

SPRING 2025

# Translational Criminology

Promoting knowledge exchange  
to shape criminal justice research,  
practice, and policy

## FEATURING

Gun Crime Trends and Challenges with  
America's Gun Violence Data Infrastructure

Focused Deterrence Strategies to Reduce  
Gun Violence

From Local Innovation to Best Practice –  
Crime Gun Intelligence Centers

Reducing the Illegal Supply of Firearms

Street Outreach Conflict Mediation Strategies:  
What the Research Suggests (So Far)

Congressional Briefing — Preventing Gun Violence

Extreme Risk Protection Orders to Reduce  
Mass Shootings and Other Firearm Violence

Domestic Violence Laws and Firearm Violence

Intervening with Persons at High-risk for  
Gun Violence and Mass Shootings

Evidence on Background Check  
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## From the Special Issue Editor

Reducing gun violence through evidence-based approaches has been a longstanding priority for the CEBCP. To help inform those efforts, this special issue of *Translational Criminology* features essays on firearms policy issues from several highly respected and accomplished scholars. These essays are based on presentations given at the Congressional Briefing on Preventing Gun Violence organized at the U.S. Capitol by the CEBCP and The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation on February 25, 2025 (videos from the Congressional Briefing can be viewed at: <https://cebc.org/outreach-symposia-and-briefings/preventing-gun-violence/>). Additionally, we have included an essay highlighting presentations from a gun policy panel held at the CEBCP's last symposium in June 2024.

In planning the Congressional Briefing, we sought to address several policy issues that are important to gun violence prevention efforts at all levels of government but that are particularly salient to federal policymakers and practitioners. These include current federal policies and practices, initiatives that the federal government has supported at the state and local levels through funding and collaboration, and emerging issues related to these efforts. Much of the research discussed in this issue has also been supported by federal funding. We also sought to focus on laws and practices that have broader public support, including among gun owners, non-gun owners, and people with different political affiliations. Broadly, these essays highlight efforts to prevent gun offending and victimization among high-risk individuals and groups, improve gun crime investigations, reduce the illegal supply of firearms, prevent gun acquisitions by prohibited persons, mobilize communities against gun violence, and improve measurement and tracking of gun crime.

While our authors provide many insights into these issues, there are also key themes that run through their essays. One is that efforts focused on high-risk individuals and groups can be effective when implemented well. These include justice-led prevention and enforcement approaches, such as focused deterrence (Braga), threat assessment (Ellyson et al.), and crime gun intelligence centers (CGICs) (Burch), as well as community-based initiatives, including street outreach conflict mediation (Maguire et al.) and hospital-based interventions with victims of gun violence (forthcoming by Joseph Richardson in our next issue). Similarly, laws restricting gun possession by domestic violence offenders (Zeoli and Holtz, Ellyson et al.) have reduced intimate partner homicide, and extreme risk protection order laws (ERPOs), which temporarily disarm persons at high risk of harming themselves or others (Pear, Ellyson et al.), appear promising for the prevention of suicides, mass shootings, and other forms of gun violence.

A second theme is the central role of the federal government in gun violence prevention efforts. Federal law sets baseline standards

for lawful gun possession and commerce, and it can be critical for addressing emerging issues like the proliferation of untraceable ghost guns (Wintemute). Federal agencies maintain key systems for measuring and tracking gun crime (Piquero and Wilcox), and they fund many state and local prevention efforts such as CGICs, street outreach work, and ERPO implementation. Federal law enforcement practitioners are central partners in focused deterrence efforts (many of which have been conducted through the federal Project Safe Neighborhoods program), and they have pioneered threat assessment techniques used to stop potential school and mass shooters. The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) plays a particularly critical role in regulating licensed gun dealers, investigating illegal gun trafficking, and improving shooting investigations, often in support of local and state police (Burch, Wintemute).

A third theme running through these essays is the need to better enforce and close gaps in existing laws. Laws restricting gun possession by domestic violence offenders, for example, can be improved substantially by addressing gaps in their coverage and enforcement (Zeoli and Holtz, Ellyson et al.). Moreover, our background check system for preventing gun acquisition by prohibited persons is incomplete as federal and many state laws fail to include private, secondary market sales, which serve as the primary source of guns for offenders (Wintemute, Webster). Universal background check laws have the potential to close this gap in federal and many state laws, but legislators should consider that these laws may not be sufficient to substantially reduce gun violence if not complemented by purchaser licensing laws that strengthen procedures for screening gun buyers (Webster).

In closing, we thank our authors for their contributions to this issue and The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation for its continued support and partnership in this work. We hope that these essays provide useful evidence and analysis that help to further illuminate promising areas of common ground in gun violence prevention. Determining the most effective approaches to reduce firearms violence remains one of the nation's most important public safety priorities.



**Christopher S. Koper**

### **Christopher S. Koper**

*Special Issue Editor & Principal Fellow  
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# Gun Crime Trends and Challenges with America's Gun Violence Data Infrastructure

BY ALEX R. PIQUERO AND ROBERT B. WILCOX, JR.

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The U.S. is in a gun violence public health crisis. But this problem is not equally experienced across demographic groups, nor does it affect all cities—and locations within cities—equally. Following an alarming surge in 2020 and 2021, we know that there have been historic drops in homicide over the past two years—12% in 2023, and what appears to be 15% in 2024—according to several sources (i.e., Real-Time Crime Index, Major Cities Chiefs Association, and NORC's Live Crime Tracker).<sup>1</sup> However, the United States's gun violence data infrastructure complicates studying this issue in greater detail and responding to it with greater alacrity. As it stands, we simply do not have an accurate measure of the full range of fatal and especially non-fatal gun violence in this country. This essay explores this variability in the gun violence data infrastructure, including improvements made by the leadership of the now-defunct White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention.

## Data Infrastructure for Gun Violence

The nation's crime data infrastructure has gone largely unchanged over the years, with timely and detailed measures of gun crime being particularly elusive. The first set of crime data containing crimes known to law enforcement is published every fall by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) summarizing the prior year's data voluntarily provided by most (but not all) of the nation's 18,000+ law enforcement agencies (known as the Uniform Crime Reports, or UCR). An important development within this data structure concerned the movement away from counting only the most serious crime in an incident (the summary reporting system) to counting every crime that occurred in an incident (the National Incident-Based Reporting System, or NIBRS). Most notably, NIBRS does flag if a crime was committed with a firearm. The old UCR system provided incident-level data on homicides committed with firearms (through the Supplemental Homicide Reports) but only summary counts of aggravated assault, robbery, and rape incidents involving a firearm, and no measures of non-fatal firearm injuries. The NIBRS system, in contrast, contains detailed information on each incident and criminal act involving a firearm, allowing for a better measure of



Alex Piquero



Robert Wilcox

gun crime. However, the conversion from the old summary system to NIBRS has been slower than anticipated, with many fewer agencies participating than in the UCR. Further, some agencies do not populate all of the

fields, including the presence of a weapon, thereby continuing to result in an unknown estimate of gun violence in several jurisdictions.<sup>2</sup> NIBRS also does not have a specific indicator for gunshot injuries, though this is now being added, as discussed below. Despite these limitations with national collections, many police departments and local governments publish their own data on fatal and non-fatal shootings. The Boston Police Department is one such agency, and also provides information locating this data within its police districts.<sup>3</sup>

The second source of data comes from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) administered by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). The NCVS is a survey of over 200,000 people aged 12 and older spread across over 100,000 households that asks specific questions about non-fatal victimization experiences. Importantly, the NCVS does ask if there was a weapon used in the victimization experience (and whether victims sustained a gunshot injury), but since it does not capture fatal shootings, it too is a source of limited data. Moreover, because the NCVS is a national-level survey, and is lagged by almost a year, it also is limited for timely analyses.

A third federal database containing information on firearms violence is from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which publishes cause of death data within both its WONDER database (or Wide-ranging ONline Data for Epidemiologic Research, which is based on the death certificates reported by state health officials to the National Vital Statistics System), as well as through the National Violent Death Reporting System (or NVDRS, which provides more detailed data on violent deaths based on public health and law enforcement data). For the specific case of homicide, there is a flag for whether the homicide was due to a firearm. Additionally, the CDC data allow users to also examine demographic patterns within cause of death data, which we will review shortly. An important recent development published by the CDC is a dashboard that maps data on deaths from drug overdoses, suicides, and homicides down to census tracts using provisional and final death data received from the states. The data spans a number of years and has a comparatively shorter 3-to-4-month time lag. There is also limited non-fatal gun



injury data that is available through WISQARS (Web-Based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System), within the CDC, which provides some state and/or national-level data depending on the query with respect to non-fatal gun injuries (via the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System, or NEISS, which collects data from a sample of hospitals) and fatal gun injuries (via the National Vital Statistics System, or NVSS).<sup>4</sup> The data are published with a substantial time lag (as of March 2025, data are only available through 2022), and the non-fatal gun injury statistics have large sampling variability, making them rather imprecise.

Not surprisingly, others have attempted to fill these gaps in the full range of fatal and non-fatal gun violence data. Perhaps the most prominent is the Gun Violence Archive (GVA), which is operated by an independent research group and contains information on fatal and non-fatal shootings by using automated queries and manual research through over 7,500 sources from local and state police, media, data aggregates, government, and other sources daily.<sup>5</sup> Some research suggests that analyses of these data may suffer from systematic biases (including undercounts) and that analyses among larger cities are more reliable.<sup>6</sup>

As can be discerned from the above, the U.S. firearms data infrastructure apparatus has much to be desired. As eloquently stated by an expert panel convened by NORC, “while there are numerous data sources describing particular elements of the relationship between firearms and accidental harm, suicides, and criminal violence, the current firearms data environment is disordered and highly segmented. [Thus], existing data are mainly useful only for narrow studies to inform national policy and for use in local operational decision-making.”<sup>7</sup>

### Insights into Recent Gun Violence Trends from Existing Data

The recent surge in gun violence during the early COVID years laid bare the limitations of our current measurement systems, particularly for timely tracking of gun violence trends in different places and among different groups. However, we did learn some important lessons from our existing data systems.

As noted earlier, the CDC cause of death data system provides a unique opportunity to examine demographic patterns within the context of firearm homicide. Piquero and Roman used these data to examine firearm homicide demographics before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup> These authors disaggregated firearm homicides by race/ethnicity, age brackets, and year, finding that in 2021, the rate of firearm homicide among Blacks aged 20-24 was 80 per 100,000 and that the ratio of Black to White firearm homicides in 2021 was 27:1 among those aged 15-19 years. This variation is quite staggering, especially when compared to the fact that the rate of firearm homicides in 2021 for white individuals was below 10 per 100,000.

In a second study, Hall et al. used data from the GVA to examine trends in gun violence across large US cities during the early phase of

the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Using the group-based trajectory methodology, these authors found differences across cities in both the timing and surge of gun violence during the pandemic period, observing in particular that a small group of two cities (Chicago and New York) experienced a large increase in firearm-related injuries in the period from March 15, 2020 through June 30, 2021 compared to March 15, 2018 through June 30, 2019. In short, the surge in gun violence before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic was one that was not shared equally across major cities throughout the US.

### Recent Federal Progress on Data Infrastructure for Gun Violence

In September 2023, President Biden created the first-ever White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention (WHOGVP), which was tasked with implementing the *Bipartisan Safer Communities Act*, expanding partnerships with state and local leaders, identifying new executive actions, and creating a federal gun violence emergency response system.<sup>10</sup> Having an office in the White House came with several benefits to improving federal data infrastructure—including an accountability measure to accelerate agencies’ work, a venue for experts to share advice and ideas, and the ability to convene leaders from across the issue area.

From the start, one of WHOGVP’s focuses was on new executive actions to improve the federal data infrastructure. In one of its first meetings, WHOGVP discussed with the CDC how to solve the data limitations on non-fatal shootings. The question presented was why the federal government had such robust COVID-19 data from hospitals but not the same level of visibility for gunshot injuries. A plan was developed and months of work followed.

