

# The True Cost of Buying Your First Handgun

By **TTAG Contributor** - July 13, 2020

*(courtesy Heather Myers)*

By Rob Aught

Sticker shock. Anyone who has ever shopped for a car knows what it is. I was somewhat surprised to find out it can apply to firearm purchases as well. Fortunately, when I went to buy my first firearm someone was kind enough to warn me that just buying a gun isn't the end of what you'll need and millions of new gun owners have been finding that out over the last few months.

If you're an experienced shooter, this article may not be for you. You probably have all the whizbangs and

doo-dads you need and going into a store to a store and coming out with a new firearm is all you have to do. This is intended largely for people who are new to guns and I'm going to provide a template for planning your purchase and give some specific examples.

More than one person has set out to spend \$500 on a handgun and suddenly found themselves out \$100 to \$200 more than they expected.

I'll focus on handguns because that's the most common weapon purchased for home defense and concealed carry. There is a long, ongoing and lively debate over whether a handgun, rifle, or shotgun makes for the "best" home defense weapon. This article is not taking a stance on that unresolvable question. I am simply using a handgun as an example because it's the weapon most new shooters will buy.

Here come the disclaimers. State laws can vary greatly and I am not looking at any additional costs for your area, including additional licensing, permits, or special taxes on firearms and ammunition. I live in Texas where the cost of a firearm is all you have to pay unless you're looking at getting a concealed handgun license. Please check your local laws and regulations before you make any purchases.

Also, any shipping costs or FFL transfer fees are not

included. If you're buying a gun online, it's best to be aware of those costs upfront. For this example, due to variances by area, I am assuming a 7% sales tax. This may be more or less than what you would actually pay, but I don't want to leave it out of the discussion entirely since it can add a significant cost to the end total.

Also not included are any fees for going to a gun range or joining a gun club to practice shooting. Too much variance there for me to calculate. Furthermore, in all the following examples I will be presenting a range and then landing somewhere in the middle. In short, your costs may vary. The idea here is to give you a general idea of what you will need to spend.

Here are the essentials you will need when you make your first firearm purchase:

- The firearm itself – Self explanatory.
- A spare magazine – You should have at least one ready-to-go reload on hand whether you intend this for home defense or concealed carry.
- 200 rounds of practice ammunition – You need to put enough rounds through your new firearm to get comfortable and accurate with it and learn it's ins and outs.
- A gun lock – Assuming you don't already have a safe, you need some kind of lock to secure the firearm.
- A full load and at least one reload of self defense ammunition – I recommend JHP's, jacketed hollow points, for any kind of defensive use
- Eye Protection – Don't practice without it. Ninety-nine percent of the time you won't need it, but if you've ever caught hot brass in the face you'll be glad you have it.
- Hearing protection – Guns are loud. Hearing loss is forever.
- Cleaning solvent, gun oil, cleaning patches, and a cleaning kit – You need to know how to maintain your gun

I'll break this down for you using a specific, very popular example, the GLOCK 19. I'm not a GLOCK lover, in fact I don't care for them. However, I do have experience with them and they are solid handguns.

There is a good reason the G19 is and has been one of the best selling handguns in the United States.

The GLOCK 19 is a striker-fired, semi-automatic, 9mm handgun with a standard capacity of 15 rounds. With a reputation for reliability, it is also accurate, and is generally not picky about what kind of ammunition it will shoot.

Here's the breakdown:

### **GLOCK 19 handgun – \$599**

Demand and prices are up these days. There are both cheaper and more expensive handguns (and used guns, too), but as a default option the GLOCK 19 is essentially the Toyota Camry of handguns and a good benchmark.

### **Spare Magazine – \$0**

The G19 comes with a spare magazine and a magazine loader. Depending on your particular gun it could be anywhere from \$15 to \$40 for spare magazines, but about \$25 is average. Most common handgun brands, certainly any brand I would recommend for home defense, comes with a spare magazine, but you can never have too many.

### **200 rounds of 9mm Luger – \$13 to \$21 for a box of 50 rounds**

In general you'll probably expect to spend about \$16

for a box of 50 rounds. The problem these days is finding it. I recommend using brass cased bullets for new shooters simply so you don't have to worry about the idiosyncrasies of steel casings. Once you get used to your weapon's function and maintenance, it may be worth looking at steel cased ammunition for shooting "on the cheap" if your gun will accommodate it.

### **40 rounds of 9mm Luger self defense ammunition – \$21 to \$30 for a box of 20 rounds**

Again, supplies are thin these days. The cost here will hurt a little because of the GLOCK 19's capacity. You'll need to buy at least two boxes so you can fully load both magazines. But don't just keep the extra 10 rounds on a shelf. I recommend shooting them at the range just to make sure the rounds you've purchased work in your gun without issue.

The GLOCK will likely function just fine with just about any self defense ammunition, but it's important to shoot at least a few magazines worth of it to make sure. Self defense ammunition is usually easy to identify in the store and there are many manufacturers, but what you're looking for is JHP (jacketed hollow-point). These bullets are designed to expand when they hit a target, doing more internal damage, while also being less likely to penetrate the inner walls of your home should you miss your target. For the end total I'm going to assume about \$25 a box.

## **Gun Lock – \$0**

Virtually all handguns sold in the US come with some kind of basic gun lock. For the most part you won't use it, but it's a good thing to have around. There may be situations where you need to secure your weapon and if you don't have a gun safe a gun lock is your next best option. While it won't prevent a theft, it will at least prevent a negligent discharge.

I don't recommend storing your weapon with the lock on as it will be difficult to deploy when you need it in an emergency. There are better, faster ways of securing a gun in your home and having it quickly available. However, there may be specific circumstances where it's better to lock it down. Just don't make that your default.

## **Eye Protection – \$10 to \$25**

I'm going to go with \$15 even though that's the low end, simply because I can find decent shooting glasses at that price without a problem. There are some very pricey options out there, but for newbie shooters don't go crazy. However, do invest in some. I literally have been hit right between the eyes with hot brass. Your vision is too important to risk.

## **Hearing Protection – \$12 to \$20 for earmuff-style hearing protection**

There are cheaper options like in-ear protection, but

earmuffs are easy to use, difficult to put on incorrectly, and generally work well if you spring for something that is at least \$15. Some shooter will double up with foam ear plugs and muffs over them. There's sophisticated electronic Bluetooth-enables earmuff protection that runs north of \$100, but for a new shooter, a basic set will do just fine. For our purposes let's assume \$20.

### **Cleaning Solvent – \$3 to \$5**

Buy some purpose-made solvent for cleaning firearms. It doesn't need to be anything fancy, but it should be designed to dissolve common residue and fouling that occurs when discharging a firearm. For \$4 you should be all set.

### **Gun Oil – \$3 to \$5**

There is an average price of about \$4. I am thinking specifically of gun oil that has a squeeze applicator similar to a standard bottle of glue instead of the spray on kind. Having an applicator allows easier clean-up and purposeful application at factory recommended lubrication points.

### **Cleaning Kit – \$15 to \$50**

Although not common for all firearms, the GLOCK 19 at least comes with a bore brush and cleaning rod. In general, a decent basic kit will cost between \$15 and \$20. However, if the GLOCK 19 is your first and only

gun there is no need to buy a 9mm handgun cleaning kit.

So what is our grand total?

\$599 – Glock 19 Handgun, extra magazine, gun lock, cleaning kit

\$64 – 200 rounds of 9mm brass FMJ practice ammunition

\$50 – 40 rounds of 9mm JHP self defense ammunition

\$10 – Eye protection

\$20 – Hearing protection

\$30 – Cleaning supplies (Patches, oil, and solvent)

Subtotal – \$773

7% Sales Tax – \$49

**Grand Total – \$822**

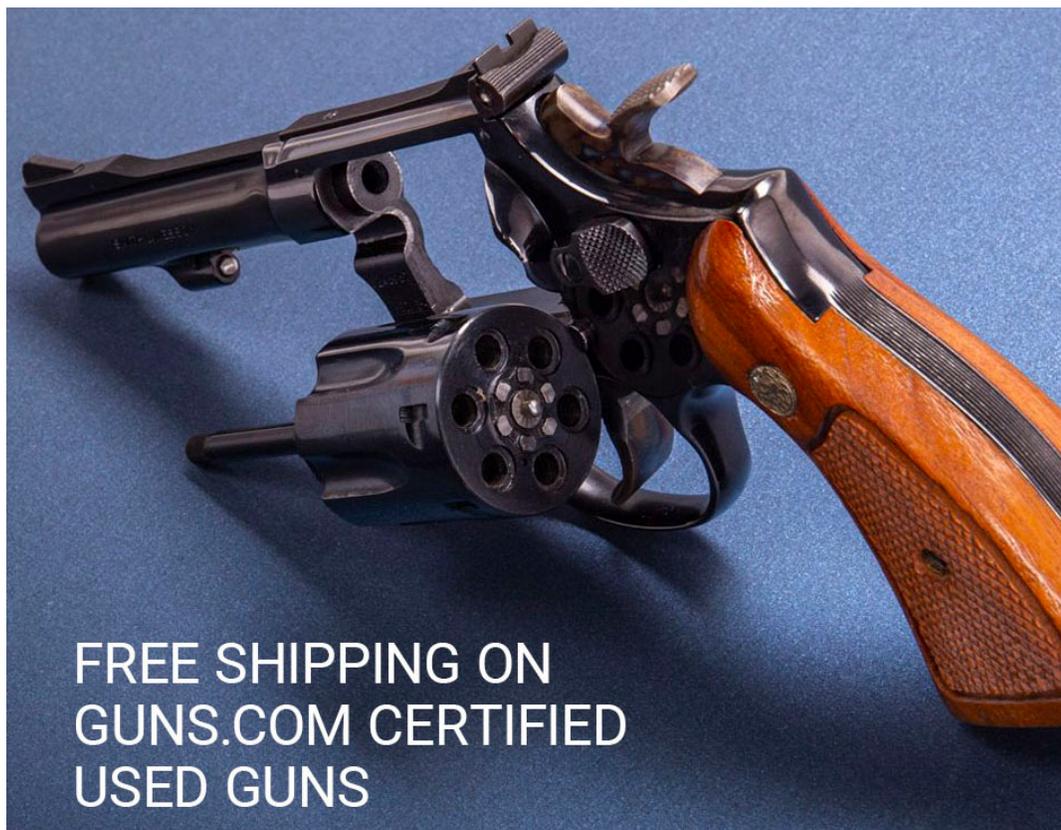
As always, your mileage may vary. Shipping may be additional. You may choose a cheaper handgun, or a more expensive one. There are plenty of other options and accessories that I'm not covering here, mostly because they are not essential to the initial purchase, but might be good to have later.

