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Mike's gun shop stings may put holes in 18 cases

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Mayor Bloomberg's decision to hire private investigators to conduct undercover stings at Southern gun shops has potentially jeopardized several criminal cases, law enforcement sources charged.

Four cases were compromised and an additional 14 were put at risk by the six-week sting aimed at gun stores in Georgia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Virginia, the sources said.

The sources argued that several suspects being watched by authorities had frequented some of the 15 gun shops - but are now cleaning up their acts or lying low because of the publicity. None of the ongoing cases was linked to New York, the sources said.

"A bunch of private eyes straight out of 'Barnaby Jones' run their own sting operation and all the real enforcement agencies find out about it on the day they are having a press conference? Not good," said a law enforcement source in Washington.

The Justice Department held a meeting last week to review potential problems, another source said.

"The goal is to lock up gun criminals, not file civil lawsuits with publicity stunts," the source said.

But the city's criminal justice czar dismissed the complaints.

"What we did can only complement any ongoing investigation," said Criminal Justice Coordinator John Feinblatt, adding his office had received only positive feedback, as well as requests to share the evidence gathered. The NYPD was not involved in the sting.

"Agencies will marry the video evidence we gathered with other evidence to make a far richer, far stronger and far more airtight case," Feinblatt said.

City officials said the sting was not a stunt - but a necessary campaign given how few gun shops are investigated and shuttered for flouting laws governing firearm sales.

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