In September 2024, the White House announced two improvements to the federal data infrastructure. First, NIBRS will collect new details on gunshot injury wounds by June 2025. There will be a new injury code to reflect a gunshot wound in the NIBRS victim segment and a mechanism for law enforcement to submit additional information on how the firearm was used in crime. Progress is starting as Massachusetts has already implemented this change. Second, the CDC committed to presenting gun death and injury data faster and at a more local level. The gun death data was released in the dashboard discussed above.

The non-fatal injury data has not yet been released, but the pathways to collecting that data have largely been built. CDC, in partnership with nearly every state, gathered data from emergency rooms at the local level. For the vast majority of states, CDC now has non-fatal injury data down to the zip code level within weeks of the injury. These critical data pipelines have been built, and nothing is stopping a motivated state from opening them up and presenting this data to the public.

While the WHOGVP no longer exists, the progress that was made can continue to advance the work. One of the last convenings held by WHOGVP featured CDC, FBI, and the National Institute of Justice sharing progress they had made while state and local leaders

showed how they were using data in innovative ways. There is now an opportunity for state and local leaders, experts, and philanthropy to come together to make additional, significant strides. For example, last month Illinois launched a new dashboard detailing information about all violent deaths and firearm-related injuries in the state. Moreover, data on non-fatal injuries that CDC collected is housed at state agencies, so any state can choose to display it.

Good strides have been made in improving data infrastructure on gun violence, but we need to also know how solutions are being deployed to meet the moment. For instance, if the data shows a concentration in youth violence, then the visualization should also display solutions, such as an investment in summer youth employment, recreation centers, and victim services. The data should also provide information on firearm types and access. There are a variety of databases currently available on gun crimes (e.g., NIBRS, NCVS, NVSS) that have very limited information on the types of firearms used in violence. There needs to be more integration with data from ATF and state and local law enforcement agencies so that the data can also reflect key information on gun trafficking, stolen firearms, and the use of “Glock switches” and ghost guns so that upstream solutions can be activated to shut down the illegal flow of firearms.

Chicago and Baltimore have both been doing innovative work in this space to build tools to better understand the flow of crime guns that are used to drive enforcement actions. Baltimore, for example, has built a Public Safety Accountability Dashboard<sup>11</sup> to show trends in violence and Community Violence Intervention (CVI) investments, and the city is using a data-driven approach to investigate, identify, and end the flow of illegal guns as part of the city’s Comprehensive Violence Prevention Plan<sup>12</sup> in large part by establishing a firearms intelligence unit within the Baltimore Police Department. And, Chicago has released a new Violence Reduction Dashboard<sup>13</sup> that displays violence and investments in intervention, and it published two reports analyzing crime gun traces to provide visibility into the source of guns used in crime.<sup>14,15</sup>

### Continuing to Strengthen the Data Infrastructure for Gun Violence

We envision three key priorities for improving the gun violence data infrastructure in the United States that will offer better information and research opportunities to inform policy debates and decisions. First, we encourage routine collection and real-time publication of fatal and especially non-fatal gun violence data by law enforcement and public health agencies, especially when it comes to the new NIBRS improvements. Second, we encourage data visualizations that show not just firearm deaths and injuries, but the solutions (e.g., CVI programs, trauma recovery centers, job centers) being deployed to confront these challenges and information about the firearms used in the acts of violence. Lastly, we recommend the integration of public health data and criminal justice data on firearms. This is a task that the federal government can and should continue to lead, but if it does not, then we need our state and local officials to step up so that

we can keep making life-saving progress. State and local officials will be crucial in not just the accurate accounting of gun violence, but also in disseminating information on evidence-based approaches that can combat this public health crisis.

### Endnotes

- 1 Real Time Crime Tracker (<https://realtimecrimeindex.com/>), NORC Live Crime Tracker (<https://www.norc.org/research/projects/live-crime-tracker.html>), Major Cities Chiefs Association (<https://majorcitieschiefs.com/>).
- 2 Parker, S.T. (2022). Measuring gun violence in police data sources: Transitioning to NIBRS. *Injury Epidemiology*, May 2;9(1):15.
- 3 Piquero, A.R., & Wheeler, A. (2024). Disaggregating fatal and non-fatal shootings in Boston, 2015-2023. *International Journal of Police Science* 3(1), <https://doi.org/10.56331/20240122/IJPS3>
- 4 To be sure, the CDC does not recommend using NEISS-AIP data for nonfatal firearm injury prevalence estimates at this time. Firearm injuries have distinct geographic patterns, and estimates can be imprecise or change over time when based on a small number of facilities. CDC is working with CPSC to update and expand the NEISS hospital sample (Go to “About Nonfatal Injury Data” to learn more).
- 5 Gun Violence Archive. (2025). <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/methodology> (accessed February 19, 2025)
- 6 Gobaad, A.N., Mehranbod, C.A., Kaufman, E., et al. (2023). Assessing the Gun Violence Archive as an epidemiologic data source for community firearm violence in 4 US cities. *JAMA Network Open*, 6(6):e2316545.
- 7 NORC. (2019, p.1). First report of the expert panel on firearms data infrastructure: The state of firearms data in 2019. <https://www.norc.org/content/dam/norc-org/pdfs/State%20of%20Firearms%20Research%202019.pdf> (accessed February 19, 2025).
- 8 Piquero, A.R., & Roman, J.K. (2024). Firearm homicide demographics before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. *JAMA Network Open*, 7(5):e2412946.
- 9 Hall, C., Wilson, N., & Piquero, A.R. (2025). Gun violence Trends in US cities during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. *JAMA Network Open*, 8(1):e2454760.
- 10 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/2938/text>.
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- 13 <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/vrd/home.html>.
- 14 <https://crimelab.uchicago.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/12/2014-Tracing-the-Guns-Report.pdf>.
- 15 <https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/mayor/Press%20Room/Press%20Releases/2017/October/GTR2017.pdf>.

# Focused Deterrence Strategies to Reduce Gun Violence

BY ANTHONY A. BRAGA

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Gun violence is highly concentrated amongst a small number of people who are involved in high-risk co-offending networks in many U.S. cities. Gangs, drug-selling organizations, robbery crews, and other criminally active groups often connect individuals involved in these risky social networks. Shootings often involve personal and group disputes that are stimulated by status and respect issues, and these violent events can generate cycles of retaliation. For instance, in Boston, Massachusetts, less than 1% of the city's youth were involved in street gangs that generated roughly half of gun homicides and two-thirds of nonfatal shootings.<sup>1</sup> In Newark, New Jersey, a co-offending network representing 4% of the population accounted for about one-third of the city's shootings; gang members were 344% more likely to be shot and people with direct social ties to gang members but not involved in gangs (e.g., relatives, friends, and intimates) were 94% more likely to be shot relative to others in the Newark network.<sup>2</sup>

Focused deterrence strategies attempt to change the violent behavior of individuals involved in these high-risk networks through strategic enforcement, the provision of social services, and direct communications with offenders.<sup>3</sup> The general framework is rooted in problem-oriented policing as upfront analyses of gun violence dynamics are used to tailor the approach to local conditions and operational capacities. A growing number of rigorous program evaluations find focused deterrence to be an effective gun violence reduction strategy.<sup>4</sup> However, several steps need to be taken to ensure focused deterrence strategies are implemented properly.

## The Strategy

Focused deterrence was initially developed as a gang violence reduction strategy in Boston during the 1990s<sup>5</sup> and has subsequently been applied to other crime problems such as disorderly street drug markets, repeat offenders released from correctional facilities, and intimate partner violence. The approach has been implemented in cities throughout the country as well as in the United Kingdom, Australia, Brazil, Israel, Sweden, and other nations. Focused deterrence programs to reduce gun violence tend to include the following programmatic features:<sup>6</sup>

- Selecting a specific crime problem, such as recurring shootings.



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- Forming an interagency enforcement group including police, probation, parole, state and federal prosecutors, and sometimes federal enforcement agencies.
- Conducting research to identify key offenders – and frequently groups of offenders, such as street gangs, drug crews, and the like – and the context of their violent behavior.
- Framing special enforcement operations directed at those offenders and groups of offenders engaged in gun violence and designed to substantially influence their violent behavior by using all available legal tools.
- Matching those enforcement operations with parallel efforts to direct services and the moral voices of affected communities to those same offenders and groups.
- Communicating directly and repeatedly with offenders and groups to let them know that they are under scrutiny for their violent behavior, explaining that shootings will get special attention, providing information on when special enforcement has previously been applied to specific violent gun offenders and violent groups, and educating targeted individuals on what they can do to avoid enforcement action.

Direct communication with violent offenders tends to take two forms. First, selected offenders are invited or directed (usually because they are on probation or parole) to attend face-to-face meetings (often called “call-ins” or “forums”) with law enforcement officials, street outreach workers, service providers, and community figures.<sup>7</sup> Second, selected offenders may be visited at their homes or on the street by a small team (usually comprised of a police officer, street outreach worker, and local community member) who provide a “custom notification” to explain their risks of prosecution based on their criminal history and available opportunities for community help and support.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, communications are delivered in a non-threatening and respectful manner to facilitate desired behaviors and compliance.

Baltimore, Maryland, serves as an important recent example of the gun violence reduction efficacy of focused deterrence. In June 2020, the Mayor's Office, Baltimore Police Department (BPD), other criminal justice agencies, and several non-profit and community-based organizations started the development of its Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS) in the city's Western District. The problem analysis revealed that 70% of homicides in the district involved

members of gangs, drug trafficking organizations, robbery crews, and other criminally active groups.<sup>9</sup> At the time of the analysis, the district had 18 criminally active groups with an estimated membership that represented less than 2% of the area's residents. Some groups were more engaged in violence than others, with members of the Poe Homes housing development crew facing a risk of being shot that was 17 times more likely when compared to the shooting risk for Western District residents.

In January 2022, the city launched its GVRs in the Western District. At a high level, the strategy involves three parts: identification, notification, and action. A series of weekly meetings led by the BPD identifies groups of people actively engaged in gun violence in the district. These individuals are then notified—either through a home visit involving some combination of an officer, an outreach worker, and a community member, or as part of a group call-in—that their behavior is the focus of GVRs and law enforcement. Finally, individuals are connected to outreach organizations that, in turn, can refer them to services ranging from housing assistance to transitional employment. In addition, police presence was increased in housing developments with a high concentration of GVRs targets and the police worked with the State's Attorney's Office and other agencies to investigate and develop criminal cases against those continuing to engage in violence. A rigorous quasi-experimental evaluation suggests that GVRs was associated with a 20-35% decline in homicides and shootings and a 20-55% decline in carjackings over the 18 months after its introduction.<sup>10</sup> Baltimore has since scaled up the GVRs into other districts with very promising citywide homicide reductions associated with this expansion.

### Evaluation Evidence

An ongoing Campbell Collaboration review suggests that focused deterrence programs generate significant reductions in crime, with the largest impacts associated with gang and group violence interventions designed to reduce gun violence.<sup>4</sup> The latest version of this review is still in development. Preliminary search results identified roughly 50 controlled evaluations, including multiple randomized experiments. Initial meta-analysis results confirm the gun violence prevention value of focused deterrence. The findings of three randomized experiments included in the review are briefly described here.

