US citizens to protect individual rights and democratic values, frequent usage aggravates the perception of gun culture. Brandishing guns by armed groups in countries where civil war goes on without any credible authority in place, is an extreme form of gun culture. In the UK even if a policeman touches a Taser it indicates his intention to use the weapon and he is mandated to record the circumstances under which he intended to use the weapon and an elaborate form needs to be filled up to justify the action. Touching the gun during an encounter with public itself amounts to use of force. Hence this procedure is followed.

Beliefs, practices, values and characteristics of a group of people or community entrenched over a period of time become its culture. Peculiar it may sound but 'culturalization' has a life-cycle and the intervals between two stages in its cycle could be very short in case of gun culture as a violent cycle has got a short fuse and events can occur in quick succession if there is no intervention immediately. Paradoxically, formation of an idea or belief that the gun is the only solution to a problem does not happen in a short time: only when democratic institutions fail and people lose faith in the law and its enforcement. But once the faith in gun is formed, the cultural cycle sets in. Police as the arm of democracy is the first responder and critical factor even in preventing the formation of such ideas. Social media monitoring and sentiment analysis in social media have become essential part of law enforcement and in monitoring the evolution of belief in solution through violence particularly through guns should also be part of such monitoring.

Availability of firearms is a critical factor in the process of 'culturalization' to guns and curtailing the access to supply points and its transport to a geographical area determines the momentum in the cycle. Intervention at the points of the supplier and the buyer and the transport medium is the most effective method of preventing the gun culture to complete its cycle. With stringent action on the usage of guns whether it is licensed or unlicensed, TN Police enforce the Arms Act effectively, resulting in early prevention of usage of guns for committing violent acts.

Psychology of possession of guns

Gun culture is a cultural trait. Gun is also meant for self-protection and self-respect. So, a gun gets into the social arena, inter-personal relationships and even group dynamics, especially in a power struggle. One can become aggressive, rude, arrogant, belligerent, disrespect human rights, though guns give a person social status rooted in fear, belongingness to an elite class for many influencing the relationships through invisible intimidation.

Historically the gun trade prospered during war and slave trade. It helped acquire territories, win wars and seal business deals. Gun means crimes; Guns are against humanity; anti-nature, anti-ecological and suicidal. Guns are anti-cultural; many massacres have been committed with guns. Gun helped in cultural hegemony and expansions. Guns change the power equation in a society and it is even considered as a community asset. When I was a boy, I had seen one community of people using guns to target another community in a clash and the members of that community celebrating the persons who used the guns, as the hero of the community. When physical power with guns combined with psychological advantage it becomes a lethal force and it can subjugate a community.

What is the prediction for TN in gun culture?

With strong intelligence infrastructure, strict enforcement of laws especially Arms Act by police and overwhelming number of peace-loving people in the scene should we really worry about a possible gun culture in TN?