A holster is always a good idea even if you don't intend to carry. And a range bag is handy to tote your gun, ammo and gear to the range. The best thing to do is to walk through this exercise before you buy, do some research on your own, and be prepared.

Yes, that first purchase can be expensive, but once you've got all the basics you can add the rest a little at a time as your budget allows.

*This article was originally published in 2013 and prices have been updated.*

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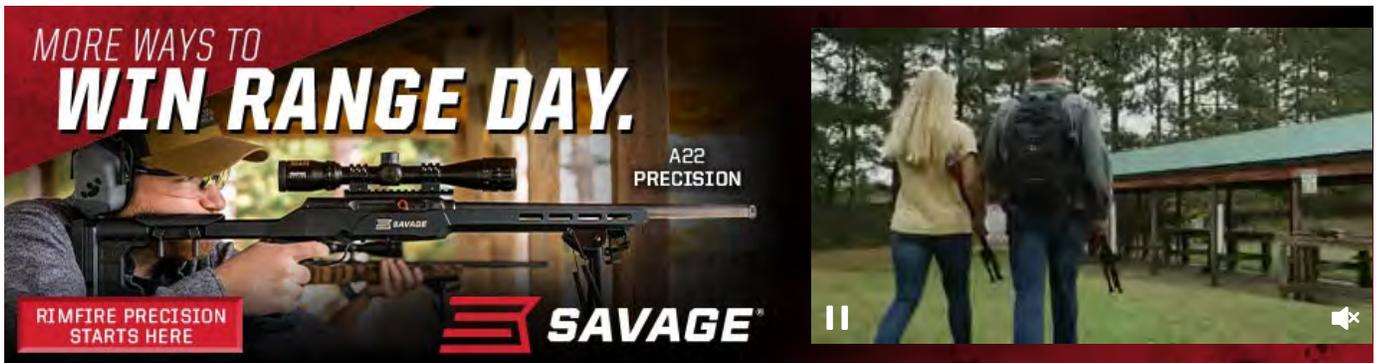
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**TTAG Contributor**

Bice, Douglas C. and David D. Hemley, *The Market for New Handguns: An Empirical Investigation* (2002) *Journal of Law and Economics*, Vol. 45, 251-265.

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# The 10 Best Budget Shotguns

By “budget shotguns” we don’t mean cheap shotguns. Budgets vary and these low-, mid-, and even high-priced guns offer the very best value for your hard-earned money

BY PHIL BOURJAILY FEBRUARY 11, 2021

GUNS



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Shotguns digest more shells in a season than most rifles will in a lifetime. They get knocked around in the uplands, splattered with mud in the marsh, and shot and shot and shot at the range. A lot of people don't like the idea of spending any more than necessary on a gun that has to take such abuse. This list of the best affordable shotguns for them, the practical among us, who will skip a frill here or an engraved pheasant there in order get the most bang for the buck. Here are ten shotguns—plus a bonus gun—that represent extremely good values in their categories. One of them is most likely the best budget shotgun you can buy for the type of hunting you do.

## How to Buy a Used Gun Safely



Used models are the best budget shotguns going. The original buyer takes the depreciation hit, you get a deal, and as a bonus, someone else puts the first ding in the stock, saving you the anguish of worrying about it. If it weren't for used guns, I'd hardly have any guns at all. Still, you have to be careful. Do your homework. [The Blue Book of Gun Values](#) is your guide to how much you should pay. It lists virtually every gun made and its price across a range of conditions.

Buy from a dealer who stands behind what they sell. Be sure you know what the return policy is before you buy. If you buy from an online seller, use only those with good ratings, and be sure there's an inspection period, which is typically three days. Find out if inspection includes test-firing.

Check the gun carefully for function. I recently bought a Model 12 Winchester with a slide release that was very difficult to press (it's a thing with Model 12s), and I negotiated the necessary repairs as part of the price of the gun. See if the choke tubes come out. I picked up a Mossberg 835 turkey gun, and in

checking it out I found the choke tube was rusted in place. The gun was already dirt-cheap, but the store knocked another big chunk off the price when I pointed out the stuck tube.

Look for signs like marred screws that shows someone who didn't know what they were doing has been poking around inside. Be sure neither barrels nor stock have been cut down, and look for signs of refinishing. If you need to, have a gunsmith look the gun over, just as you might take a used car to your mechanic. He can spot any problems and keep you from buying what looks to you like a great budget shotgun but is actually a lemon.

Finally, consider resale value. Someday you may want to move on from the gun even though right now you're smitten with it. I'm terrible about this, but I'm learning. A little while ago, I passed up a terrific deal on an older Browning Citori skeet gun with great wood and a full set of sub-gauge tubes. But, it had 26-inch barrels and the current trend is to longer ones. I knew if and when I soured on the gun, the short barrels would make it tough to sell, so I let it go.

Whether you are buying new or used, a budget means you have a limited amount to spend. And whether that's a few hundred dollars or a couple thousand, you want to get most for your money. So, to that end, here are 11 bargain shotguns that represent the best values in four different budget ranges.

**Read Next: 10 Stylish But Affordable Shotguns You Should Own**

## Best Budget Shotguns Under \$500

### 1. Mossberg Maverick 88



The Maverick 88 starts for under \$250. *Mossberg*

**BUY NOW**

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Made in Mexico, the Maverick 88 is a budget Mossberg 500, which seems like a redundancy. It's essentially the same gun but with a crossbolt safety in place of the 500's top safety. The 88 is also the least-expensive pump gun I could find (undercutting the Chinese-made Savage 320 by \$7). For just a little over \$200, you get a lock, stock, and barrel, plus one choke tube and a middle bead. It comes in black plastic, 3-inch, 12-gauge only, and weighs about 7 pounds. I have shot 25 straight on the skeet field with a Model 88, which suggests they shoot where you point them, and I've seen them work reliably in the field, too. The Maverick 88 starts at \$245.

## 2. Remington 870 Express



Used 870 Express models make exceptional bargains. *Bass Pro Shops*

**BUY NOW**

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The most popular shotgun of all time, the 870 pump, was introduced in a budget Express version in 1987 with a plainer finish and a hardwood stock. It has a steel receiver and twin action bars to keep its stroke smooth. It was sold in both hardwood or synthetic in 3-inch 12 or 20, as well as a few in .410. Again, you get no frills here, and the finish is quick to rust and requires care, but inside it is the same reliable gun shooters have relied on since 1950. **Update:** Note that since this story was first published, Remington has been acquired by the Round Hill Group, and it's not clear yet if the new owner will continue to offer the Express. But I've chosen to keep this gun in the roundup because there are plenty of used ones out there can be had for as little as a couple hundred bucks.

## 3. Stoeger M3000



### **Stoeger M3000**

The M3000 is a reliable inertia gun for half the price of a Benelli. *Bass Pro Shops*

**BUY NOW**

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If you yearn for an inertia semiauto but don't have the cash for a Benelli or an A5, the [Stoeger M3000](#) may be for you. Owned by Benelli, Turkish gunmaker Stoeger turns out eerily similar semiautos at a much lower price. Although you do give up something in fit and finish, the M3000 has the same light weight and slim lines of a Benelli, and the same reliable action that's known for running in the worst weather conditions. As Turkish semiautos improve, the Stoeger becomes a better and better option, and with an affordable street price it's less than half the price of a Benelli.

#### 4. Weatherby SA-08



The Weatherby SA-08 in black synthetic retails for \$499. *Bass Pro Shops*

**BUY NOW**

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Friends don't let friends shoot cheap gas semiautos. They are a headache—unless the one in question is the Stoeger above or a [Weatherby SA-08](#). This plain Turkish-made gas gun is slim and lightweight, and it does nothing but work, without a fuss. A lot of people own these, and I have yet to hear a complaint. The design is outdated; you have to switch between two different pistons depending on whether you're shooting light or heavy loads, but outside of that minor inconvenience, the SA-08 delivers reliable performance. Perhaps because it's so light—6 ½ pounds in 3-inch 12 gauge—it doesn't offer the same reduced-recoil sensation of other semiautos, but for the price, a lot of hunters don't mind a little extra punch.