In Sacramento, California, a randomized experiment found evidence that a focused deterrence intervention, where police officers visited the homes of prolific offenders to offer “carrots” (desistance pathways) and “sticks” (increased sanction threats), reduced subsequent recidivism by 21% in the year following random assignment, along with suggestive evidence that it decreased the future offending of those individual's prior co-arrestees.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, juveniles in Chicago detention centers randomized to pre-release focused deterrence notification forums were 18% less likely to be re-arrested within one year of release.<sup>12</sup> These reductions were driven by statistically

significant 43% and 40% reductions in arrests for violent and drug crimes, respectively. In New York City, adults who were called in to attend notification forums were substantially less likely to violate their parole in subsequent one- and two-year post-release observation periods, and this effect was driven primarily by reductions in violations due to absconding.<sup>13</sup> However, the program did not affect individual arrest rates. The available evaluation literature also suggests that focused deterrence strategies are very difficult to implement and sustain.<sup>14</sup>

Focused deterrence interventions are comprised of multifaceted activities and a complex interagency structure that presents multiple opportunities for implementation and fidelity problems. The approach has a long history of implementation failure associated with programmatic divergence from fundamental intervention principles and the abandonment of effective programs following leadership turnover. Deficient implementation of focused deterrence has the potential to exacerbate poor police-community relations and generate collateral harm through increased surveillance and harsh enforcement. Recommended capabilities to ensure robust implementation include creating a network of capacity that aligns the work of individual agencies and their representatives toward common goals, developing interagency accountability structures and sustainability plans, and conducting upfront and ongoing problem analyses to ensure that strategy activities are tailored to local contexts and operational capacities.<sup>3</sup>

The key prevention mechanisms involved in focused deterrence also need further specification. These interventions are often framed as exercises in getting deterrence “right” with a premium placed on swiftness and certainty of sanctions over severity of punishment. The communications component is designed to increase offenders' perceptions of sanction risk. However, the available literature suggests that these messages should be delivered in a procedurally just manner to increase the likelihood that offenders voluntarily obey the law.<sup>15</sup> The service delivery component seeks to redirect offenders away from crime and enhance the legitimacy of the strategy in the eyes of the community. Other possible prevention mechanisms include increasing the collective efficacy of communities to control violence and decreasing the situational aspects of continued violent behavior. Further research is needed to develop insights into prevention mechanism efficacy so practical knowledge can be generated to design successful violence prevention programs.

### Conclusion

The available evaluation evidence and practical implementation experience suggest that focused deterrence strategies should be included in city gun violence prevention portfolios. To generate reductions in shootings, however, cities must follow the basic steps in the focused deterrence framework to implement a strategy that includes key strategic elements tailored to the specific nature of their gun violence problem. City leaders, police executives, and other



stakeholders need to be aware that considerable upfront planning and coordination is required. Once implemented, robust performance management systems need to be in place to ensure that key program activities move forward as intended. As with any evidence-based crime prevention strategy, implementation fidelity is vital to program success.

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# From Local Innovation to Best Practice – Crime Gun Intelligence Centers

BY JAMES BURCH, II

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In 2013, the Denver Police Department and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) developed an innovative approach to leveraging data, forensics, and interagency collaboration to focus on the most prolific shooters and others who commit gun-related crimes. The innovation became the Denver Crime Gun Intelligence Center (CGIC). The early Denver CGIC leveraged ATF's National Integrated Ballistics Information Network (NIBIN) and its eTrace system to link shooting incidents and ultimately identify previously unknown suspects, and to generate forensic evidence leading to the arrest and convictions of gun-crime offenders.<sup>11</sup> Today, just over 10 years since the first CGIC was formed, nearly 60 cities, counties, and Puerto Rico have received federal funding, training, and other assistance from the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) to establish and enhance CGIC approaches.

## The CGIC Model

As described by BJA, CGICs are an interagency collaboration focused on the immediate collection, management, and analysis of crime gun evidence, such as shell casings, in real-time, to identify shooters, disrupt criminal activity, and prevent future gun violence. The "essential elements" (see <https://crimegunintelcenters.org/cgic-concept/>) include the utilization of effective gun investigation teams and their resources, comprehensive gun crime and forensics tracing, comprehensive collection and management of crime gun intelligence, crime gun intelligence analysis, investigative follow-up, prevention and community performance management, and training and policy development. The primary outcome of these centers is identifying armed violent offenders for investigation and prosecution. Other outcomes include the identification of crime gun sources, efficient resource allocation, and increasing case closure rates, thereby preventing additional gun violence and improving public safety.<sup>22</sup>

Though CGICs have multiple essential elements that may vary in terms of how or to what degree they are each implemented, specific core components are always present in CGICs.<sup>33</sup> Examples include using ATF's NIBIN and eTrace systems. NIBIN technology compares images of submitted ballistic evidence (i.e., cartridge



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casings) from shooting scenes and recovered firearms, and produces a list of potential links or associations from the same firearm. When a link is confirmed, we know that the same firearm was used in more than one and sometimes many shootings.<sup>4</sup> ATF's eTrace is a web-based application that is used to identify the original retail purchaser of a recovered firearm.

eTrace leads help law enforcement agencies quickly identify potential gun traffickers and suspects in criminal investigations.<sup>5</sup> The CGIC workflow leverages these resources and the essential elements aid investigators in rapidly identifying suspects, making arrests, and supporting the local and/or federal prosecution of these serious offenders.

## The CGIC's Theory of Change

CGICs are intended to reduce violent crime by "disrupting the shooting cycle" through a process that helps to identify and then prosecute shooters, while also interrupting their sources of crime guns.<sup>1,3</sup> The National Crime Gun Intelligence Governing Board ("governing board"), organized by the ATF, describes the goal as reducing violent crime "by removing the violent actor(s) from the community for the longest possible amount of time."<sup>3</sup>

To be effective in reducing gun violence, police responses must be targeted, disciplined, and focused on the highest-risk people and locations.<sup>6,77</sup> In many cases, the highest-risk offenders are relatively small in number and often involved in gangs and other criminal networks.<sup>6,7,88</sup> These high-risk co-offending networks are central to gun violence problems, and the rates of nonfatal and fatal shootings within these networks or groups exceed the rates of violence in even the highest crime neighborhoods. Thus, police can reduce gun violence by focusing their enforcement efforts on gangs and other criminally active groups that generate a disproportionate number of shootings.<sup>7,99</sup> These networks are often associated with crime guns that have been linked to multiple shootings; thus, the importance of removing the offenders and their crime guns is understood.<sup>1010</sup>

## What We Know About the Impact of the CGIC Approach

Despite more than five dozen agencies or communities implementing CGIC approaches over the last twelve years, the best evaluative information comes from just over a dozen studies, some of which are process or qualitatively focused and only three involve quasi-experimental designs. However, there is reason to be very optimistic about the benefits of the CGIC approach. Multiple evaluations have noted improvements in arrest clearance rates, though these findings

are not always consistent, particularly across crime types.<sup>11,12,13</sup> Other evaluations have found that CGICs likely reduced firearm-related crime or slowed the increase of gun violence during periods of overall rising violence.<sup>1,12,14,15</sup>

In terms of the individual CGIC essential elements and workflow steps, multiple CGIC evaluations have found that when implemented consistently with best practices, which include systematic police follow-up on shots fired calls and gunshot detection alerts, CGICs can produce significant increases in the recovery of ballistics evidence and crime guns.<sup>1,11,14, 16, 17,18</sup> The increase is especially significant in areas where gunshot detection technologies are operating, leading to a significantly improved awareness of shooting scenes where evidence can be recovered.<sup>14,19</sup> Failing to comprehensively collect casings and crime guns can have a significantly limiting effect on CGICs.<sup>1,16,20</sup>

Evaluations have also shown that CGICs can also produce significant increases in NIBIN submissions and investigative leads.<sup>11,12,15,18,21</sup> Research has found, however, that the value of NIBIN leads may depend at least in part on their timeliness.<sup>22</sup> More recent studies have found that investigators may deem NIBIN leads as helpful more often when the lead is more timely and when the lead is accompanied by advanced intelligence such as social or link analysis, mapping data, incident details, and possibly when a cooperating witness or victim exists.<sup>1,11,12,14,17,23,24</sup> Interestingly, Huff and colleagues found that the odds of a lead being viewed as helpful to investigators were 60% higher when the case already involved actionable intelligence.<sup>24</sup> Although this may seem counterintuitive, it gives support to the idea raised in some evaluations that NIBIN leads may be more helpful in opening new lines of investigation into cases even though they may not necessarily “make the case” alone.<sup>12,13,24</sup> Research assessing investigator perceptions of the helpfulness of NIBIN leads has also found that crime types may matter. Specifically, detectives have reported that leads were more helpful in robbery and homicide investigations, for example. Though the reasons for these perceptions are not fully known, some have suggested that it may be related to the presence of additional evidence in higher-priority cases such as homicides.

Another CGIC tool is ATF’s eTrace system, which can assist in identifying the source of crime guns and more. Evaluations of CGICs suggest that tracing is not consistently relied on across CGICs,<sup>11,14</sup> though some CGIC evaluations report increased use of tracing<sup>12,18,20,25</sup> to address crime gun trafficking.

As discussed previously, advanced intelligence analysis related to priority incidents and leads is important to aid investigators in rapidly making cases and preventing the next shooting. In many CGIC evaluations, the presence of agency and ATF analysts who connect leads using NIBIN, eTrace, and other analytic tools and techniques is described as critical to the CGIC’s ability to produce actionable leads for investigators.<sup>1,14,15,23</sup> In addition to incident and offender basic characteristics, advanced intelligence assessments can

also aid in the prioritization of cases and lead to align investigative efforts with CGIC’s theory of change—reducing gun violence through the identification and apprehension of the most violent and prolific shooters. This prioritization process can result in better resource alignment leading to more rapid lead development, distribution, and follow-up, and may result in a relative increase in investigative resources by not immediately responding to those incidents that fall outside of a priority level that requires immediate investigation through the CGIC.

Collaboration is also seen as an essential element of a CGIC. The most common partners include local and sometimes regional law enforcement, the crime lab, ATF, and local and federal prosecutors, though state and local corrections have also been engaged. In the Denver CGIC, communication among partners and within the CGIC was a significant need and was helpful in improving operations and the alignment of resources.<sup>1</sup> In Los Angeles, collaboration and communication among staff and across cases was described as “one of the greatest benefits of CGIC.”<sup>15</sup> Other CGIC evaluations have noted improvements in information sharing, efficiency of investigations, and intra- and interagency collaboration as benefits of the CGIC stakeholder engagement approach.<sup>14,25</sup>

This collaborative approach to engaging stakeholders is not limited to the operational or investigative levels. The ATF’s *Crime Gun Intelligence: An Evidence-Based Approach to Solving Violent Crime* guide<sup>3</sup> describes stakeholder partnerships and “buy-in” as “imperative,” and lists the heads of law enforcement and prosecution at the local and federal levels, as well as leaders of the crime laboratory, as essential partner agencies. The best practice recommendations are supported by CGIC evaluations highlighting the need for this collaboration and for meetings of agency leaders to occur regularly.<sup>15,20</sup> Though some may see this type of executive-level engagement as only a “nice to have” or as “optional,” it has been found to be associated with evidence-based crime reduction strategies such as Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN).<sup>26</sup>

To be successful in removing prolific and violent offenders from communities, local and federal prosecutors must be engaged in the CGIC according to ATF’s guide. Though evaluations to date have produced very limited and mostly anecdotal evidence on the impact of engaged prosecutors at the local or federal level, evaluations of CGICs have confirmed the detrimental impact of disengaged prosecutors.<sup>14,16</sup> Others have noted increases in charging decisions,<sup>13,21</sup> creative problem-solving to ensure proper evidence handling while addressing the need for rapid ballistic imaging, enhanced prosecutor staffing,<sup>17</sup> and prosecutor engagement in problem-solving.<sup>16,27</sup>

Other areas have emerged in best practices and are important to address as CGICs are implemented and tested. Among them are the modification of policies that inhibit CGIC optimization, such as limited canvassing of no-injury crime scenes; the layering of CGIC practices with other crime reduction approaches, such as focused deterrence, hot spots, and problem-oriented policing; and allowing



for a phased implementation, which may improve cohesion, outcomes, and sustainability.<sup>14</sup> A major issue to be considered when implementing a CGIC is the appropriate balancing of limited resources against the optimization of the CGIC. Multiple examples exist in which resource limitations became CGIC limitations when alternatives were available that may have allowed the CGIC to function optimally. Examples of practices that facilitate optimal CGIC operations include strong prioritization of leads and cases, the use of gunshot detection and, separately, recanvassing strategies to better collect evidence, critical staffing, and leveraging ATF resources such as the NIBIN National Correlation Center.