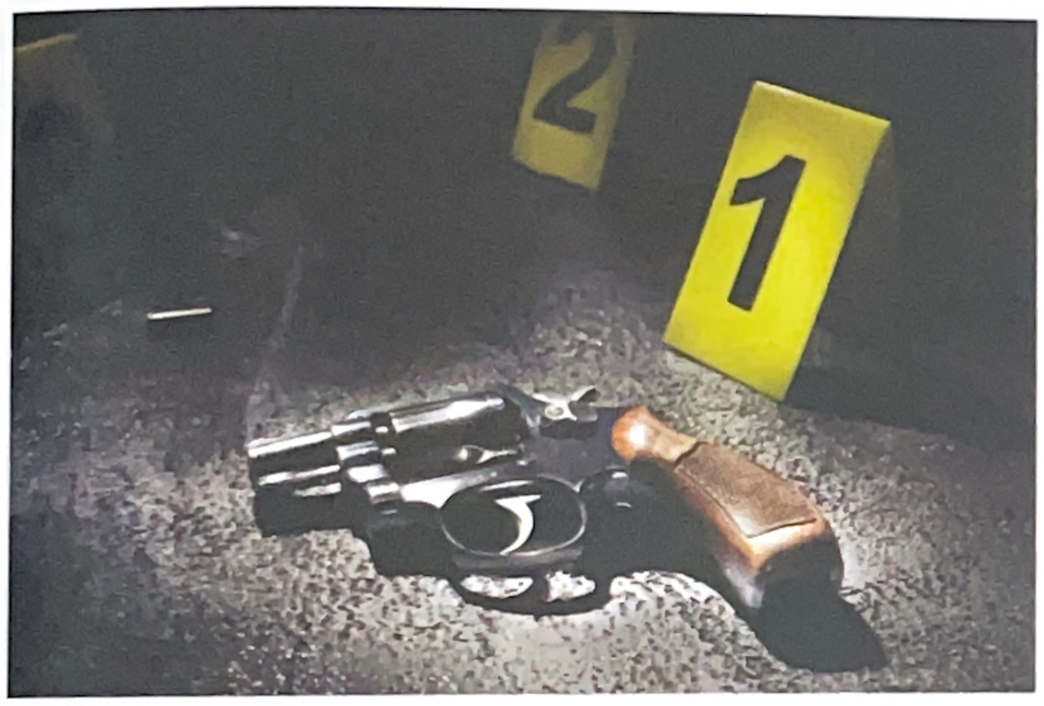
Probably no, but gun culture can be triggered in a society where historically violence and revolutionary attitude have been noticed. 'De-violencing' / disarming the society by encouraging more democratic opportunities is the preliminary step the law and order machinery should take up and it should be part of its long-term objectives. Disarming is easier but 'de-violencing' is a challenging one and the wherewithal to do the same is not there with police. Further, it is not in the police mandate also. Organized groups particularly the one with extremist ideologies should be nudged into the path of democracy both administratively and politically. Education may need a re-orientation to make children aware of the negative consequences of violence. Individuals with inclination to attain martyrdom for a chosen cause should be identified and addressed through systematic programs to de-extremize the ideological thoughts in individuals as one act of martyrdom can inspire many individuals who are predisposed to such machinations, due to various socio-economic or psychological reasons. Scotland Yard's programme of de-radicalization, though marred with a few controversies, is one such programme for consideration. Schools look for the students with violent extremist search histories on the internet. They are subjected to a counselling programme to set their cognitive distortions right. Perhaps we need it in colleges as well. A simple algorithm which can report the search for violent extremism-related content can throw data on the susceptible individuals.

External factors on the borders in Palk Strait definitely needs a close watch, as China's presence in Sri Lankan territory and its reach in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal has long term implications for a possible gun culture in Tamil Nadu.

With access to bandwidth and penetration of smartphones across the economic strata of the society, every individual is a potential entity in a possible gun culture. 3D printer guns and micro drone-enabled guns are going to be the potential agents for gun culture in the future and the task is cut out for police on those fronts.

Firearms as Evidence

Firearms and ballistic marching play an important role in criminal investigations, as ***"every firearm tells a story"***. The information required to depict their story can be obtained from both the exterior and interior of a firearm, or from ammunition, and can be used to further investigations and prosecutions which contribute to intelligence gathering and analysis.



Crime Scene:

Firearms and their surrounding area at a crime scene can furnish a variety of evidence. These crime scenes can include, but are not limited to any place where:

- A victim has sustained a firearms-related injury;
- A firearm has been criminally discharged;
- A firearm/firearm parts or components/ammunition/ ammunition components believed to have been used in or linked to a crime is discovered; and
- A firearm/firearm parts or components/ammunition has been unlawfully manufactured, converted, or test fired.

A ***'crime gun'*** is a firearm that is possessed unlawfully and/or has been used in the commission of a crime. Proper examination and tracing of these items may:

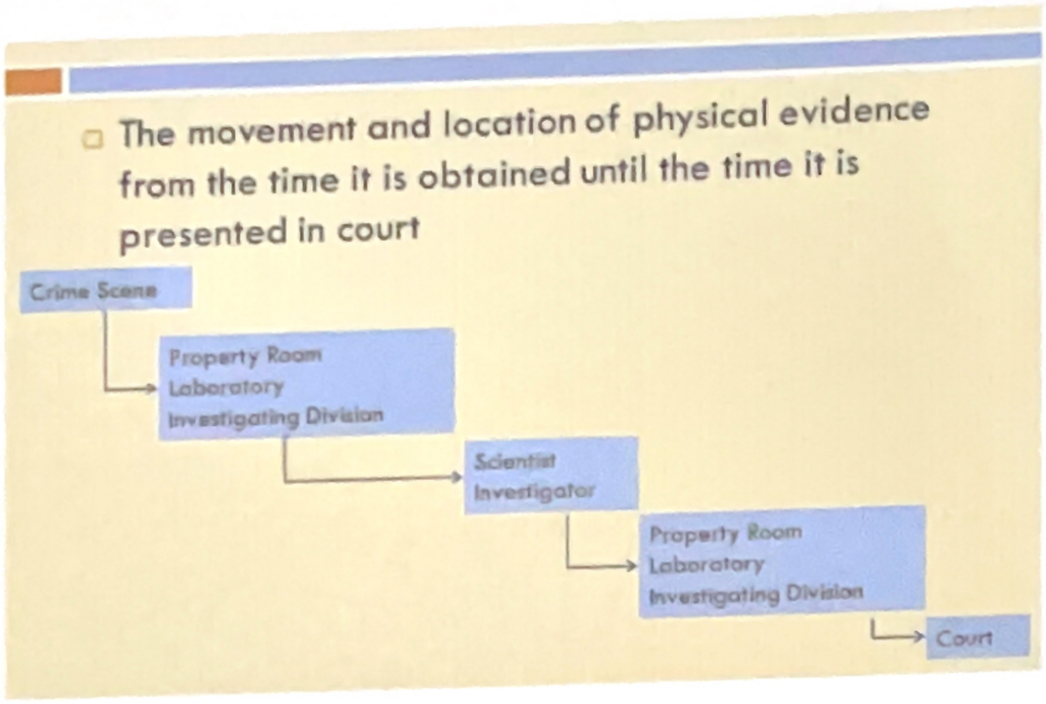
- Confirm/eliminate the weapon as the source of shots fired during the commission of a crime;
- Enable the identification of persons of interest;
- Reveal links to related crimes;
- Indicate evidence of an illicit trafficking network; or
- Indicate evidence of illicit manufacturing.

Firearms – As Evidence

Firearms-related evidence can be used both in relation to the main crime but can also lead to the building of strong parallel criminal cases, such as international firearms trafficking. Sometimes, one piece of evidence can help in both investigations. For example, a ballistic comparison can confirm that a firearm was used in a murder case but also in other crimes committed in another country, which is already an indicator of the routing of that firearm.

Too often, the value of evidence that firearms, ballistics and ammunition provide is overlooked in criminal investigations; enforcement operations stop at the point of seizure or recovery. Yet, seized and recovered firearm-related items may themselves provide critical evidence of a broad range of additional crimes, such as firearms trafficking and illicit manufacturing.

Firearms chain of custody



Ensuring the chronological and careful documentation of evidence relating to a crime scene, or alleged crime, is vital; this is known as the 'chain-of-custody'. If during the investigation, steps are taken to ensure 'traceability and continuity' of the evidence for the duration of the investigation from crime scene to courtroom, it is possible to establish its connection to an alleged crime. It is important to preserve the value of any evidence that is collected during an investigation. The chain-of-custody can present a significant opportunity for error if it is not maintained correctly.

Health and safety procedures are of paramount importance when arriving at crime scenes and should remain a priority throughout the process, to ensure the safety of officers and others present. Accordingly, crime scene examinations must be undertaken with the support, guidance and supervision of suitably trained firearms and other experts, and/or forensic firearms experts, who can help ensure all activity is safe while not compromising potential forensic evidence.

Firearm identification

Firearms identification is a fundamental step in firearms trafficking investigations because it provides the essential elements for the unique identification and tracing of the firearm.

There are at least five key identifiers of a firearm: the make, model, calibre, manufacturer, and serial number. Other markings (import or proof house markings), the year of manufacture or import, as well as additional specific characteristics, may contribute to its identification.

Firearms identification can sometimes be challenging because of the large variety of firearms producers, makes and models. Sometimes, the same producer may manufacture different models of firearms with the same serial number. However, when adding the make, model and calibre to the serial number, it will be possible to uniquely identify and distinguish one firearm from another.

A further challenge in the identification of firearms refers to the manufacturer or make, as there are many firearms that are produced under licence by various countries. For example, the AK-47 is one of the firearms posing serious challenges to proper identification because of the similarities encountered between firearms produced by various manufacturers. It is estimated that more than 75 million AK-type firearms have been manufactured since the original AK-47 first entered service in the Soviet Union in 1949. Today, there are in excess

of 30 varieties of Kalashnikov assault rifle, most retaining the distinctive banana-shaped ammunition clip, which are frequently misidentified as AK-47 rifles.