## Best Budget Shotguns for Under \$750

#### 5. CZ Drake



A bare-bones O/U that works, the Drake goes for \$675. *CZ USA*

**BUY NOW**

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The [CZ Drake's](#) price tag reads like a typo. No O/U should cost as little as it does, yet it's a solid gun that gives you all the advantages of a break action (two chokes, compact balance) at a low-end semiauto cost.

Made in Turkey, the Drake comes in 12, 20, 28, and .410. It doesn't have much in the way of engraving or fancy wood, and its extractors lift spent shells instead of kicking them out like ejectors. In short, it's a bare-bones O/U that works, and that's no small thing at under \$700, complete with hard case and five choke tubes.

## Best Budget Shotguns Under \$1,000

### 6. Beretta A300 Outlander



#### **Beretta A300 Outlander**

The Beretta A300 Outlander runs from between \$680 and \$800 depending on finish. *Bass Pro Shops*

**BUY NOW**

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When people ask me what they should buy for a first shotgun, I point them to the A300. Like the SA-08, it's based on second-generation technology, but in this case, it's a budget version of the excellent Beretta 391, simplified, changed a little, and made in the United States. The least expensive model is the synthetic version, which features spacers that let you change the stock length up to an inch to fit smaller shooters. The gas system is famously reliable, and the gun shoots all loads without adjustment. Really, this is a tough gun to beat at any price.

### 7. Winchester Super X4



The Super X4 is a budget gun with lots of features. *Bass Pro Shops*

**BUY NOW**

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A recent member in the family of Browning/Winchester semiautos spawned by the Browning Gold back in the 90s, the X4 is made to be a budget gun, but it still comes packed with features. A redesign of the X3, it features a larger square safety, as well as a larger bolt handle and bolt release button for easier use in cold weather. It has a bright, TruGlo bead, too, for those who like them. Inside, it has the same excellent, reliable, easy-to-maintain, soft-shooting gas system of the Gold/X2/X3 family. The 3-inch, 12-gauge, black-synthetic model can be had for as low as \$800, and a 3 ½ inch version is about \$100 more.

#### 8. Remington V3



The Remington V3 can be had for right around \$800. *Bass Pro Shops*

**BUY NOW**

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Remington's V3 uses the ingeniously simple VersaPort system, which was developed for the 3½-inch VersaMax so it could shoot everything from the lightest to the heaviest loads with reliability and low recoil. Not all gas guns can make that claim, even models that cost much more than the humble V3. It's not a good-looking gun, but it is loaded with inner beauty. It's lightweight, has a great trigger, and it's very easy to maintain. I have hunted and shot with a few, including the one I own, and they have all been perfect, even in extreme cold. Available in 12 gauge only, you can find them new for around \$800. **Update:** As with the 870 Express above, it's not clear if Remington's new owner will continue to produce the V3, but it is still offered new by some retailers.

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## Best Budget Shotguns Over \$1,000

#### 9. Beretta A400 Xcel



The excellent Beretta A400 Xcel is known as the 'blue gun.' *Bass Pro Shops*

**BUY NOW**

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Beretta's A400 Xcel is practically the only semiauto you'll see in the hands of serious sporting clays shooters. Known as the "blue gun," it's somewhat pricey for a semiauto at over \$1,500 (a little more with the highly worthwhile Kick-Off recoil reducer). On the other hand, it can go head to head with the far more expensive (up to \$12K) Krieghoff, Kolar, Perazzi, and Beretta O/Us in top-level sporting competition. And that makes it a real bargain. Diane Sorantino, who is a dominant shooter in women's events, will shoot nothing else. Berettas are famous for working practically forever without cleaning (not that you wouldn't, but you could) and rarely malfunctioning. They are a snap to maintain when you do have to take them apart, too. With 3-inch chambers, the Xcel could double as a duck or dove gun, although the blue receiver might offend gamebirds.

#### 10. Browning Cynergy CX



The Browning Cynergy CX is a great choice for targets and hunting. *Bass Pro Shops*

#### **BUY NOW**

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Originally intended to replace the venerable Citori O/U, the Cynergy is a futuristically styled ugly duckling that never caught on as it should have. It's an excellent design, with a very low-profile receiver and an action built to last practically forever and a very crisp mechanical trigger. Repositioned in the market as a lower-priced alternative to the Citori, it comes in target and field versions in 12, 20, 28, and .410 for around \$1,900. But the real bargain in the Cynergy lineup is the CX field-and-target model, which comes in 12 gauge with 30 or 32 inch barrels. Choose 32 inch for targets, or 30 if you want a gun for targets and hunting, and you'll never look back. Yes, the matte finish is cheap and shows any ding as a white scar, but the CX can be found for only \$1,600, and it will see you through summer targets, September doves, and fall waterfowl seasons.

#### **Bonus Bargain Shotgun: Beretta SL3**



Even at \$25,000, the Beretta SL3 is a lot of gun for the money. *Beretta*

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For a certain class of people—say, about 1% of us—the Beretta SL3, with its \$25,000 price tag, is in fact a

bargain. In the world of premium O/Us, where guns cost as much as modest homes, the SL3 sells for comparative peanuts. Despite its good looks, it's made to be a serious hunting gun, too, designed and built to endure the high round count of those who travel the world shooting driven pheasants and Argentine doves. The SL3 features a new action that makes it a very low-profile, natural pointer, as I found out when I shot it last spring in Italy. Made in equal parts by high-tech machines and old-world craftspeople, the SL3 takes a month to build, even with the aid of sophisticated robot labor. It comes in a beautiful leather case hand-made right there at the Beretta factory.

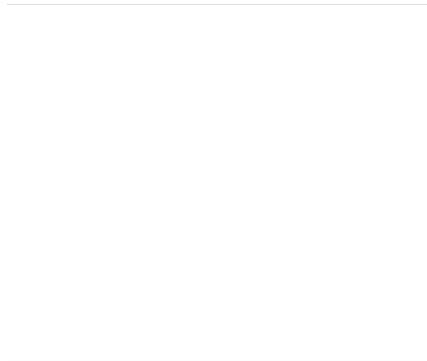
## 6 Tips on How to Sell a Used Gun

“Never sell a gun” some sage told me years ago. While it seemed like sound advice at the time, it's not practical. Guns pile up. You have to thin the herd occasionally. Sometimes you need money right away for emergencies, other times you want to make room for something new. There are several ways to sell a gun, from taking it to a gun store or pawn shop to auctions and private sales.

### 1. How to Gauge the Value of Your Gun

[The Blue Book of Gun Values](#) is updated annually. It's the standard on which most buyers and sellers rely. You can also search online auction sites to see how much guns like yours have sold for.

### 2. How to Sell Your Rifle or to a Gun Store



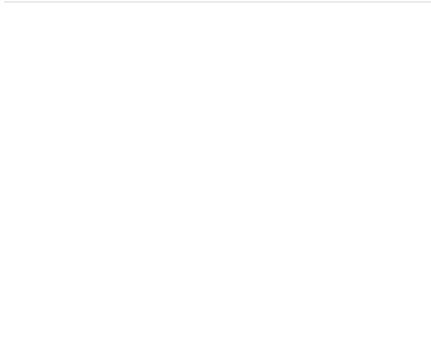
If you sell a gun to gun shop, you get money right away—but you might receive only half the gun's value or even less. Stores have overhead, and they can't give you the full value of the gun if they want to make any money on the resale. Scopes and other accessories rarely add much to the price of a gun. If you think you might need them in the future, take them off and sell the gun by itself.

You'll generally get a better deal if you trade the gun toward something at the shop that you want. If you need money right away, sell the gun, take your lumps graciously on the price, and walk out the door with cash in hand.

### 3. How to Sell a Gun on Consignment

Ask if your gun shop sells on consignment. They'll work with you to set the price, display the gun, sell it, and take a commission when the gun sells. Some guns go right away, while I've seen others sit on the rack for a year or more until someone meets the seller's price.

### 4. How to Sell a Firearm on Gunbroker



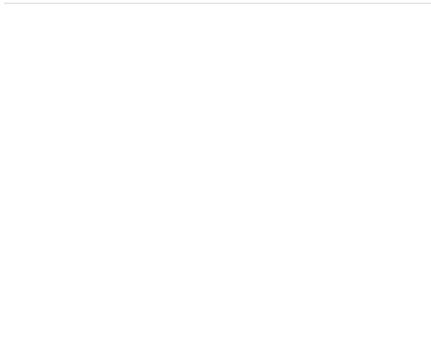
You'll reach the widest possible market if you sell online through [Gunbroker.com](https://www.gunbroker.com) or a similar site. Take lots of pictures, including pictures of any scratches, dents, and dings, and be scrupulously honest in your descriptions of the gun to minimize the chance of returns. You'll be responsible for shipping the gun, and the auction site will take a commission when the gun sells.

### 5. How to Sell a Gun Privately

Private sales (where legal; see below) will get you the most money for your gun. Ideally, you'll sell it to a friend who wants it, and you're done with no hassle. Failing that, advertise the gun locally – the bulletin boards at shooting ranges are good places – and sell it. Only ask top dollar if you're willing to wait a long time for your money. Again, let the Blue Book be your guide.

### 6. How to Sell a Gun Legally

Be sure you know your state's laws. A growing number of states require private sales to be conducted through a Federal Firearms License (FFL) holder that can perform background checks. Laws for selling handguns are often stricter than laws governing long gun sales. Be careful and know the law.