Over the last ten years, agencies have innovated and adapted the CGIC approach, leading to a more effective and efficient concept of operations. Today, CGICs have strong potential and enjoy a growing body of evidence in support of the approach. However, it is also essential that more evaluations take place to help resolve questions about the CGIC elements, individually and collectively, and offer insights into how CGICs can be implemented while allowing for local adaptations.

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# Reducing the Illegal Supply of Firearms

BY GAREN WINTEMUTE

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Garen Wintemute

Firearm-related crime is a significant problem in the United States. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that there were 19,651 firearm homicides in 2022, the most recent year for which data are available.<sup>1</sup> The National Crime Victimization Survey estimates that there were approximately 641,000 violent victimizations involving firearms that year: approximately 440,000 aggravated assaults, 193,000 robberies, and 8,000 rapes or sexual assaults.<sup>2</sup>

This article touches on three topics related to the supply of firearms used in crime. First, to use an analogy from environmental health (think of a factory discharging hazardous material), some licensed retailers can usefully be thought of as point sources of crime-involved firearms. Second, the secondary firearm market functions as a diffuse source of crime guns. And third, privately made firearms, colloquially known as ghost guns, are a recent development with the potential to reshape the supply chain for firearms used in crime.

## Licensed Retailers

It has long been understood that a small minority of licensed retailers are the source of many, and likely most, firearms that are recovered and traced following use in crime. But firearm sales are also distributed very unevenly among retailers; in theory, being linked to many traced crime guns could reflect nothing more than a retailer's large sales volume. The more important question is: Are there retailers who are linked to crime guns not just frequently, but disproportionately—that is, more frequently than would be predicted from the number of guns they sell?

A California study addressed that question directly.<sup>3</sup> By linking handgun trace data from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) with handgun sales data from the California Department of Justice, researchers “followed” handguns sold by California retailers during 1996–2000 and identified which of those handguns were recovered and traced following use in a violent or firearm-related crime during 1996–2003. Unsurprisingly, there was a positive relationship overall (Figure 1) between the number of handguns a retailer sold and the number that were traced. But at any given sales volume, some retailers experienced many more traces than others did. For example, among retailers selling between 2,000 and 4,000 handguns during those years, most were linked to 10 or fewer

traced crime guns. But a small number were linked to 20 or more, and one was linked to more than 80.

A comprehensive analysis found that these high-trace retailers were different. They made fewer sales to law enforcement, their purchasers were younger, and they were more likely to be pawnbrokers. They also had higher percentages of transactions denied because the prospective purchasers were prohibited persons, and this relationship was particularly strong.

The researchers suggested that these retailers might function as “bad guy magnets” who were sought out by persons contemplating an illegal transaction or supplying guns for criminal purposes. Such a relationship could account for both the high denial percentage and disproportionate sales of crime guns. A follow-up study comparing these high-trace retailers to others made use of both administrative data and on-site observations and added frequent sales of inexpensive handguns and other characteristics to the list of their distinguishing features.<sup>4</sup> A study of more than 1,800 firearms recovered by police in Baltimore yielded similar findings.<sup>5</sup>

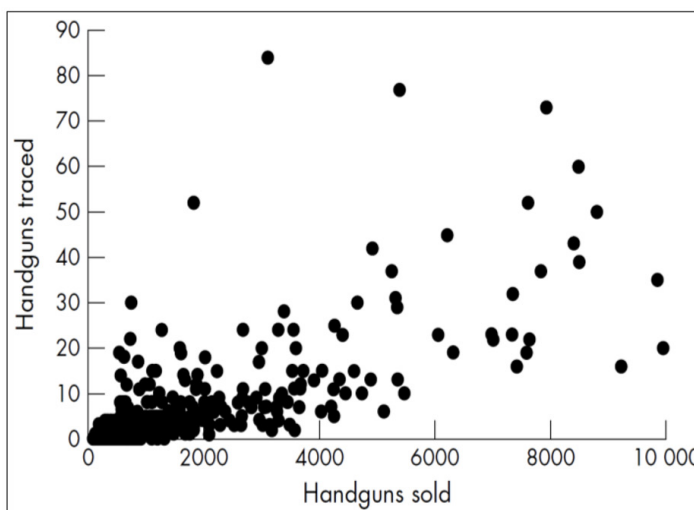


Figure 1: Handgun sales 1996–2000, and traces of those handguns 1996–2003, for 421 licensed firearm retailers in California

Reprinted from: Wintemute, G.J., Cook, P.J., & Wright, M.A. (2005). Risk factors among handgun retailers for frequent and disproportionate sales of guns used in violent and firearm-related crimes. *Injury Prevention*, 11: 357–363.

Subsequently, the California researchers surveyed a 43-state sample of 1,601 retailers who sold at least 50 handguns per year to assess their exposure to and opinions on the criminal gun market.<sup>6</sup> Two-thirds of respondents reported experience with an attempted straw purchase, and 42% reported attempted “off-books” purchases. Such reports increased with retailer sales volume, status as a pawnbroker, and self-reported frequency of denied purchases and sales of guns

that were later traced; these findings validated those of the earlier California studies. Respondents estimated that approximately 3% of firearm retailers knowingly participated in illegal sales. When offered a list of potential explanations for why “a retailer might have more gun traces than expected,” respondents most frequently selected “the retailer is known to ‘go along’ and not ask questions.”

## The Secondary Market

We will define the secondary firearm market as comprising all trans-



**Figure 2: A private party seller at a gun show**

*Legend: The photograph is from a gun show held at the Arizona State Fairgrounds in Phoenix. A private party walks the aisles of the show offering an AK-type rifle for sale.*

*From: Wintemute GJ. (2009). Inside gun shows: What goes on when everybody thinks nobody's watching. Sacramento, CA: Violence Prevention Research Program. <https://cvp.ucdavis.edu/reports/inside-gun-shows>.*

actions, both legal and illegal, following a firearm's first retail sale by a licensed retailer. In secondary market transactions, the transferor of the firearm may be either a licensed retailer or a private party. There is a very important difference between retailer and private party transfers; federal law does not require background checks for private party transfers (though it does prohibit intentional transfers to prohibited persons).

Partly for this reason, the secondary market has long been the principal source of crime guns. The most recent demonstration of this is ATF's just-concluded National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA), which includes data for approximately 2.3 million crime guns that were recovered and traced during 2017-2023.<sup>7</sup> Traces identified both the possessor of the gun at the time of its recovery and the person who first purchased the gun from a licensed retailer in about 70% of cases. For this large majority, in more than 80% of cases, the possessor and the purchaser were not the same person. These guns had undergone at least one secondary-market transfer of possession before being recovered following use in crime.

The secondary market appears to be an efficient source of crime guns. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, approximately 40% of traced crime guns were recovered within three years of first sale, and 20% were recovered within one year.<sup>7</sup> These percentages increased to nearly 55% and more than 30%, respectively, during the pandemic. More recently, they appear to be returning to pre-pandemic levels. These short times to crime, as the interval from first sale to recovery is known, suggest that some elements of the secondary market are organized to supply firearms for illegal use.

ATF trafficking investigations, compiled as part of the NFCTA

project, provide more detail on the operation of the secondary market as a source of guns used in crime.<sup>8</sup> Data on more than 12,000 trafficking investigations that were initiated during 2017-2021 revealed that approximately 40% involved a private-party seller, and approximately 40% involved straw purchasing. (A straw purchase is the use of a surrogate purchaser by someone who is a prohibited person or wants to avoid being recorded as the purchaser of the firearm; it is a crime under federal law.) Both percentages increased over the study period. Approximately 25% of investigations involved theft—17% from federal firearms licensees and 8% from private parties—and those percentages decreased over time. Only about 2% of cases directly involved a participating firearm licensee, sales at gun shows, or online sales, and these percentages remained largely unchanged.

While cases involving gun shows are uncommon, the shows provide an opportunity to view the secondary market in operation first-hand.<sup>9</sup> To illustrate, Figures 2-4 show photographs of a private party seller and a straw purchase, at a gun show in Phoenix, Arizona. Straw purchases are often conducted openly; participants appear to have little concern that they might be apprehended.

## Privately Made Firearms

Criminal users have long been interested in firearms that could not be traced after recovery by law enforcement. For decades, they have



**Figure 3: The initiation of an apparent straw purchase**

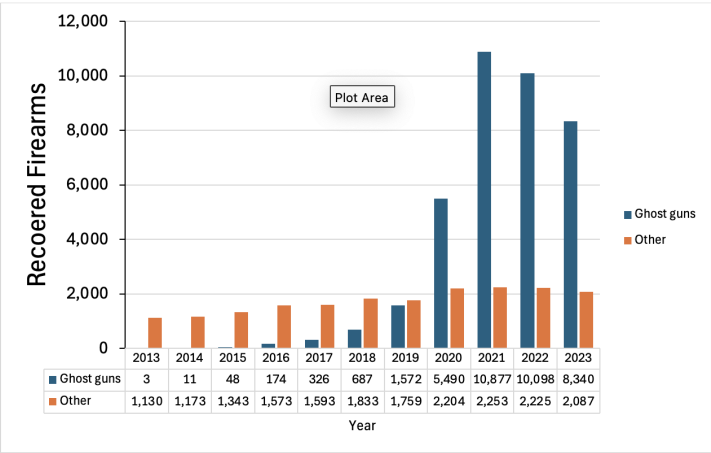
*Legend: The photograph is from a gun show held at the Arizona State Fairgrounds in Phoenix. The straw purchaser (on the right) has just received cash from the real purchaser (on the left). Subsequent photographs document the progress of the transaction to its conclusion. From: Wintemute GJ. (2009). Inside gun shows: What goes on when everybody thinks nobody's watching. Sacramento, CA: Violence Prevention Research Program. <https://cvp.ucdavis.edu/reports/inside-gun-shows>.*



**Figure 4: The conclusion of that apparent straw purchase**  
**Legend:** The photograph is from a gun show held at the Arizona State Fairgrounds in Phoenix. The straw purchaser having completed the paperwork, passed the background check, and paid for the firearm—an AK-type rifle—the real purchaser takes possession. *From:* Wintemute GJ. (2009). *Inside gun shows: What goes on when everybody thinks nobody's watching.* Sacramento, CA: Violence Prevention Research Program. <https://cwp.ucdavis.edu/reports/inside-gun-shows>.

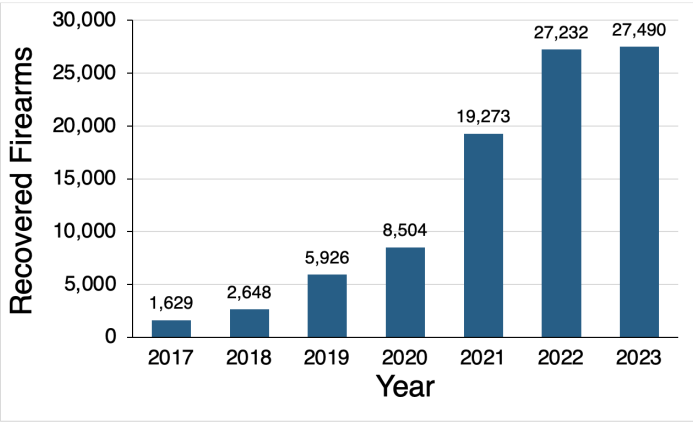
used various technologies in attempts to remove serial numbers from commercially manufactured firearms. However, in the last 20 years, and particularly the last five years, it has become much easier to produce new firearms privately, and the proliferation of these unserialized, untraceable, privately made firearms (PMFs) or “ghost guns” has created a serious problem for law enforcement.