Firearms examiners can use various tools designed to help them correctly identify a firearm, ranging from manufacturers identification tools to specialized databases. The best-known database used for firearm identification is the INTERPOL Firearms Reference Table (FRT), which is an online interactive tool used to provide a standardized methodology to identify and describe firearms.

In addition to firearm identification, the examiners need to assess the functionality of the firearm, mainly considering the following aspects:

- Whether the firearm is capable of firing live ammunition;
- Whether the firearm has undergone functional modifications (for example if it was modified from semiautomatic to automatic, or if a gas firearm was modified to discharge real bullets);
- Whether a firearm has been deactivated or reactivated;
- Whether the firearm may be subject to mechanical malfunctions (for example if it can accidentally discharge).

Serial Number Restoration



Example of an obliterated serial number on a firearm, before restoration (Courtesy of the Association of Firearm and Tool Mark Examiners)



And, after restoration

A Serial Number includes information related to the data and location of the weapons manufacturing intended to present the illegal gun shells and make it easier to solve crimes by allowing individual guns to be traced.

Sometimes, firearms used in crimes have the serial numbers obliterated or modified in an attempt to make tracing them very difficult, if not impossible. A firearm and tool mark examiner may perform a serial number restoration if this number has been obliterated through means such as filing, grinding, or peening.

The most used methods for serial number restoration are the magnetic particle method, chemical etching, the electrolytic method, and heat treatment.

Firearm tracing

The Firearms Protocol defines tracing as "the systematic tracking of firearms and, where possible, their parts and components and ammunition from manufacturer to purchaser for the purpose of assisting the competent authorities of States Parties in detecting, investigating and analysing illicit manufacturing and illicit trafficking."

'Firearms tracing' is a critical tool in the investigation of firearms-related offences, particularly those involving trafficking and distribution. It assists in identifying sources of firearms used by criminal organizations and terrorist groups, as well as providing valuable intelligence on methodologies utilized in the trafficking of these firearms. Firearms tracing can also provide evidence which may link a suspect to a firearm.

A successful firearms trace will identify the manufacturer and the first retail purchaser of the firearm, using the manufacturer's records of sale. Where the firearm has been later sold by the first purchaser, tracing the weapon through the history of its distribution chain may also, subject to national laws and recordkeeping, reveal any subsequent ownership and thereby identify its current legal owner. This identified individual (or entity) may be the perpetrator of a crime or may be otherwise relevant to the case or have information to contribute about the circumstances of the crime or its perpetrator. The tracing process may thus lead to evidence that is decisive in solving or prosecuting a case.