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## DEALER RECORD OF SALE TRANSACTIONS

The following chart shows the total number of transactions processed by DOJ between 1972 and 2018.



### NOTES

**1972-1990:** Figures represent handguns only; legislation requiring eligibility check on long gun purchasers and expanded prohibiting categories effective January 1, 1991.

**1972-1974:** DOJ was required to notify dealers and law enforcement of prohibited firearm purchasers, but was unable to stop delivery because the waiting period was limited to 5 days.

**1975-1997:** 15-day waiting period in place.

**1997-present:** 10-day waiting period in place.

**2000:** Limit handgun purchases to 1 in a 30-day period.

**2014:** DOJ retains long gun information.

# DEALER RECORD OF SALE

(Calendar Year Statistics)

Year	Handguns	Handgun Denials
1972	190,335	
1973	192,108	
1974	234,691	
1975	231,916	
1976	204,658	
1977	225,412	
1978	258,485	
1979	268,447	
1980	325,041	
1981	371,160	
1982	311,870	1,008
1983	268,462	1,148
1984	275,882	1,349
1985	293,624	1,413
1986	266,480	1,515
1987	273,628	1,702
1988	291,171	1,803
1989	333,069	1,793
1990	330,295	2,437

Year	Handguns	Handgun Denials	Long guns	Long gun Denials	All Guns	Total Denials
1991	329,133	3,934	160,300	1,925	489,433	5,859
1992	382,122	4,037	177,486	1,726	559,608	5,763
1993	433,822	4,605	208,375	1,904	642,197	6,509
1994	382,085	3,862	217,587	2,564	599,672	6,426
1995	254,626	2,534	157,042	1,672	411,668	4,206
1996	215,804	2,111	138,068	1,531	353,872	3,642
1997	204,409	1,839	150,727	1,615	355,136	3,454
1998	189,481	1,721	153,059	1,596	342,540	3,317
1999	244,569	2,233	268,849	2,546	513,418	4,779
2000	201,865	1,572	184,345	1,903	386,210	3,475
2001	155,203	1,449	198,519	2,158	353,722	3,607
2002	169,469	1,661	182,956	2,172	352,425	3,833
2003	126,233	1,254	164,143	1,774	290,376	3,028
2004	145,335	1,497	169,730	1,828	315,065	3,325
2005	160,990	1,592	183,857	1,878	344,847	3,470
2006	169,629	2,045	205,944	1,689	375,573	3,734
2007	180,190	2,373	190,438	1,926	370,628	4,299
2008	208,312	2,737	216,932	2,201	425,244	4,938
2009	228,368	2,916	255,504	2,221	483,872	5,137
2010	236,086	2,740	262,859	2,286	498,945	5,026
2011	293,429	3,094	307,814	2,767	601,243	5,861
2012	388,006	3,842	429,732	3,682	817,738	7,524
2013	422,030	3,813	538,149	3,680	960,179	7,493
2014	512,174	4,272	418,863	4,297	931,037	8,569
2015	483,372	5,417	697,231	4,252	880,603	9,669
2016	572,644	6,172	758,678	6,149	1,331,322	12,321
2017	522,984	4,264	359,601	2,570	882,585	6,834
2018	441,761	3,714	357,159	2,347	798,920	6,061

## San Francisco Chronicle

### Gun sales have surged during the pandemic, up 500% for one Bay Area store

Michael Cabanatuan

Oct. 23, 2020

Bethtina Woodridge walked out of a Martinez sporting goods store Wednesday morning holding something increasingly popular in the Bay Area — and around California. The small, rectangular black box held a Glock 19, a pistol to accompany the pair of shotguns she and her wife bought in September.

Like most of the dozen customers at that hour who strolled in and out of Canyon Sports — a gun store inside a warehouse — Woodridge said she was buying the firearms for protection during what has become for many an unnerving period in modern American life.

As the pandemic sows misery and desperation, as social unrest grips the nation and on the cusp of a divisive, frantic presidential election, an increasing number of Californians appear to be assuaging a sense of insecurity by buying guns, research suggests.

“They’re for home defense,” Woodridge said. “Things are getting crazy, and they may be getting crazier.”

Woodridge, 44, who lives in Oakland, said break-ins and holdups at people’s homes are her biggest concern and that she worries about being able to protect her wife and son.

“With COVID and people getting more desperate all the time, we started to get ready,” she said.

So have an increasing number of Californians, according to a recent report from UC Davis School of Medicine researchers, who looked at the impact of the coronavirus crisis on firearm purchases, reasons for buying guns and how new gun owners store their weapons.

Their analysis found that an estimated 110,000 Californians have purchased firearms because of the pandemic and that nearly half — 47,000 — are new gun owners. Many said the pandemic increased their concerns they’d become victims of violence.

It also found that 55,000 gun owners prefer to keep them at the ready, not locked in a gun safe or other secure location as recommended by safety experts.

In the parking lot of Canyon Sports, Matt Johnson of Pinole said he bought his first pistol because “It’s been a bad year all around. I think everybody’s nervous about what may happen with protests and voting and such. I think it’s more people being cautious than being scared.”

Surveys of nearly 3,000 Californians by the researchers suggested “worry about multiple types of violence ... increased during the pandemic,” according to the report.

“Conditions that contribute to violence — poverty, unemployment, lack of available resources, isolation, hopelessness, and loss — have intensified and are further compounded by the recent surge in firearm sales, which is itself a risk factor for firearm-related harm,” the report said.

Bay Area gun store owners and employees interviewed by The Chronicle confirmed that gun sales are booming — up as much as 500%, according to Todd Richardson of Richardson Tactical in Hayward.

“Comparing year over year sales, it feels like it’s Christmas all year. That’s how much demand there is for firearms,” said Jeff, an employee at Elite Armory in Castro Valley. He declined to give his last name.

Demand is up so much, others said, that many display racks and stockrooms are empty, especially of handguns and shotguns, the most popular weapons for home defense. Manufacturing troubles, some pandemic-related, may be contributing to the shortage, some retailers said.

Ammunition also is in short supply.

“We haven’t seen any of the most common calibers in months,” Jeff said.

Several other gun dealers confirmed that sales are up significantly. Several recorded outgoing voice mail messages saying they had too much business to pick up the phone or return calls.

An estimated 4.2 million Californians own guns — around 14% of adults in the state, according to a 2018 analysis. They collectively possess an estimated 19.9 million firearms, about half of which are owned by 10% of all gun owners in the state.

Another firearms study, by the Pew Research Center, found that 40% of Americans personally knew someone who had been shot.

The UC Davis report found concern over “lawlessness” drove almost 76% of those who bought new firearms.

Other reasons included prisoner releases, the government “going too far,” the government collapsing and gun stores closing.

So many new gun owners are seeking practice at Bay Area gun ranges, where pandemic safety regulations are in effect, that long lines are not uncommon. Most firing ranges now limit shooters to every other position on a range to maintain social distance.

Gun sellers said the increase in purchases started just before the coronavirus shutdown in March and picked back up when stores were allowed to reopen in the spring. Most buyers, especially first-timers, cite personal defense of their homes and family as the reason.

“I think people are scared,” Richardson said. “With all the civil unrest and crap going on, you have to be able to defend yourself. And you still have a right to own weapons to defend yourself under the Second Amendment.”

Inside Canyon Sports, the walls are covered with taxidermied hunting trophies, most of them deer, as well as a big blue “Trump 2020” sign. That dismayed Woodridge, who considers herself a liberal and believes in the Second Amendment.

“I would like to buy from a store than has similar political values as mine,” she said. “But there are not a lot of choices. I have to reluctantly buy from places that have Trump signs.”

Still, Woodridge said, protecting herself and her family is paramount.

“I believe people have the right to buy guns and protect themselves,” she said.

*San Francisco Chronicle staff writer Steve Rubenstein contributed to this report.*

*A quote regarding sales at the Old West Gun Shop was misattributed to the owner of the store. The quote was said by an employee of the store and has been removed.*

# FACTANK

## NEWS IN THE NUMBERS

MAY 9, 2013

# Why Own a Gun? Protection Is Now Top Reason

BY [SARA KEHAULANI GOO](#)

The vast majority of gun owners say that having a gun makes them feel safer. And far more today than in 1999 cite protection – rather than hunting or other activities – as the main reason they own guns.

A Pew Research Center survey conducted in February found that nearly half of gun owners (48%) volunteer that the main reason they own a gun is for protection; just 32% say they have a gun primarily for hunting and even fewer cite other reasons, such as target shooting. That's 22 percentage points higher than 1999 when 26% cited protection as the biggest factor and 49% said they owned a gun mostly for hunting.

### Why Do You Own a Gun?

	Aug 1999	Feb 2013	Change
<i>Among gun owners</i>	%	%	
Protection	26	48	+22
Hunting	49	32	-17
Target/sport shooting	8	7	-1
Constitutional right/ 2 <sup>nd</sup> amendment	4	2	-2
Collect guns/Hobby	4	2	-2
Other	10	7	-3
Don't know	—	1	
	100	100	

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Feb. 13-18, 2013. Based on those who personally own a gun. August 1999 data from ABC News/Washington Post. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

About a quarter of Americans (24%) say they personally own a gun, rifle or pistol; another 13% say another person in their household has a gun. A large percentage of gun owners

(79%) say having a gun makes them feel safer. At the same time, nearly as many (78%) say that owning a gun is something they enjoy.