PMFs are most commonly produced by completing the machining of a nearly finished metal or polymer frame or receiver (a so-called 80 percent) and adding the other components necessary to make a fully functional firearm.<sup>10</sup> Models based on Glock pistols and AR-type rifles have been particularly popular. The final machining can be accomplished in



**Figure 5. Unserialized firearm recoveries in California**  
**Legend:** The “other” category includes firearms from which serial numbers have been removed, guns manufactured before serial numbers were required, and others. *From:* California Department of Justice. (2024). California’s fight against the ghost gun crisis. Sacramento, CA. <https://oag.ca.gov/ogvp/data>.

about 20 minutes in some cases and does not require advanced skills. Some companies have sold kits comprising an 80 percent, the other necessary components, instructions, and drilling guides. PMFs can also be made by producing frames or receivers with 3-D printers or computer numerical control milling machines. None of these technologies is expensive; small-scale production is within reach of nearly anyone, and it is not difficult to scale up and establish illegal manufacturing of untraceable firearms.



**Figure 6. Privately made firearm recoveries in the United States**  
*From:* Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. (2025). National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFCTA): protecting America from trafficked firearms - volume four. Washington, DC. <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/national-firearms-commerce-and-trafficking-assessment-nfcta-firearms-trafficking-volume-four>.

PMS became a particularly acute problem in California, where from 2016 to 2021 recoveries by law enforcement increased from a few hundred to nearly 11,000 per year (Figure 5).<sup>11</sup> In some California cities, 25% or more of recovered crime guns were PMFs.<sup>12, 13</sup> California adopted progressively more stringent policies on these products, regulating “precursor parts,” as the legislation termed them, and assembly kits as firearms. This meant that a sale by a licensee was required and imposed a serial number requirement. PMF recoveries have since declined. New nationwide data<sup>7</sup> show a similar downward trend (Figure 6), but this is largely due to California’s experience; many other states continued to experience increases in PMF recoveries through 2023.

Federal regulations affecting PMFs took effect in August 2024.<sup>14</sup> Among other changes, these regulations define nearly finished frames and receivers as firearms. As a result, the manufacturers and sellers of the kits mentioned above must have federal firearms licenses, and the nearly finished frames and receivers must have serial numbers. (It remains legal to make a firearm for one’s own use.) The United States Supreme Court heard arguments in a lawsuit challenging those regulations in October and issued a decision upholding them (the vote was 7-2) on March 26.<sup>15</sup> It remains to be seen whether the current federal administration will rescind them.



## Implications for Firearms Policy

The evidence indicates that multiple interrelated sources supply firearms for illegal use. While individual retailers can be important sources, the secondary market predominates. Untraceable privately made firearms have the potential to increase the supply of illegal firearms. Controlling this complex supply chain will require a combination of regulatory and law enforcement approaches.

Following its comprehensive review of the data, the NFCTA team developed a list of recommendations for action in the near term to reduce the illegal supply of firearms and strengthen the law enforcement response to crimes involving firearms.<sup>7,16</sup> Among them are improving the quality and completeness of the data needed for investigative work; increased use of firearm tracing; expansion of the National Integrated Ballistic Information System (NIBIN), which uses advanced imaging technology to link firearms to crimes, even when the firearm is not recovered; increased attention to privately made firearms; additional effort to prevent firearm theft from private individuals as well as manufacturers and retailers; expanded efforts to identify and prosecute firearm traffickers; and research and evaluation to support continued improvement in all these areas, and the development of new strategies for preventing firearm violence.

On February 7, 2025, the White House issued an executive order requiring the Attorney General to “examine all orders, regulations, guidance, plans, international agreements, and other actions of executive departments and agencies” and “present a proposed plan of action to the President . . . to protect the Second Amendment rights of all Americans.”<sup>17</sup> Pending the publication of that plan and the administration’s actions in response to it, the likelihood of those recommendations being implemented, and of actions taken during the prior administration continuing in effect, remains uncertain.

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# Street Outreach Conflict Mediation Strategies: What the Research Suggests (So Far)

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## Introduction

Community violence refers to interpersonal or intergroup violence between nonfamily members, typically in public spaces. It accounts for a substantial share of intentional violent injuries and deaths every year in the United States. This violence predominantly involves economically disadvantaged and disenfranchised young men and often occurs in marginalized urban neighborhoods. While it can occur with or without weapons, community violence in the United States is often firearm related. One of its principal drivers is disputes, often involving rivalries between loosely organized groups or gangs. Due to its cyclical and retaliatory nature, victims and offenders often overlap.<sup>1</sup>

Policy responses to community violence are traditionally law-enforcement-based, but there is a growing movement towards non-punitive, community-led alternatives known as community violence interventions (CVIs). One key CVI strategy is street outreach conflict mediation, in which outreach workers or violence interrupters—individuals with credibility in the communities they work in—engage directly with high-risk individuals. By leveraging their credibility, they aim to influence the decisions of potential offenders and victims and intervene in conflicts before they turn violent. These workers prevent violence by talking people out of imminent violent acts, arranging interventions by influential individuals (such as loved ones or members of the faith community), keeping people at risk of carrying out or being victimized by violence apart, and/or negotiating truces. These efforts typically exclude law enforcement, though some programs collaborate with police. Street outreach conflict mediation strategies may also include other elements, including intensive case management, mentoring, subsidized employment, various types of treatments, therapies, and other support mechanisms, as well as public awareness campaigns to change community norms regarding violence.



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This article examines the scientific evidence on the implementation and impact of street outreach conflict mediation strategies. A close reading of the research reveals widely varying findings—with some initiatives reducing violence, some increasing violence, and others having no effect. Given this inconsistency in the scientific evidence, we conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis. With support from Arnold Ventures, we undertook the study through the Campbell Collaboration, an international research network that provides rigorous systematic review protocols to synthesize research evidence on social and policy interventions.

## Background and Research Evidence

One of the first rigorous studies of street outreach conflict mediation programs took place in Chicago, where evaluators compared the effects of Ceasefire Chicago (later renamed Cure Violence) on three measures of violence in seven neighborhoods relative to matched comparison neighborhoods.<sup>2</sup> This study found statistically significant reductions in violence for 17 of the 21 outcomes (three measures across seven neighborhoods) in the Ceasefire neighborhoods. However, due to a broader decline in violence in Chicago at the time, 19 of the 21 outcomes in the matched comparison neighborhoods also decreased significantly, with 11 showing larger declines than

those in the Ceasefire neighborhoods. Time series analyses revealed that Ceasefire was associated with significant reductions in violence for only 9 of the 21 outcomes. Despite these mixed results, advocates frequently cite this study as evidence in favor of street outreach conflict mediation strategies.<sup>3</sup>

However, some studies have found these strategies highly effective in reducing violence. For example, two of this article's authors (Maguire and Adams) evaluated Project REASON, an adaptation of Cure Violence, in Trinidad and Tobago.<sup>4, 5</sup> This Caribbean nation has experienced a significant outbreak of gun violence, much of it gang related.<sup>6</sup> Using multiple methodologies and data sources, the evaluation found "a significant and substantial drop in violence" (p.36). The evaluators' best available estimate showed that the intervention produced a 44.9% reduction in violent incidents relative to the comparison area after two years. Notably, this significant effect occurred despite serious issues with program administration and challenges in implementing the "outreach worker" component. However, the authors concluded that the "violence interruption" component was successfully implemented.

Two authoritative reviews of the literature on street outreach conflict mediation strategies, published eight years apart, yielded equivocal findings. Butts et al.<sup>7</sup> conclude that evidence on the effectiveness of the Cure Violence model, arguably the most well-known street outreach conflict mediation strategy, "is mixed at best" (p. 47). Hureau et al.<sup>8</sup> also conclude that the evidence on street outreach worker approaches is mixed and call for research to clarify "this apparent haze of disconnected and conflicting empirical results" (p. 760).

The research does not only suggest that street outreach conflict mediation is effective in some cases and ineffective in others. Some studies indicate that these strategies can be counterproductive, producing an *increase* in violence.<sup>9, 10</sup> The idea that these strategies may be effective, ineffective, or counterproductive creates confusion for policymakers trying to make sense of the evidence on preventing and reducing violence. To address this, our team undertook this review to clarify the evidence base and inform more effective decision-making.

## Our Study

We are conducting a systematic review to synthesize the available research evidence on street outreach conflict mediation programs, the full results of which will be available soon. As noted in our protocol, the primary question is whether these programs are effective at reducing violence.<sup>11</sup> The study also explores two secondary questions: (1) Do certain program elements make these strategies more or less effective? (2) Are there conditions under which these strategies are more or less effective?

This systematic review examines studies providing quantitative estimates of the impact of community-based street outreach conflict mediation strategies on violence. Eligible studies included

randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental designs with comparison groups that produced estimates of the effects of these initiatives on one or more measures of violence. The interventions of interest are community-based street outreach worker programs using conflict mediation or violence interruption strategies. Primary outcomes included measures of violent offending or victimization at either the area or individual level.

We used a multifaceted search strategy that began with keyword searches of 23 databases and 8 trial registries across multiple disciplines. We also conducted manual searches on the websites of 22 organizations involved in work related to the review. Additionally, we contacted 27 experts to ask about studies that should be included. Our search process resulted in 113,288 records. After eliminating duplicates and conducting progressively more detailed screening procedures, we arrived at a final list of 25 eligible studies. Because not all of the quantities reported in these studies were suitable for inclusion in the meta-analysis, the preliminary results reported here are based on only 20 of those studies. These studies are based on data from 10 cities (in some cities, e.g., Baltimore, multiple studies cover the expansion of the program over time); nine in the United States and one in Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago.

We used meta-analysis to convert study results into a common metric, called an effect size, for comparison. We focused in particular on area-based counts of violent crime, homicides, and nonfatal shootings, which were the outcomes used by most of the studies included in our analysis.<sup>12</sup>

## What Did We Learn?

Using random effects methods, the overall meta-analysis, including all estimates, resulted in a negative, statistically significant effect size, suggesting that street outreach worker programs were associated with a small but significant reduction in violent offenses. For homicides, we found a positive, statistically nonsignificant effect size, suggesting that the effect of these programs on homicides was not significantly different from zero. In contrast, for nonfatal shootings, we found a negative and statistically significant effect size, indicating that these programs were associated with a statistically significant reduction in shootings. These findings were robust in testing procedures relying on different analytical methods. Overall, the weight of the evidence suggests that street outreach conflict mediation interventions can have a beneficial impact on violent crime reduction. Based on a review of author conclusions, a majority of the studies included in the meta-analysis (13 out of 20, or 65%) found that the intervention was effective at reducing violent crime, while four of the studies found that evidence of effectiveness was inconsistent or uncertain, two found that the intervention had no effect, and one found that the intervention was possibly associated with an increase in violent crime. We want to emphasize that these are preliminary results based on the first phase of our study and that they may change as we continue to incorporate new estimates into the model.

Our preliminary findings indicate that street-outreach conflict mediation strategies are associated with small but statistically significant reductions in violent offenses in general and in nonfatal shootings in particular, but not in homicides. This finding makes sense; homicides are rare events at the neighborhood level, and studies may be underpowered to detect such changes in neighborhoods where nonfatal shootings are often much more frequent. For instance, an analysis of crime data from Chicago's open data portal reveals about 5.6 aggravated assaults with a gun for every homicide there.<sup>13</sup> Again, it is important to note that these findings are preliminary and may be subject to change as we complete our research. Nonetheless, the initial results suggest that street outreach conflict mediation strategies *may* reduce violence *under certain conditions*.

One key challenge is identifying those conditions under which such strategies are more or less effective. Many of the studies included in the systematic review reported implementation problems. For example, some community organizations lack the capacity to administer these interventions, including staffing, financial management, and administration. These challenges often lead to fidelity issues, with staff in some sites failing to follow intervention protocols.<sup>7</sup> These factors and others may serve as moderators of program effectiveness, which we will further explore in our final report for the Campbell Collaboration.