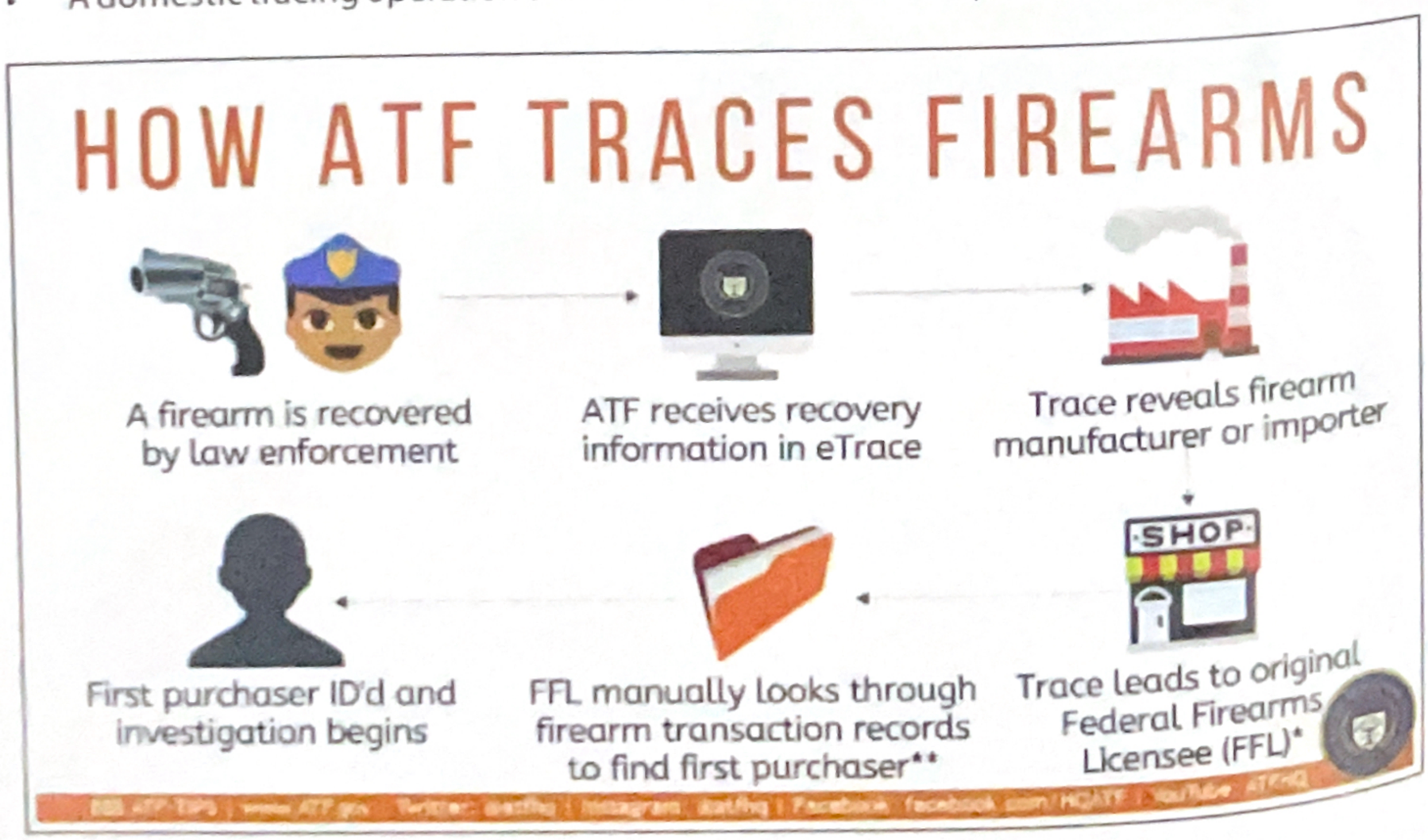
A firearm trace is not an indication that the person of interest has committed an unlawful act; it is simply intended to provide an avenue of information for investigative fact-gathering. In many cases additional investigation will be required to determine the point when the firearm became the subject of the investigation or inquiry, or when it became illicit.

Firearm tracing is a key resource, not only for the development of leads in a criminal investigation, but also for the development of actionable intelligence on complex firearm-related crime and firearms trafficking. The mapping and analysis of national and international firearm trace data may help to:

- Delineate potential patterns and trends in firearm trafficking;
- Reveal individuals and entities involved in firearm trafficking activities; and
- Expose ***'red flag'*** data such as disproportionate numbers of ***'lost'*** or 'stolen' firearms from a single source, or short ***'time-to-crime'***, etc.

The Modular Small-Arms-Control Implementation Compendium provides good practice and guidance on the steps for undertaking domestic and international tracing action, including the steps necessary to make and respond to international tracing requests as follows:

- Unique identification of the weapon based on its markings and physical characteristics;
- A domestic tracing operation to establish whether the weapon became illicit while under



the jurisdiction of the State that recovered it (e.g. following its domestic manufacture or import), or possibly entered the country by illicit means;

- An international tracing operation, if the weapon is suspected of having entered the country by illicit means;
- The tracing operation (domestic or international) to identify the point in time and space at which the weapon became illicit;
- Action taken to prosecute those responsible for diverting the weapon and to prevent similar diversions from recurring.

Firearms tracing can take place in different moments and contexts of a criminal investigation. It can be part of the initial investigative process of a law enforcement official or can also be requested by a prosecutor as part of a follow up or parallel investigation into illicit trafficking.

By implementing the tracing activities, investigators can make use of various tools available at a national level in national databases on firearms owners, manufacturers, importers, and dealers and at international level through (iArms) Illicit Arms Records and Tracing Management System and (eTrace) Electronic Tracing System.

Courtesy:
UNODC - https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/firearms/module-8/key-issues/firearms-as-evidence.html

Did You Know?

In 1938, there was a very interesting innovation in the form of a Revolver Camera. It was just what it sounded like, a revolver (a Colt .38 special) with a camera attached. Whenever the owner would pull the trigger of the gun, a camera would take a picture.