Most Americans (57%) say they do not have a gun in their household. Most of the non-gun owners (58%) say that they would be uncomfortable having a gun in 3-12-13 #3their homes; 40% say they would be comfortable having a gun. [Read more](#)

[Sara Kehaulani Goo](#) is a former senior digital editor at Pew Research Center.

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# America's Rifle: Rise Of The AR-15

By Dan Haar  
March 9, 2013  
Hartford Courant

When his son turned 14 a year ago, Jonathan Hardy bought the teen a gift that was both a coming-of-age badge and a hot item: an AR-15 rifle.

To Hardy, the matte-black weapon is not a dangerous assault rifle. His son's model shoots the same small, low-powered bullets used by youths for decades.

The allure of the AR-15 — the main gun used by the killer in Newtown — has nothing to do with the rifle's firepower, as far as Hardy is concerned. Rather, it's the gun's modular design, light weight, ease of use, low recoil and extraordinary flexibility that draws him in.

"It's the perfect rifle," said Hardy, a [New Britain](#) resident and certified firearms instructor who is active in the debate over gun control. "It can grow with him as he grows. ... As his needs change, it can change."

Hardy can convert it to the more powerful rounds that have made the AR-15 famous, with the same bullets as the military version, the M-16. Or it can shoot even larger rounds of the sort used by deer hunters.

"If you get a new barrel, essentially you've got a new rifle," Hardy said.

Anyone who thinks Hardy is an extremist, far from the mainstream, should wake up. The AR-15, which isn't a brand but rather a generic design, accounts for an estimated 60 percent of all civilian rifle sales in the United States and perhaps a quarter of all firearms sold, according to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, an industry group based in Newtown.

It's made by dozens of manufacturers.

The story of how the AR-15 reached the pinnacle of the firearms world winds through decades of twists and turns with events that support arguments on both sides of the debate about whether to ban it.

The AR-15 was invented as a replacement for the World War II-era M-1, and was developed and industrialized by Colt Firearms in [Hartford](#) in the 1960s, largely as the M-16 military rifle in the early years.

Today, the AR-15 is so popular, with estimates of as many as 5 million in private hands, that its advocates say a ban would do little to keep it from the grasp of determined evil-doers. Opponents can't refute that; they say a ban is a first step, worthwhile if it saves even one life. Although

partial bans have been in place or years in some places, including Connecticut, the latest proposals here and some other states could ban it outright.

Everyone agrees that when it comes to rifles, the AR-15 is the "it" gun. But there's less agreement on how that happened, and what it says about our society. Opponents say the firearms industry foisted the gun on the public using ads laden with military words and images.

In fact, a close look at the rise of the AR-15 shows that marketing was just one of many factors, and probably not the biggest one.

The AR-15 has brought to the firearms world what the smartphone delivered to electronics and the single-lens-reflex camera offered for photography: maximum usability in an affordable package that's easy to upgrade and, most important, plays into the culture of its customers. Not only can Jonathan Hardy give one to his teenager, his disabled mother can shoot one as well, and does.

"It's America's rifle," said Christopher Bartocci, a former Colt's employee who wrote "Black Rifle II," the second volume of a two-book, illustrated history of the AR-15/M-16. "It's as American as anything there is — apple pie and football."

It's true that some firms have marketed it using the icons of war and tactical defense, but many have not, because they appeal to hunters, target-shooters and an evolving American way of thinking that has fueled demand for a gun that sells itself.

It was 50 years ago, in 1963, that Colt Firearms sought and later got federal permission to modify its automatic AR-15 for sale to civilians as a semi-automatic rifle. Since then, especially with an explosion in the last 10 years, the weapon has gained popularity in a sweep of events that reads like a cultural history of the last half-century — because that's what it is.

The rifle first became familiar during the Vietnam War, through grainy, televised images of the M-16 (the military version of the AR-15) in the jungles of Southeast Asia. That was followed by a string of high-profile incidents and movies such as "Rambo" in the 1980s; an end to imports of the Uzi and the AK-47 in 1989 and a partial federal ban on semi-automatic firearms in 1994; the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with returning servicemen eager to have their own versions of the rifles they carried; the rise of realistic video games and a target-shooting sport called "three-gun competition"; and, finally, the election of President Barack Obama, coinciding with an anti-government movement of gun-rights advocates convinced they must be ready to defend themselves.

Those cultural tides raised the AR-15's popularity, as did gun control debates. The greater the threat to its existence, the more the gun sold. Gun manufacturers were not surprised that demand has spiked since the Newtown tragedy. Some models are selling for many times their pre-Dec. 14 prices — if buyers can find them at all.

Opponents say marketers have played into an aggressive, menacing image of rifle owners, far from the former hunting-driven gun sales.

"That reality is that the gun industry is not today — if it ever was — a 'sporting' industry. It is a highly militarized and increasingly cynical industry that has cast all restraint aside to generate profit from military-style firearms," the Violence Policy Center said in a 2011 report titled "The Militarization of the U.S. Civilian Firearms Market."

But to hear enthusiasts like Hardy, the star in the AR-15 story is the gun itself. And no one can deny that it is a triumph of engineering. Improvements, many of them designed at Connecticut's Colt factories, have led to an ever-refined weapon, copied and advanced by upstart companies from Maine to California.

Those firms, including Bushmaster, one of the two largest AR-15 makers and the brand used by the shooter in Newtown, have offered a dizzying array of interchangeable accessories including scopes and collapsible stocks. Colt's Manufacturing Co., as the firm is now known, has a model in pink camouflage, called the "Muddy Girl."

And prices have fallen or stayed flat thanks to a revolution in manufacturing technology that happened to coincide with the early rise in popularity of the AR-15 and, more recently, growing competition.

In Connecticut, Stag Arms set up shop 10 years ago in New Britain, pioneering left-handed AR-15s, and now employs nearly 200 people. Historic gun-makers Sturm, Ruger & Co., based in [Fairfield](#), O.F. Mossberg & Sons of North Haven, Remington Arms, formerly of Bridgeport and Smith & Wesson of Springfield have all started making versions of the AR-15 since 2008.

"We simply responded to customer demand," said Joe Bartozzi, vice president and general counsel at Mossberg, which added a line of AR-15's to its more traditional hunting rifle offerings a year ago.

The industry certainly wants to advance the idea that the AR-15 is heir to a tradition of popular guns first designed for military use, icons like the Winchester 1872 and the Colt Peacemaker.

And, more deeply, it's part of a history of firepower in the hands of American citizens, said Richard Slotkin, a cultural historian and retired Wesleyan University professor of American studies.

The tradition stems from the nation's foundation on individual freedom and from the expectation that violence will happen — sometimes justified, sometimes not.

"In a sense it goes back to the handgun," Slotkin said. "We lived in a violent society for a long time."

Between the Civil War and the New Deal, Slotkin said, we saw the development of automatic weapons and vast production of firearms at a time when there was no gun control, amid the rise of goon squads against labor, urban gangs and other dangers. Upheaval in the '60s and the drug wars of the '80s only added to that, and the current movement of anti-government fervor feeds on it, blending extremist views with a rational desire for personal defense.

"The irrational appeal works because at some points it connects to something which isn't irrational," Slotkin said.

It also draws appeal simply as a device.

"We want to have the latest, the greatest, the biggest, the baddest," said Gary Lenk, a retired [West Hartford](#) detective who repairs firearms and has followed the rise of the AR-15 for decades. "The AR-15 is like Legos for grownups because you can adapt them for different calibers, different barrel stocks, with just a few simple tools."

## **From Airplanes To Rifles**

There are two myths surrounding the AR-15, both of which feed controversy about it, both wrong — or at least partly wrong. The first is that it's among the most powerful weapons on the market. The second is that it was an overnight success in the gun world, embraced by [the Pentagon](#) and pushed early and often by its makers onto a compliant public.

Yes, the AR-15 is one of the most efficient killing machines ever devised because it's easy to use. Weighing between 6.5 and 8.5 pounds, it delivers semi-automatic firing —meaning a bullet loads after each pull of the trigger, driven by a gas pressure system. The military versions, the M-16 and the shorter M-4, both developed by Colt's, are "selective fire," meaning they can switch to automatic, machine-gun mode, which is banned for almost all civilian use.

The AR-15 was born after the Army put out a call for an all-purpose weapon that infantrymen could carry for weeks at a time with minimal maintenance, firing at targets from long distances, short distances and in between. But it is less powerful and uses a smaller round than most hunting rifles; more to the point, it's less powerful than the rifles it competed against to succeed the venerable M-1 after World War II.

And the gun had a rocky early history — rejected for years by the Army, not viewed as an especially marketable civilian firearm for decades.

During and after the Vietnam War, when the M-16 was the standard-issue rifle, "The perception in the gun-buying public at that time was that the caliber and the rifle were relatively useless," said an engineer who worked at Colt. It was derisively called "the mouse gun" or a "poodle-shooter."

The AR-15 was born in the 1950s, at a startup company called ArmaLite, which gave the gun its AR name. The business was formed in California by Fairchild Engine and Airplane Corp., and deployed three new ideas: lighter materials that are used in aerospace; a smaller, high-velocity bullet developed by Remington Arms in Connecticut; and parts that could be swapped to modify the gun.