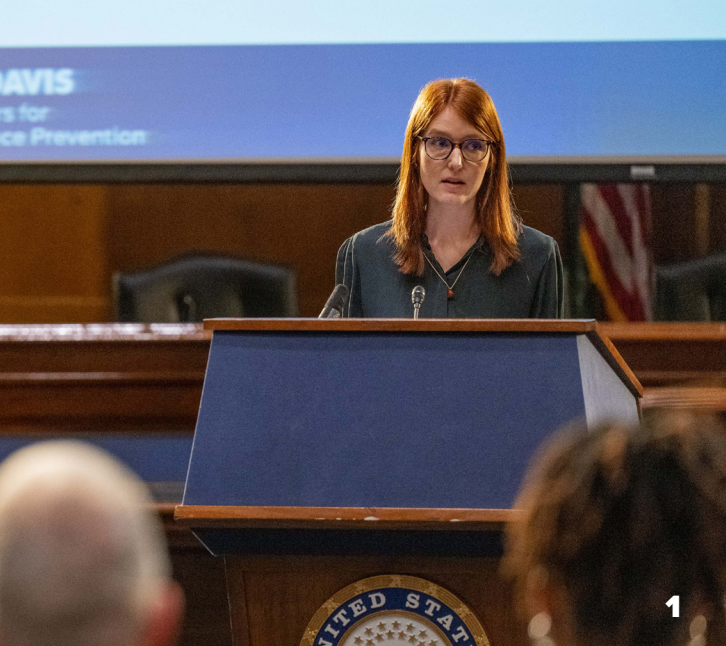
## Conclusion

Evidence on street outreach conflict mediation strategies is mixed, making it difficult for policymakers to assess their effectiveness. This challenge is compounded by the fact that the research often relies on complex statistical methods that are difficult for nonspecialists to understand. Our systematic review is ongoing, but the preliminary results presented here are promising, suggesting that street outreach conflict mediation strategies can reduce violence. We encourage those adopting these strategies to engage community-based organizations with sufficient administrative and managerial capacity to implement them with fidelity. In addition, careful evaluation will help to provide a stronger and clearer body of research evidence on the conditions under which they are most effective.

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# Congressional Briefing — Preventing Gun Violence

February 25, 2025







1. Veronica Pear (presenter, University of California, Davis).
2. Chief Tarrick McGuire (Alexandria Police Department), Laura Wyckoff (National Policing Institute), with Christopher Koper (presenter, George Mason University).
3. Joseph Richardson (presenter, University of Maryland) with guests.
4. Alex Piquero (presenter, University of Miami).
5. The presenters and organizers of the Congressional Briefing.
6. Nancy La Vigne (Rutgers University) with Daniel Wilhelm (President, The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation).





# Extreme Risk Protection Orders to Reduce Mass Shootings and Other Firearm Violence

BY VERONICA A. PEAR

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In 2018, a 19-year-old Florida resident posted on social media that he “was going to be a professional school shooter” and “go on a killing rampage.” The same year, in California, a 21-year-old resident posted threats online targeting his former high school, including messages saying “RIP,” “no one will be graduating,” and “I hate you all.” A separate post pictured him with an assault rifle. The man making threats online in Florida was Nikolas Cruz. He went on to kill 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland with guns that he legally purchased and possessed, despite many warning signs indicating that he was a danger to others. Meanwhile, in California, an acquaintance informed law enforcement of the threats, and an extreme risk protection order (ERPO) was issued, separating the man from his guns. Violence was averted and he did not go on to commit a mass shooting.

## ERPOs—The Basics

ERPOs are civil restraining orders that temporarily prevent the purchase and possession of firearms by people judged to be at particularly high risk of harming themselves or others. They provide a targeted intervention to reduce gun violence that responds to behavioral threats rather than prohibiting people based on broad disqualifying criteria. In this way, ERPO laws attempt to balance the right to own firearms with the risk of ownership during acute crises.

ERPO laws are intended to prevent violence by removing access to firearms—the most lethal means of violence—during periods of imminent risk of dangerousness. They address a critical policy gap that allows people to access firearms when they are a danger to themselves or others and have not broken the law. The consequences of this gap are most obvious after a public mass shooting like the one in Parkland, which leaves us wondering why the shooter was able to have access to guns in light of their obvious dangerousness. It is estimated that around 55-85% of public mass shooters leak violent thoughts or plans prior to committing violence<sup>1,2</sup>—a fact that these laws are designed to take advantage of.

Currently, 21 states, the District of Columbia, and the US Virgin Islands have enacted an ERPO law. Details of these laws vary by state, including who can serve as petitioner (the person asking a



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judge to issue the order), how long the orders last, and what standard of evidence is used in court.<sup>3</sup> Typically, an ERPO starts with a short-term *ex parte* order, usually lasting just a couple of weeks and permitting the emergent removal of guns from the respondent (the subject of the order). This is followed by a hearing at which the respondent can appear. If the final order is granted at the hearing, the order will remain in effect for a longer period of time, usually one year. After the order expires, the respon-

dent has their firearm rights restored, and any confiscated firearms can be returned.

ERPOs are among the most popular gun policies in the United States. A recent nationally representative survey of US adults conducted by Johns Hopkins University found that 76% of Americans support allowing family members to ask the court to temporarily remove guns from a relative who they believe to be at risk of harming themselves or others.<sup>4</sup> The same survey found that ERPOs have strong support among Republicans and gun owners,<sup>4</sup> two groups that have historically been more skeptical of firearm safety legislation. A state-representative survey of adults in California found similar levels of support, ranging from 73-78%, for a judge issuing an ERPO across a range of scenarios, including when a person physically threatens to hurt themselves, someone else, or a group of people, or when a person is experiencing an emotional crisis or dementia.<sup>5</sup>

## Use and Implementation

Much of the research on ERPOs so far has focused on their use and implementation. This work has found that uptake of the law tends to be slow at first. For example, there were fewer than 100 orders issued during the first year the law was in effect in California, Connecticut, Indiana, Oregon, and Washington.<sup>6-10</sup> 74% of homicides and 51% of suicides involve firearms. Using extreme risk protection order (ERPO) There are a few notable exceptions to this pattern; for example, Florida issued about 2,500 orders during the first year and a half that its law was in effect.<sup>11</sup> One reason for the slow uptake is a lack of awareness about ERPO laws. In 2020, four years after the law went into effect in California, two-thirds of adults had never heard of it.<sup>5</sup> use of ERPOs has been limited. Barriers to ERPO uptake remain unclear. To assess public awareness and perceived appropriateness of and willingness to use ERPOs in various risk scenarios, and to identify reasons for being unwilling, overall and by firearm ownership status, to

inform efforts to improve ERPO implementation. This was a cross-sectional study using data from the 2020 California Safety and Well-being Survey, a statewide internet survey on firearm ownership and exposure to violence and its consequences, conducted from July 14 to July 27, 2020. Adult respondents were recruited from the Ipsos KnowledgePanel using probability-based sampling methods. Responses were weighted to be representative of the adult population of California. Awareness and perceived appropriateness of gun violence restraining orders (GVROs; California's official term for ERPOs) This lack of awareness extends to those responsible for its implementation as well, like law enforcement officers and judges, serving as a major barrier.<sup>12</sup> However, despite what is generally a slow start, research has found that the number of orders tends to increase as implementation bugs get worked out and more people learn about the law. By 2023, for example, California issued over 2,700 orders.<sup>13</sup>

Another commonality across ERPO states is that the majority of petitioners are law enforcement officers, even in states that allow others, such as family members, roommates, or clinicians, to petition.<sup>6,7,14,15</sup> 74% of homicides and 51% of suicides involve firearms. Using extreme risk protection order (ERPO) In California, for example, over 95% of petitioners are officers.<sup>6</sup> This highlights the importance of ERPO-specific training for law enforcement, who are serving as petitioners, attending court hearings, serving the orders, and recovering and storing firearms from respondents.

Finally, this body of work illustrates the variety of cases in which ERPOs are being used to remove firearms from high-risk situations. Depending on the state, estimates range from about 40-70% of cases involving threats of suicide<sup>16,17</sup> and 40-80% of cases involving threats of harm to others,<sup>15,17</sup> including mass shootings. However, important gaps remain in our understanding of ERPO usage and implementation. Using the Oregon Judicial Case Information Network database, we abstracted data from all ERPO petitions filed in Oregon from 2018 to 2022, the first five years after the law took effect (N = 649). These other-directed threats include threats against intimate partners, family members, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, and more. It also includes threats of mass shootings, which we found to be present in 10% of ERPOs in a study using data from six states.<sup>18</sup> ERPOs have also been used to disarm people making threats of politically motivated violence or terrorism;<sup>16</sup> these cases sometimes include collaboration with federal agents, who can provide intel to local officers who petition for the order. Other cases of note include those involving cognitive impairment, which includes dementia and psychosis, and those involving brandishing or recklessly using a firearm.

## Effectiveness

Another critical area of ERPO research is focused on trying to quantify the laws' effectiveness in preventing violence. However, evaluation poses several challenges. First, ERPO effectiveness depends on how well they are implemented, both in terms of the number of orders issued and how well they are being targeted to those at highest

risk. Second, effectiveness can be measured at the population level (i.e., comparing changes in state rates of violence before and after an ERPO law went into effect) or at the individual level (i.e., comparing violence among ERPO respondents to similar individuals who did not receive ERPOs). Population-level studies are much easier to carry out because the data are readily available, but there are serious questions about whether it is reasonable to expect to detect a population-level effect from such a new and rarely used intervention.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, we would be more likely to detect an effect among ERPO respondents, since they are the ones experiencing the intervention directly. However, it is very difficult to identify a comparison group for these individual-level evaluations. We want to find people who, like ERPO respondents, are at high, imminent risk of violence, who are not already prohibited from owning firearms, and who do not receive an ERPO or another firearm-prohibiting intervention. This is a tough group to identify and get data on. Finally, a challenge in evaluating the impact of ERPOs on mass shootings, in particular, is that even though mass shootings occur far too frequently, they are statistically rare events, which makes it hard to tell if changes over time are due to random variation or a change in the law.

Because of these difficulties, there is very little research on the effectiveness of ERPOs in preventing mass shootings. However, descriptive research is promising. For example, Wintemute and colleagues examined a sample of 21 cases in which ERPOs were used for individuals making mass shooting threats in California. Using open-source data online, they found no indication these individuals went on to commit mass violence after the ERPO was issued.<sup>20</sup>

Research on the effectiveness of ERPOs in preventing firearm homicide and assault is also nascent. A very small number of studies looking at changes in rates at the population level before and after an ERPO law was implemented have found non-significant reductions in violence,<sup>21,22</sup> meaning we cannot be sure whether the reduction is due to the law or to random variation in the outcome over time. A few state-level studies are currently being conducted examining rates of arrest among ERPO respondents before and after an ERPO was issued; however, these results have not yet been published. It is possible, though, for ERPOs to have a preventive impact on those they directly affect without there being a detectable change in rates at the population level.

The evidence is the strongest for the preventive effects of ERPO on suicide. Most of the effectiveness research to date has been done in this area. Using data from 4 ERPO states, we estimated that, among respondents, one suicide is prevented for every 17-23 orders issued.<sup>23</sup> Studies have also found population-level reductions in suicide rates, with one multi-state study finding that ERPO laws are associated with a 6% reduction in firearm suicide.<sup>22</sup>

## Recommendations

Taken together, the research supports several recommendations. States that do not have ERPO laws should consider adopting such a



law to close the policy gap allowing people posing an imminent danger to themselves or others to possess a firearm. The evidence to date on their effectiveness shows that this would likely reduce suicide and may very well reduce interpersonal violence by respondents as well.

States with ERPO laws can take several steps to improve their implementation, including dedicating resources such as money, time, and personnel to this effort.<sup>12</sup> States should also fund ERPO-specific training and education for officers and judges, and potentially broader outreach efforts as well, to inform the public about the availability of ERPOs as a tool they can use if a loved one is in crisis and has access to a firearm. States should also consider providing court advocates to walk people through the petitioning process, which can be intimidating and confusing to people not familiar with the court.<sup>24</sup> They should also consider formally connecting ERPO respondents to resources addressing the causes of the crises leading to the ERPO in the first place, such as substance abuse treatment or assistance with housing and employment. Finally, it is critically important that states systematically collect high-quality ERPO data and make it available to researchers. These data make it possible for us to monitor ERPO uptake, describe its use, and quantify its effectiveness.