Designer Eugene Stoner and his team were outsiders competing against the Connecticut Valley establishment, as told in the book, "Black Rifle," the first volume of the history, by R. Blake Stevens and Edward C. Ezell.

Stoner's team built a version just over 6 pounds, dubbed the AR-15. The bullet would become the famous .223, still made by Remington. The AR-15 performed well in Army tests but lost out to the more traditional design that was designated the M-14.

Soon after, the AR-15 design was sold to Colt's Patent Fire Arms Manufacturing Co., the historic Hartford gun maker that was, according to "Black Rifle," near bankruptcy and looking for a new product.

Less than a year later, in September 1959, Colt's sold its first order, 25 rifles to Malaya. Eventually, the gun drew keen interest from an Air Force general who used it to shoot at watermelons during a [July 4th](#) party in 1960, Stevens and Ezell wrote. But that bit of momentum died when there was a change in company leadership and project managers were fired.

It was not the last time that executive turmoil at Colt's would bend the history of the AR-15.

Colt Firearms, as the company had become known, regained its footing and aggressively marketed the AR-15 to the military as a low-maintenance, modular system. It paid off. The Air Force became the first U.S. military buyer in 1962. The Army followed suit, and after positive reviews in Vietnam, ramped up orders despite some jamming of ammunition that was later fixed.

By the height of the war, Colt was making a staggering 50,000 of the guns a month under the famous blue Onion Dome in Hartford.

### **Taxpayers Rescue The Gun**

Civilian versions of the AR-15, with the pleasant-sounding name "The Sporter," were available almost from the start. In fact, Colt rolled out the Sporter in January 1964, even before its first M-16 delivery to the Army.

But it would be decades before sales of Sporters and copycat brands would take off. A cultural revolution had to happen first, and it would take nearly 30 years.

The best time and place from which to examine the fate of the AR-15 is the morning of March 28, 1990, at the historic Colt armory in Hartford. On that day, Colt ended a bitter, four-year strike by [United Auto Workers](#) employees with a triumphant parade back into the factory.

The company was reeling not only from the strike, but also from the loss of the Army M-16 contract two years earlier. Some hoped the AR-15 Sporter might put Colt back in the game. At the very least it was part of the company's rebuilding strategy, a plan that didn't come cheaply.

To end the strike and save 1,200 jobs, the state had brokered a deal. Colt Firearms, part of a sprawling parent company called Colt Industries that would be reborn as Colt's Manufacturing Co., would be owned by the union, managers, private investors and the state itself — which kicked in \$25 million from the public employees' pension fund.

The new Colt was in position to benefit from large-scale, commercial sales of the Sporter. Not only was the strike over, but a year earlier, a school shooting in Stockton, Calif., had led to a ban on imports of AK-47s and other military-style weapons.

Colt voluntarily suspended sales of the Sporter to the public after the Stockton shooting, and that created an angry backlash from some in the gun world. Other companies, including Smith & Wesson, would feel the same pressure over the next decade: Appear to compromise, and pay the price.

The new Colt quickly introduced the Sporter with several variations — ensuring that taxpayer money was being used to help sell military-style weapons to the public. Francisco Borges, then the state treasurer, didn't like the idea, but went along to protect the company's 1,200 jobs.

"I used to fight with Frank," recalled Tony Autorino, the Wethersfield investor and former United Technologies Corp. executive who led the complex deal creating the new Colt. "He would say 'Well geez, what are we doing? We're making [guns],' and I would say 'Frank, it's a *gun* company.'"

Civilian sales were not huge, but they were growing. In 1990, Colt Firearms didn't even see the need to patent it, a decision some in the company would later regret.

"Colt corporate management decided for a period of 10 years that patents weren't worth taking out," said the retired company engineer, who asked for anonymity. "And it was a big mistake."

That year, 1990, Colt's Manufacturing Co. made 36,000 AR-15s that were not for export or military use. All other companies combined made about the same number, according to federal records and surveys by the National Shooting Sports Foundation.

Colt's needed to ramp up to save itself. Sales of the AR-15 were there for the taking. Military-style weapons had burst into the public consciousness in movies, including the Rambo series, TV's "Miami Vice," increasingly violent computer games and images from U.S. invasion of Iraq in Desert Storm.

And the gun itself was now more accurate and more reliable. The U.S. Marines, using Colt's new version (the M-16 A2), started to compete in civilian target-shooting events.

"Within nine months of the first production of the M-16 A2 in '83, there were at least three companies making components that copied the design," the former engineer said. "The older generation of people, who didn't believe anything was really a gun unless it was made of steel and walnut, started to disappear, and they were replaced by younger people. ... Someone would buy one of these, bring it to the range and say 'This thing really works well.'"

Colt's dominated the market for the next several years, with AR-15 production rising to 48,000 in 1995. But many, perhaps most, of those guns were sold to law enforcement agencies, not civilians. Any hope of capturing a future market was thwarted by the company's 1992 bankruptcy and reorganization two years later.

Ultimately, the Sporter simply wasn't a priority. "We were so used to dealing with the military and police with that type of weapon, that a lot of the Colt people didn't think of it" as a potential blockbuster, said a former longtime Colt's executive.

"The problem was we needed to retool and regroup the company," Autorino said, "and the Sporter was, quite frankly, almost a pain."

It was a "pain" not only because of the military-style weapons controversy in Congress and state legislatures. With so many parts interchangeable, gun enthusiasts would devise and sell kits for converting the Sporter into a machine gun, illegally. That angered the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and led to an expensive "cat-and-mouse game," according to the former engineer.

"We would find out about it and we would design something to prevent it from happening," then people would find a way around the design, he said.

The federal ban on semi-automatic, military-style "assault weapons" from 1994 to 2004 stoked demand like nothing else, and other companies stepped up with redesigned versions that met the strict, new definition of allowable rifles. Several states, including Connecticut, have kept the ban in place, forcing manufacturers to assemble separate "Connecticut versions" of the AR-15.

Connecticut adopted a ban in 1993 and Colt's fought hard to stop it, then as now saying it would be ineffective, then as now saying hundreds of jobs could be at stake. and at the state Capitol, the leaders included then-state Reps. Martin Looney and Mike Lawlor — who are still leading the charge today, Looney as senate majority leader, Lawlor as the governor's chief of criminal justice.

Colt's, however, had a new plan for the AR-15, far bigger than chasing sales to civilians: The M-4 carbine, a shorter variant of the AR-15, designed for urban warfare, became the version all the other companies copied. Colt's never stopped selling Sporters to the public, but it would be up to other companies to lead the revolution.

And with the M-4 becoming the Pentagon's weapon of choice in Iraq and Afghanistan, the historic Hartford company, now moved to West Hartford, had done its part to make the AR-15 the firearm that would capture a generation of shooters.

### **'This Product Sells Itself'**

Just as the rifle is a product of the American inventive spirit, the explosive growth in popularity of AR-15s over the past several years has resulted from American free enterprise as dozens of companies, from startups to old-line firms like Smith & Wesson, have jumped in to sell it.

Some, including Mossberg in North Haven, which just launched an AR-15 line last year, emphasize hunting.

Others, including DPMS Panther Arms in Minnesota, use military imagery and culture to sell "tactical rifles." DPMS proudly declares that its workforce is 50 percent veterans. That's no small point, as the vanguard of the sales explosion of the 2000s has been returning servicemen who shot the weapon in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Chris Fields, a former Special Ops and private security engineer in both wars, bought a carbine version of the AR-15 when he returned to North Carolina after serving two tours of duty. He later served three more tours and moved to Connecticut, where his wife is from.

"I bought it because I was comfortable with it," said Fields, who founded and runs the King 33 firearms training center in Southington. That natural transition is especially true of veterans with longer years of service, he said, and they are the core of a new breed of target shooters at the ranges.

Why didn't it happen after Vietnam?

"Think about the Vietnam War and the mentality of the general public, being anti-war and anti gun," said the former Colt executive, who was with the company in that era. "Now, it's not so politically incorrect to be a shooter...I can remember the late '60s and the '70s, even people who hunted were given a big rap. You were supposed to have a peace symbol and smoke pot. You didn't carry a gun."

"It all goes in cycles and waves," said the former executive, who spoke on condition that his name not be used.

In this cycle, the AR-15 is called the "modern sporting rifle" by the industry, obviously trying to soften the image, and it's called an "assault rifle" by opponents, though that word is more correctly used to refer to fully automatic military weapons.

Sales figures for AR-15-type rifles are not available publicly because the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives is not allowed to give them out. But figures from NSSF, the industry group, show that a record 748,000 were made in the United States and not exported in 2012, following a trend of high volumes since 2008, when the figure jumped from 285,000 to nearly a half-million.

Three Connecticut companies made nearly 200,000 AR-15s last year at local factories, between them: Colt's (and its affiliated company in West Hartford, Colt Defense LLC), Stag Arms and Mossberg. Another maker, Sturm, Ruger & Co., is based in Fairfield but makes the gun elsewhere, and Smith & Wesson makes an undisclosed number in Springfield.

Critics say military-style, semi-automatic weapons are driving sales in an industry that otherwise faces decline.

"It was the last shiny thing that they could sell to an aging group of gun buyers," said Josh Sugarmann, executive director of the Violence Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

The trend, Sugarmann said, is toward fewer people owning more guns, with demographic and cultural changes such as the urbanization and suburbanization of the population, the rise of households headed by single women and the shrinking of the armed services all leading to a decline in hunting. That, he said, has forced gun-makers to change the way they sell.