Finally, while ERPOs are state laws, there is an important role for the federal government to play as well. First, it can support states' adoption and implementation of ERPO laws as it did with the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which helped localities offset some of the cost of implementation. Second, the federal government can support ERPO research through grants from relevant agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute of Justice. We all share a common goal of finding solutions to the problem of firearm violence, and the only way to know what works—and what does not—is through rigorous scientific investigation.

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# Domestic Violence Laws and Firearm Violence

BY APRIL M. ZEOLI AND MICHAEL G. HOLTZ

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Intimate partner homicide (IPH) is one of the most prevalent forms of homicide in the United States, particularly among women. Although men are more likely to be victims of homicide, women are disproportionately likely to be killed by an intimate partner. In 2021 alone, an estimated 1,700 of 4,970 female murder victims that year were killed by an intimate partner, according to data reported by law enforcement and entered into the National Incident-Based Reporting System. By comparison, just over 1,000 of the 17,970 male murder victims of 2021 were victims of IPH.<sup>1</sup> Expanding the data to homicide victims in the United States between 2019-2022, IPH accounted for nearly half of female homicide victims and roughly 10% of male victims.<sup>2</sup>

## Firearms and Intimate Partner Homicide

Firearm-related IPH is the most common form of IPH among women, with more than half of all IPH cases involving female victims committed with a firearm.<sup>3</sup> Female victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) are five times more likely to be killed by their partner if a firearm is in the home. When broken down by race, Black women are disproportionately more likely to be victims of firearm-related IPH, with Black women three times more likely to be fatally shot by their partner than White women. Younger Black women ages 18-34 are at the highest risk, being over four times more likely to be fatally shot by an intimate partner than White women.<sup>4</sup>

Though firearms exacerbate the risk of death in IPV situations, firearms are used in nonfatal incidents as well. Firearm-related nonfatal IPV is defined in several ways, including being shot and surviving, being shot at, or being otherwise hit with the firearm itself. Definitions can also include threats of using the firearm on the victim. Relatively little research into nonfatal firearm-related IPV exists, and currently available research shows a wide breadth in the potential prevalence of firearm-related abuse cases.

According to the National Crime Victimization Survey from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, firearm-related incidents accounted for 3.4% of total nonfatal IPV cases reported between 2003-2012.<sup>5</sup> A later study found that, based on a nationally representative survey of

US adults, nearly 5% of total adults experienced some form of firearm-related nonfatal IPV, either by being threatened with a firearm or having a firearm used on them. When the definition is expanded to include the victim being threatened by a partner who has possession of or easy access to a firearm, nearly 10% of total adults have experienced some form of nonfatal firearm-related IPV. Across demographics, 13.6% of women and 5.9% of men have experienced some form of nonfatal firearm-related IPV, and among IPV victims, Black women were the most at risk of experiencing nonfatal firearm abuse.<sup>6</sup> Consistent with IPH, firearm-related nonfatal IPV disproportionately affects women, and Black women, in particular, are the most at risk. More research is needed to understand the prevalence of firearm-related abuse, discrepancies in the demographic distribution of abuse, firearm behaviors of abusers, and the reporting of firearm-related nonfatal IPV incidents.

## Federal and State Laws

Two federal laws exist to respond to the danger of firearm-involved IPV. The first prevents access to firearms by those who have a misdemeanor conviction for domestic violence (MCDV). Under the federal MCDV law, those convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence are prohibited from purchasing or possessing firearms or ammunition. The federal MCDV firearm restriction has been associated with a 9% decrease in IPH<sup>7</sup> and a 31% decrease in domestic homicides of male children.<sup>8</sup> Before the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act went into effect in 2022,<sup>9</sup> dating partners who were convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence were not included in the federal firearm restriction. However, now the restriction extends to dating partners, who are prohibited for five years. If the convicted dating partner subsequently has a second MCDV involving a dating partner or a misdemeanor involving the use or attempted use of force or a deadly weapon, they are then subject to a lifetime firearm restriction (other categories of intimate partner, such as spouses, co-parents, and cohabitants, are initially put under a lifetime restriction).

The other federal law restricts firearm possession by persons under

a domestic violence protective order (DVPO). A DVPO is a court order that requires a domestic violence perpetrator to stay away from the victim, among other remedies. While the federal DVPO law includes a firearm access restriction provision, prohibiting a perpetrator from accessing firearms, the federal DVPO does not have a dating partner clause and only extends to current or former spouses or cohabitants, and parents of a child in common. It is important to note that the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act did not extend the protective order firearm restriction to dating partners. However, about half of the individuals who commit IPH are dating partners of their victims. Omitting dating partners from the DVPO firearm restriction heightens the risk of firearm injury and death.<sup>10</sup>

Most states have enacted statutes similar to these federal laws, and state DVPO firearm restrictions have also been associated with reductions in IPH. Unlike the federal DVPO law, of the 39 states with firearm restrictions for DVPOs, 31 have laws that apply to dating partners, and 23 extend restrictions to *ex-parte* orders. Research suggests that covering dating partners is associated with a 13% decrease in IPH.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, 32 states with DVPO laws also have firearm relinquishment provisions built in to ensure that respondents who already possess firearms are disarmed. These provisions have been shown to be critical components of broader DVPO prohibitions in reducing IPH: research suggests relinquishment provisions are associated with a 10-12% decrease in IPH.<sup>7,11</sup> Conversely, restrictions for DVPO respondents that lack a relinquishment provision are not significantly associated with IPH reductions.

Additionally, 35 states have firearm restrictions for MCDV, including 26 that apply to dating partners. Furthermore, 18 states have a relinquishment law stating that the court is authorized to order the newly prohibited individual to relinquish any firearm they already possess. The enforcement of MCDV laws has been shown to have a significant impact on IPH among pregnant and postpartum women. Homicide is a leading cause of death of pregnant and postpartum women,<sup>12,13</sup> and state-level MCDV firearm restrictions are associated with a reduction of homicides among this group (3.74 fewer deaths per 100,000 live births), but only if there is a relinquishment mechanism in the law.<sup>14</sup>

Still, in many states, there is no policy requiring or authorizing judges to order a person newly prohibited from firearm possession by a MCDV or by a DVPO to turn over their firearms. In these instances, those who have recently been prohibited from purchasing or possessing firearms may still have access to firearms already owned, and there is no statutory mechanism to remove those firearms through the DVPO alone. Similarly, neither the federal DVPO firearm restriction nor the federal MCDV firearm restrictions include a relinquishment element, meaning there is no clear enforcement mechanism for these restrictions. Without a relinquishment element, the benefit of these laws lies in their ability to prevent acquisition through the inclusion of the restriction in a background check for a firearm purchase.

## The Effectiveness of DVRO and MCDV Laws

More research is needed which focuses on studying the implementation of DVPO and MCDV laws. In particular, it is not clear from existing research how many people are under either of these restrictions, what the rate of firearm relinquishment among this group is, or how effective background checks and firearm purchaser licensing laws are in preventing these individuals from obtaining new firearms. This information would help clarify current gaps in existing literature. For example, one study found that of state-level DVPO and MCDV laws, only DVPO laws that require the relinquishment of firearms were associated with significant reductions in IPH overall.<sup>11</sup> Another study found that state-level MCDV firearm restrictions did not reduce IPH overall but that other laws prohibiting firearm possession for violent misdemeanants more generally did.<sup>7</sup>

The reasons for this discrepancy in effectiveness are not yet understood. Some theories posit that laws restricting firearm possession by violent misdemeanants more broadly still affect domestic violence offenders who were convicted of either domestic or non-domestic violent crimes. Therefore, by disarming violent offenders, more firearm violence, including violence against intimate partners, is prevented. Another theory states that, because many states do not have a misdemeanor crime statute that covers all violent crimes involving intimate partners, the purchase prohibition may be simpler to implement for violent misdemeanors generally than for MCDV laws.<sup>7</sup>

Another discrepancy of note in IPH reductions due to DVPO firearm restrictions is the impact these laws have by race. When looking at the effects of state DVPO firearm restrictions by race, IPH among White populations has been shown to decline; but no significant decreases in IPH have been shown among Black populations.<sup>7</sup> The reason for these discrepancies is unclear, but the pattern is particularly concerning given the higher rate of firearm IPH among Black women.

Support for firearm restrictions in domestic violence cases is broad across the country. For example, a 2023 scientific opinion poll found that 81% of Americans support removing firearms from an individual who is currently under a DVPO.<sup>15</sup> More research is thus needed to better understand the impacts and the implementation of these IPV-related firearm laws in order to inform policymakers who are considering adopting these laws or amending existing laws.

At present, the risk of harm from firearm-related IPV in the United States, especially IPH, depends on the laws of each state and, more broadly, the federal laws covering DVPOs and MCDVs. Despite the need for more research in this space, what currently exists shows that extending domestic violence firearm restrictions to dating partners, not just current or former spouses or cohabitants and co-parents, is a life-saving measure that reduces the rate of IPH. Current research also suggests DVPOs that include a firearm relinquishment component show more significant reductions in IPH than DVPOs without this component. When the implementation of the laws is better understood, the outcomes of the laws will be better put into



context, and the implementation of DVPOs and MCDV laws at the state and federal levels can be improved.

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# Intervening with Persons at High-Risk for Gun Violence and Mass Shootings

BY ALICE M. ELLYSON, SHANNON FRATTAROLI, & JAMES M. SILVER

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When a mass shooting occurs, we immediately wonder if somehow it could have been prevented. Over the past several decades, researchers, practitioners, and lawmakers have developed programs and laws to try to do exactly that—stop violence before it occurs. Among the most promising approaches are *behavioral threat assessment* programs, *extreme risk prevention orders*, and *domestic violence prevention orders*, which can help practitioners prevent many forms of violence, including mass shootings and more common forms of fatalities that are often firearm-related, like intimate partner homicides and suicides.

Years of research have shown that using threat assessment to identify and address high lethality factors can help prevent harm and tragedy. Law enforcement officers routinely use some of these tools in their practice. For example, lethality assessments are used when an officer arrives at the scene of a domestic violence incident and asks the alleged victim a series of questions to identify how much danger the person may be in based on the current incident and history of lethal harm by their abusive partner or family member. Similar tools are also used in clinical settings (e.g., lethal means assessment to assess suicidality and danger assessment to gauge intimate partner violence risk) where a healthcare provider asks someone a series of questions to determine the severity of their risk and to inform intervention strategies.

Because of the success of these threat assessment tools, many policies and practices have been adapted or created to help professionals address the risks once they have been identified. Civil protection orders (sometimes called restraining orders) are often sought to intervene in potentially lethal situations, providing protections to prevent the restrained individual (often called the respondent) from harming themselves or others. Research shows protection orders are associated with reductions in abuse, especially physical abuse, including homicide (see articles by Pear and Zeoli in this issue). Furthermore, people who are protected by these orders report feeling much safer after the

protection order is granted. Civil protection orders often offer faster, more flexible, and more accessible protections than the criminal system, and may be available when violence is threatened but has not yet occurred. In many states, protection orders also have firearm-specific relinquishment provisions and can provide a vital lifeline to prevent fatal harm.

## How Can “Behavioral” Threat Assessment Help Prevent Mass Shootings?

One of the most important things to know about public mass shootings (attacks that often generate the most attention and policy interest) is that they are *rarely spontaneous*—few shooters “just snap.” Research has shown that these attacks usually result from understandable and often discoverable behaviors occurring over time (generally days to months) before the trigger is pulled.<sup>1</sup> In other words, most attackers do and say things that, *if recognized*, can serve as early and actionable “warning signs.” This insight is the basis for behavioral threat assessment and is critical to disrupting future harm.