"They're expert at promoting and feeding the paranoia that's fueling the gun sales," Sugarmann said. "The long-term issues they face, they're basically insurmountable."

The industry does not agree. Hunting licenses were up 9 percent last year, said Bartozzi, the Mossberg vice president. And Sugarmann's view does not account for the rise of target shooting as a sport. For whatever reason, last year saw a 26 percent increase in U.S. AR-15 production, and that was before the post-Newtown frenzy spurred by new ban proposals.

At Colt's, which contracts with Colt Defense to make the AR-15 in a jointly operated plant, civilian-version AR-15 sales were less than 10,000 in 2011, then catapulted to 100,000 in 2012 after the company retooled its factory and its product line with the slowdown of M-4 sales to the military.

"This product sells itself," said Dennis Veilleux, who recently became CEO of Colt's. "Since we've been involved in the commercial market, we haven't had to sell it. It's been a pull."

How and whether Newtown's aftermath affects long-term sales of the AR-15 remains to be seen. Stag Arms owner Mark Malkowski, Veilleux and others in the industry will not speculate on the effect of possible legislation on sales.

"I did listen really closely to everything that was being said and I did reflect really deeply on my role in firearms manufacture...in the community," said Veilleux, who has two school-age children. "At the end of that reflection I feel confident that what I'm doing is not contributing to making this place less safe."

And at the center of it all is the AR-15 itself, which is as much a product of technology and innovation as culture and marketing.

"Semi-automatics have been around since the turn of the 19th century," said Gary Lenk, the retired West Hartford detective. The AR-15, he said, "is an extremely competent package, and when people find something that works well, they tend to gravitate toward it."

"Nothing evil — it's just a firearm that works."



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-Eric Hung & Jacki Billings, Editors

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### **Colt LE6920 AR-15**

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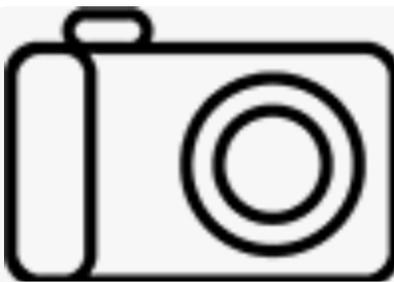
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Fall 1995

## Armed Resistance to Crime: The Prevalence and Nature of Self-Defense with a Gun

Gary Kleck

Marc Gertz

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# ARMED RESISTANCE TO CRIME: THE PREVALENCE AND NATURE OF SELF- DEFENSE WITH A GUN\*

GARY KLECK  
MARC GERTZ

## I. INTRODUCTION

Crime victims used to be ignored by criminologists. Then, beginning slowly in the 1940s and more rapidly in the 1970s, interest in the victim's role in crime grew. Yet a tendency to treat the victim as either a passive target of another person's wrongdoing or as a virtual accomplice of the criminal limited this interest. The concept of the victim-precipitated homicide<sup>1</sup> highlighted the possibility that victims were not always blameless and passive targets, but that they sometimes initiated or contributed to the escalation of a violent interaction through their own actions, which they often claimed were defensive.

Perhaps due to an unduly narrow focus on lower-class male-on-male violence, scholars have shown little openness to the possibility that a good deal of "defensive" violence by persons claiming the moral status of a victim may be just that. Thus, many scholars routinely assumed that a large share of violent interactions are "mutual combat" involving two blameworthy parties who each may be regarded as both offender and victim. The notion that much violence is one-sided and that many victims of violence are largely blameless is dismissed as naive.

A few criminologists have rejected the simplistic mutual combat model of violence, though they sometimes limit its rejection to a few special subtypes of violence, especially family violence, rape, and, more generally, violence of men against women and of adults against

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\* The authors wish to thank David Bordua, Gary Mauser, Seymour Sudman, and James Wright for their help in designing the survey instrument. The authors also wish to thank the highly skilled staff responsible for the interviewing: Michael Trapp (Supervisor), David Antonacci, James Belcher, Robert Bunting, Melissa Cross, Sandy Hawker, Dana R. Jones, Harvey Langford, Jr., Susannah R. Maher, Nia Mastin-Walker, Brian Murray, Miranda Ross, Dale Sellers, Esty Zervigon, and for sampling work, Sandy Grguric.

<sup>1</sup> MARVIN E. WOLFGANG, *PATTERNS IN CRIMINAL HOMICIDE* 245 (1958).

children.<sup>2</sup> However, the more one looks, the more exceptions become evident, such as felony killings linked with robberies, burglaries, or sexual assaults, contract killings, mass killings, serial murders, and homicides where the violence is one-sided. Indeed, it may be more accurate to see the mutual combat common among lower-class males to be the exception rather than the rule. If this is so, then forceful actions taken by victims are easier to see as genuinely and largely defensive.

Once one turns to defensive actions taken by the victims of property crimes, it is even easier to take this view. There are few robberies, burglaries, larcenies, or auto thefts where it is hard to distinguish offender from victim or to identify one of the parties as the clear initiator of a criminal action and another party as a relatively legitimate responder to those initiatives. The traditional conceptualization of victims as either passive targets or active collaborators overlooks another possible victim role, that of the active resister who does not initiate or accelerate any illegitimate activity, but uses various means of resistance for legitimate purposes, such as avoiding injury or property loss.

Victim resistance can be passive or verbal, but much of it is active and forceful. Potentially, the most consequential form of forceful resistance is armed resistance, especially resistance with a gun. This form of resistance is worthy of special attention for many reasons, both policy-related and scientific. The policy-related reasons are obvious: if self-protection with a gun is commonplace, it means that any form of gun control that disarms large numbers of prospective victims, either altogether, or only in certain times and places where victimization might occur, will carry significant social costs in terms of lost opportunities for self-protection.

On the other hand, the scientific reasons are likely to be familiar only to the relatively small community of scholars who study the consequences of victim self-protection: the defensive actions of crime victims have significant effects on the outcomes of crimes, and the effects of armed resistance differ from those of unarmed resistance. Previous research has consistently indicated that victims who resist with a gun or other weapon are less likely than other victims to lose their property in robberies<sup>3</sup> and in burglaries.<sup>4</sup> Consistently, research also has

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<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Berk et al., *Mutual Combat and Other Family Violence Myths*, in *THE DARK SIDE OF FAMILIES* 197 (David Finkelhor et al. eds., 1983).

<sup>3</sup> See generally MICHAEL J. HINDELANG, *CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION IN EIGHT AMERICAN CITIES* (1976); Gary Kleck, *Crime Control Through the Private Use of Armed Force*, 35 *SOC. PROBS.* 1 (1988); Gary Kleck & Miriam A. DeLone, *Victim Resistance and Offender Weapon Effects in Robbery*, 9 *J. QUANTITATIVE CRIMINOLOGY* 55 (1993); Eduard A. Ziegenhagen & Dolores

indicated that victims who resist by using guns or other weapons are less likely to be injured compared to victims who do not resist or to those who resist without weapons. This is true whether the research relied on victim surveys or on police records, and whether the data analysis consisted of simple cross-tabulations or more complex multivariate analyses. These findings have been obtained with respect to robberies<sup>5</sup> and to assaults.<sup>6</sup> Cook<sup>7</sup> offers his unsupported personal opinion concerning robbery victims that resisting with a gun is only prudent if the robber does not have a gun. The primary data source on which Cook relies flatly contradicts this opinion. National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data indicate that even in the very disadvantageous situation where the robber has a gun, victims who resist with guns are still substantially less likely to be injured than those who resist in other ways, and even slightly less likely to be hurt than those who do not resist at all.<sup>8</sup>

With regard to studies of rape, although samples typically include too few cases of self-defense with a gun for separate analysis, McDermott,<sup>9</sup> Quinsey and Upfold,<sup>10</sup> Lizotte,<sup>11</sup> and Kleck and Sayles<sup>12</sup> all found that victims who resisted with some kind of weapon were less likely to have the rape attempt completed against them. Findings concerning the impact of armed resistance on whether rape victims suffer additional injuries beyond the rape itself are less clear, due to a lack of information on whether acts of resistance preceded or followed the rapist's attack. The only two rape studies with the necessary sequence information found that forceful resistance by rape victims usually follows, rather than precedes, rapist attacks inflicting additional injury, undercutting the proposition that victim resistance increases the likelihood that the victim will be hurt.<sup>13</sup> This is consistent with findings on robbery and assault.<sup>14</sup>

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Brosnan, *Victim Responses to Robbery and Crime Control Policy*, 23 CRIMINOLOGY 675 (1985).

<sup>4</sup> See generally Philip J. Cook, *The Technology of Personal Violence*, 14 CRIME & JUST.: ANN. REV. RES. 1, 57 (1991).

<sup>5</sup> Ziegenhagen & Brosnan, *supra* note 3; Kleck *supra* note 3; Kleck & DeLone, *supra* note 3.

<sup>6</sup> Kleck, *supra* note 3.

<sup>7</sup> Cook, *supra* note 4, at 58.

<sup>8</sup> Kleck & DeLone, *supra* note 3, at 75.

<sup>9</sup> JOAN M. MCDERMOTT, *RAPE VICTIMIZATION IN 26 AMERICAN CITIES* (1979).

<sup>10</sup> Quinsey & Upfold, *Rape Completion and Victim Injury as a Function of Female Resistance Strategy*, 17 CAN. J. BEHAV. SCI. 40 (1985).