Originating from work done by the United States Secret Service and supported by decades of research (including work by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the U.S. Department of Education), behavioral threat assessment is a systematic way to *identify, assess, and manage* a person of concern off of their pathway to violence.<sup>2</sup> *Identification* relies on gathered information (e.g., concerning changes in behavior observed by friends, loved ones, or fellow students, reports to managers, or tips to police) and is evaluated on an individual basis (there are no checklist “profiles”). *Assessment* involves gathering additional information about the person of concern, the potential target, and the circumstances between them. *Management* is the process of developing and implementing a plan to avert impending violence. The practice is dynamic (with plans shifting as more evidence is gathered) and operational (focused on achievable steps to protect potential victims).<sup>3</sup>

Behavioral threat assessment is ideally carried out by a trained multidisciplinary team of administrators, mental health professionals, law enforcement, human resources, teachers, and social service agencies, with the composition varying based on resources and setting. The goal of assessment is to prevent (not react to) violence. Tactics commonly used to manage the person of concern span a continuum from dismissing cases after initial screening to interviews to establish behavioral boundaries, voluntary and involuntary mental health treatment, use of extreme risk protection orders, target hardening, surveillance, and, if necessary, arrest and prosecution.

Over the past 25 years, behavioral threat assessment has become a recommended or required practice in K-12 schools, colleges and universities, and large organizations across the nation. However, adoption remains incomplete, and many communities do not have access to a behavioral threat assessment team outside these particular settings.

### **Is an Extreme Risk Protection Order the Right Tool to Use?**

As behavioral threat assessment and other risk assessment tools have become increasingly sophisticated and widespread in their use, the options for civil protection orders have also expanded. Extreme Risk Protection Orders (also known as “ERPOs” and “red flag” laws) are available in 21 states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands (erpo.org). Like other civil protection orders, ERPOs are designed to interrupt a trajectory of violence when someone is behaving dangerously and at risk of harming themselves or others. By intervening before a crime occurs, ERPOs do not involve criminal charges. As such, ERPOs complement behavioral threat assessment and are being used when people are identified as at risk of suicide, interpersonal violence (including intimate partner violence), and mass violence. One recent review of ERPO casefiles in six states revealed that 10% of ERPO petitions to the court were motivated by someone threatening to shoot three or more people.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike other civil protection orders, ERPOs are narrow in scope. When a court grants an ERPO, the respondent is temporarily prohibited from purchasing and possessing firearms. Temporary firearms dispossession lasts up to one year in most places where ERPO is law. The prohibition on firearms is where ERPOs begin and end. This focus builds on lessons learned from civil Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs): States with DVPO laws that prohibit firearm purchase and possession are associated with reductions in intimate partner homicide generally, and intimate partner homicide with guns compared with state DVPO laws that do not include firearm prohibitions. Depending on the specifics of the firearm prohibition and whether the outcome is firearm homicide or all homicide, the estimated reduction in intimate partner homicide associated with state DVPO gun prohibitions is between 10-16%.<sup>5</sup> Access to firearms also makes a difference in preventing suicide. People who attempt suicide with a firearm are far more likely to die compared to people who attempt by taking pills (the most common mechanism used). About 90% of people who attempt suicide with a firearm die, whereas

about 2% of those who attempt with poisoning (i.e., pills) die. And contrary to popular belief, most people who survive a suicide attempt do not later die by suicide. With regard to ERPO use, when someone is behaving in a way that suggests they are at risk of suicide, a 2024 analysis of four states’ ERPO data estimated that for every 17-23 ERPOs issued, one less person died by suicide.<sup>6</sup> Removing firearms when people are behaving dangerously makes sense—the best available evidence suggests that fewer people die when temporarily prohibiting firearm purchase and possession in response to dangerous behaviors and threats of violence.

### **What Effective Policies and Strategies Can Be Used to Disarm Dangerous Individuals?**

Studies have shown that removing firearms from the highest-risk people is an important part of identifying, assessing, and managing lethal threats in the context of domestic violence. Over half of all domestic homicides are perpetrated with firearms, and most mass shootings in public or private are perpetrated by a person who has previously or is currently perpetrating domestic violence. To address this risk, individuals who are subject to qualifying DVPOs are prohibited from possessing or purchasing firearms by federal law. As with ERPOs, many states have enhanced their laws with specific provisions requiring the relinquishment of firearms that seek to address the threat of fatal harm to intimate partners, family members, household members, and community members using firearm prohibitions in DVPOs.

One noteworthy distinction between ERPOs and DVPOs is that law enforcement can initiate the ERPO process. DVPOs are initiated by intimate partners and family members requesting protection, and on rare occasions, individuals requesting protection for someone else on their behalf (e.g., minor children, vulnerable adults). In all 21 states with ERPO laws and the District of Columbia, police are authorized to petition for an ERPO. In most states, family members and partners can petition, and in a growing number of jurisdictions, licensed healthcare providers can initiate the ERPO process. By expanding the categories of people who can request ERPO cases before the court, law enforcement can have a role in the civil court process that is not available with DVPOs. This new role is an opportunity for law enforcement to intervene in a wide variety of cases, including those with a link to domestic violence.

While many states have enacted laws to help local and state law enforcement enforce these firearm-specific provisions, not all jurisdictions have prioritized the resources, developed the infrastructure, and deployed universal or consistent training to fully implement them. Research on the enforcement of DVPOs shows that having a multidisciplinary and interjurisdictional unit dedicated to the implementation of firearm restrictions can help improve both the judicial enforcement of and individual compliance with these state laws. For example, firearm and weapon relinquishment in domestic violence cases was three times more likely to occur along with the



implementation of a dedicated unit in one study in King County, Washington.<sup>7</sup> Successful units are built on taking collaborative and cohesive action across all stages of threat assessment.

Research shows that these specific actions are essential to encourage judicial officers to order firearm and weapon relinquishment as authorized by law, and encourage individuals subject to these orders to turn in weapons and firearms in their possession. Recommended actions include:

- 1) reviewing all DVPO and ERPO cases and interviewing protected people about the restrained person's use and access to weapons and firearms;
- 2) identifying any and all weapons, including firearms, that may pose an ongoing risk by searching available weapon and firearm purchase history records;
- 3) working with individuals in the court system and other areas of the legal system to ensure procedurally just approaches and clear messaging of compliance expectations to help facilitate understanding of the law and enforcement of the law;
- 4) using best practices to better promote compliance through the relinquishment of weapons and firearms based on the specific circumstances of each case;
- 5) systematically managing each case and educating individuals subject to these orders so they understand the legal requirements and how to comply with them; and
- 6) supporting the legal requirements to remove items by law enforcement when needed.

Although they differ in some ways, behavioral threat assessment, ERPOs, and DVPOs are all built on the same idea—sometimes we can recognize and deal with danger *before* it occurs. To learn more go to:

- National Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) Resource Center<sup>8</sup>
- King County (WA) Regional Domestic Violence Firearms Enforcement Unit<sup>9</sup>
- Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks (Federal Bureau of Investigation)<sup>10</sup>

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# Evidence on Background Check Policies and Gun Crime

BY DANIEL W. WEBSTER

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Legally prohibiting firearm possession for individuals with histories of violence and serious criminality is not controversial, nor are mandated background checks of firearm purchasers to prevent firearm transfers to legally disqualified individuals.<sup>1</sup> At the individual level, denying prohibited persons from purchasing firearms leads to reduced risks for future commission of violent crimes by the prohibited purchasers.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, there are weaknesses in U.S. federal and state background check laws. Police commonly recover firearms from prohibited persons who were not the retail purchaser of record. However, holding individuals who supply guns to criminals legally accountable is very difficult if there are no background checks or record-keeping requirements for firearm transfers between private individuals. Firearm transfers by someone who is not “in the business of selling firearms” do not require a background check of the purchaser nor record-keeping of the transaction by any party under federal law. This gap is commonly exploited by gun traffickers and individuals with disqualifying criminal convictions who acquire firearms from friends, family members, and trusted traffickers.<sup>3,4</sup> However, the Bipartisan Community Safety Act of 2022, in a Rule issued in 2024, expanded the definition of “being in the business of selling firearms” to include anyone who sells firearms for a profit.<sup>5</sup> If enforced properly, this new law could significantly increase background checks and restrict the most prominent channel of gun trafficking identified in federal investigations.<sup>6</sup>

There is a clear and consistent pattern between where crime guns are recovered by police and where they were originally sold based on the strength of states’ background check and related laws that are designed to deter illegal transfers of firearms. States with the strongest set of laws related to firearm seller accountability—universal background checks that include private transfers, purchaser licensing with fingerprint verification of applicants, state gun dealer licensing and oversight, and mandatory reporting of gun thefts—have the fewest guns sold within the state that are trafficked to other states for use in crime.<sup>7</sup> Such laws also thwart the diversion of guns for use in crime within the state of sale.<sup>8</sup> Said another way, weaknesses in federal and state background check laws facilitate the diversion of guns for use in crime across state lines and within states.



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The importance of background checks in preventing criminal use of guns is underscored by the surge in crime with untraceable privately-made firearms (PMFs) between 2018 and 2022. In response, the Biden Administration implemented a rule in August 2022 to treat do-it-yourself (DIY) kits for making firearms (also known as ghost guns) as any other firearm including background checks and record keeping by any business selling the kits. Specifically,

that rule meant that DIY gun kits marketed online and in retail shops would be subject to mandatory serialization, background checks of purchasers, and record keeping by sellers. Some states, including Maryland, have passed legislation analogous to the Federal PMF rule to regulate the sale of PMFs and, in some cases, prohibit possession of unserialized firearms. In addition, some cities have successfully sued the company that dominated the DIY gun kit market to stop the sales that skirt background check laws. After these federal, state, and local actions were implemented, there has been an abrupt reversal of the surge in untraceable PMFs used in crime.<sup>9,10</sup>

Despite the strong connections between background checks and the diversion of guns for use in crime and the reduced risk of offending by persons blocked by background checks, the strongest studies have not found a clear protective effect on population-level rates of gun violence from state policies that extend background checks to private transfers.<sup>11,12</sup> There have been few studies of the enforcement of background check laws, but available evidence suggests that minimal enforcement<sup>13,14</sup> may be a key reason that universal background check (UBC) laws have not translated into significant reductions in firearm homicides. Challenges to getting convictions, low penalties for background check law violations, and low public interest are likely reasons for minimal enforcement of background check laws. A high-profile murder of a state police officer in Pennsylvania with a firearm obtained by a prohibited person from a straw purchaser linked to other crime guns led state lawmakers to increase penalties for straw purchasers who transfer firearms without background checks. Shortly after this policy change, prosecutions of straw purchasers increased dramatically.<sup>14</sup>

However, when comprehensive background check laws are coupled with a legal requirement for firearm purchasers to obtain purchaser licenses or permits, a series of studies have shown negative associations between the laws and most forms of gun violence. Studies have found strong associations between firearm purchaser licensing laws and lower rates of firearm homicide,<sup>15</sup> firearm suicides,<sup>15</sup> fatal mass shootings,<sup>16</sup> hospitalizations due to shootings,<sup>17</sup> shootings of law

enforcement officers in the line of duty,<sup>18</sup> and shootings of civilians by law enforcement.<sup>19</sup> Thus, features of purchaser licensing laws to achieve universal background checks for firearms transactions that complement UBC laws may be necessary to achieve population-level gains in public safety. These features typically include: 1) direct application to a law enforcement agency to receive a license to purchase, 2) fingerprint-based identification to improve the accuracy of matches with criminal records, 3) more comprehensive search of databases of prohibiting conditions, 4) more time allowed to complete a thorough review of records, and 5) some form of safety training requirement.<sup>20</sup> These conditions may serve as a deterrent to straw purchases and provide private sellers with an ability to vet potential purchasers even if they forego the point-of-sale background check requirements of universal background check laws.

In summary, weaknesses in federal and state background check and related laws designed to prevent prohibited individuals from accessing firearms facilitate gun trafficking and gun crime. Policies that close gaps in and strengthen background check laws reduce gun trafficking and criminal use of firearms. Universal background checks are necessary but not always sufficient to significantly curb population-level gun violence, in part, due to poor enforcement. When UBC laws are complemented with firearm purchaser licensing laws, however, many lives can be saved from criminal violence, fatal encounters involving law enforcement, and preventable suicides.

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