<sup>11</sup> Alan J. Lizotte, *Determinants of Completing Rape and Assault*, 2 J. QUANTITATIVE CRIMINOLOGY 203 (1986).

<sup>12</sup> Gary Kleck & Susan Sayles, *Rape and Resistance*, 37 SOC. PROBS. 149 (1990).

<sup>13</sup> Quinsey & Upfold, *supra* note 10, at 46-47. See generally Sarah E. Ullman & Raymond A. Knight, *Fighting Back: Women's Resistance to Rape*, 7 J. INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE 31 (1992).

<sup>14</sup> See Kleck, *supra* note 3, at 9.

## II. THE PREVALENCE OF DEFENSIVE GUN USE (DGU) IN PREVIOUS SURVEYS

### A. THE NATIONAL CRIME VICTIMIZATION SURVEY (NCVS)

However consistent the evidence may be concerning the effectiveness of armed victim resistance, there are some who minimize its significance by insisting that it is rare.<sup>15</sup> This assertion is invariably based entirely on a single source of information, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS).

Data from the NCVS imply that each year there are only about 68,000 defensive uses of guns in connection with assaults and robberies,<sup>16</sup> or about 80,000 to 82,000 if one adds in uses linked with household burglaries.<sup>17</sup> These figures are less than one ninth of the estimates implied by the results of at least thirteen other surveys, summarized in Table 1, most of which have been previously reported.<sup>18</sup> The NCVS estimates imply that about 0.09 of 1% of U.S. households experience a defensive gun use (DGU) in any one year, compared to the Mauser survey's estimate of 3.79% of households over a five year period, or about 0.76% in any one year, assuming an even distribution over the five year period, and no repeat uses.<sup>19</sup>

The strongest evidence that a measurement is inaccurate is that it is inconsistent with many other independent measurements or observations of the same phenomenon; indeed, some would argue that this is ultimately the *only* way of knowing that a measurement is wrong. Therefore, one might suppose that the gross inconsistency of the NCVS-based estimates with all other known estimates, each derived from sources with no known flaws even remotely substantial enough to account for nine-to-one, or more, discrepancies, would be sufficient to persuade any serious scholar that the NCVS estimates are unreliable.

Apparently it is not, since the Bureau of Justice Statistics continues to disseminate their DGU estimates as if they were valid,<sup>20</sup> and scholars continue to cite the NCVS estimates as being at least as rea-

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<sup>15</sup> Cook, *supra* note 4; David McDowall & Brian Wiersema, *The Incidence of Defensive Firearm Use by U.S. Crime Victims, 1987 Through 1990*, 84 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 1982 (1994); UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING VIOLENCE 265 (Albert J. Reiss & Jeffrey A. Roth eds., 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Kleck, *supra* note 3, at 8.

<sup>17</sup> Cook, *supra* note 4, at 56; MICHAEL R. RAND, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, GUNS AND CRIME (Crime Data Brief) (1994).

<sup>18</sup> See Kleck, *supra* note 3, at 3; GARY KLECK, POINT BLANK: GUNS AND VIOLENCE IN AMERICA 146 (1991).

<sup>19</sup> Gary A. Mauser, *Firearms and Self-Defense: The Canadian Case*, Presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Society of Criminology (Oct. 28, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> RAND, *supra* note 17.

sonable as those from the gun surveys.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the editors of a report on violence conducted for the prestigious National Academy of Sciences have uncritically accepted the validity of the NCVS estimate as being at least equal to that of all of the alternative estimates.<sup>22</sup> In effect, even the National Academy of Sciences gives no more weight to estimates from numerous independent sources than to an estimate derived from a single source which is, as explained below, singularly ill-suited to the task of estimating DGU frequency.

This sort of bland and spurious even-handedness is misleading. For example, Reiss and Roth withheld from their readers that there were at least *nine* other estimates contradicting the NCVS-based estimate; instead they vaguely alluded only to "a number of surveys,"<sup>23</sup> as did Cook,<sup>24</sup> and they downplayed the estimates from the other surveys on the basis of flaws which they only speculated those surveys *might* have. Even as speculations, these scholars' conjectures were conspicuously one-sided, focusing solely on possible flaws whose correction would bring the estimate down, while ignoring obvious flaws, such as respondents (Rs) forgetting or intentionally concealing DGUs, whose correction would push the estimate up. Further, the speculations, even if true, would be wholly inadequate to account for more than a small share of the enormous nine-to-one or more discrepancy between the NCVS-based estimates and all other estimates. For example, the effects of telescoping can be completely cancelled out by the effects of memory loss and other recall failure, and even if they are not, they cannot account for more than a tiny share of a discrepancy of nine-to-one or more.

Equally important, those who take the NCVS-based estimates seriously have consistently ignored the most pronounced limitations of the NCVS for estimating DGU frequency. The NCVS is a non-anonymous national survey conducted by a branch of the federal government, the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Interviewers identify themselves to Rs as federal government employees, even displaying, in face-to-face contacts, an identification card with a badge. Rs are told that the interviews are being conducted on behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice, the law enforcement branch of the federal government. As a preliminary to asking questions about crime victimization experiences, interviewers establish the address, telephone number, and full names of all occupants, age twelve and over, in each house-

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<sup>21</sup> Cook, *supra* note 4, at 56; McDowall & Wiersema, *supra* note 15.

<sup>22</sup> UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING VIOLENCE, *supra* note 15, at 265-66.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 265.

<sup>24</sup> Cook, *supra* note 4, at 54.

hold they contact.<sup>25</sup> In short, it is made very clear to Rs that they are, in effect, speaking to a law enforcement arm of the federal government, whose employees know exactly who the Rs and their family members are, where they live, and how they can be recontacted.

Even under the best of circumstances, reporting the use of a gun for self-protection would be an extremely sensitive and legally controversial matter for either of two reasons. As with other forms of forceful resistance, the defensive act itself, regardless of the characteristics of any weapon used, might constitute an unlawful assault or at least the R might believe that others, including either legal authorities or the researchers, could regard it that way. Resistance with a gun also involves additional elements of sensitivity. Because guns are legally regulated, a victim's possession of the weapon, either in general or at the time of the DGU, might itself be unlawful, either in fact or in the mind of a crime victim who used one. More likely, lay persons with a limited knowledge of the extremely complicated law of either self-defense or firearms regulation are unlikely to know for sure whether their defensive actions or their gun possession was lawful.

It is not hard for gun-using victims interviewed in the NCVS to withhold information about their use of a gun, especially since they are *never directly asked whether they used a gun for self-protection*. They are asked only general questions about whether they did anything to protect themselves.<sup>26</sup> In short, Rs are merely given the opportunity to volunteer the information that they have used a gun defensively. All it takes for an R to conceal a DGU is to simply refrain from mentioning it, i.e., to leave it out of what may be an otherwise accurate and complete account of the crime incident.

Further, Rs in the NCVS are not even asked the general self-protection question unless they already independently indicated that they had been a victim of a crime. This means that any DGUs associated with crimes the Rs did not want to talk about would remain hidden. It has been estimated that the NCVS may catch less than one-twelfth of spousal assaults and one-thirty-third of rapes,<sup>27</sup> thereby missing nearly all DGUs associated with such crimes.

In the context of a nonanonymous survey conducted by the fed-

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<sup>25</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, NATIONAL CRIME SURVEY: INTERVIEWER'S MANUAL, NCS-550, PART D - HOW TO ENUMERATE NCS (1986).

<sup>26</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES 1992, at 128 (1994).

<sup>27</sup> Colin Loftin & Ellen J. MacKenzie, Building National Estimates of Violent Victimization 21-23 (April 1-4, 1990) (unpublished background paper prepared for the Symposium on the Understanding and Control of Violent Behavior, sponsored by the National Research Council).

eral government, an R who reports a DGU may believe that he is placing himself in serious legal jeopardy. For example, consider the issue of the location of crimes. For all but a handful of gun owners with a permit to carry a weapon in public places (under 4% of the adult population even in states like Florida, where carry permits are relatively easy to get)<sup>28</sup>, the mere possession of a gun in a place other than their home, place of business, or in some states, their vehicle, is a crime, often a felony. In at least ten states, it is punishable by a punitively mandatory minimum prison sentence.<sup>29</sup> Yet, 88% of the violent crimes which Rs reported to NCVS interviewers in 1992 were committed away from the victim's home,<sup>30</sup> i.e., in a location where it would ordinarily be a crime for the victim to even possess a gun, never mind use it defensively. Because the question about location is asked before the self-protection questions,<sup>31</sup> the typical violent crime victim R has already committed himself to having been victimized in a public place before being asked what he or she did for self-protection. In short, Rs usually could not mention their defensive use of a gun without, in effect, confessing to a crime to a federal government employee.

Even for crimes that occurred in the victim's home, such as a burglary, possession of a gun would still often be unlawful or of unknown legal status; because the R had not complied with or could not be sure he had complied with all legal requirements concerning registration of the gun's acquisition or possession, permits for purchase, licensing of home possession, storage requirements, and so on. In light of all these considerations, it may be unrealistic to assume that more than a fraction of Rs who have used a gun defensively would be willing to report it to NCVS interviewers.

The NCVS was not designed to estimate how often people resist crime using a gun. It was designed primarily to estimate national victimization levels; it incidentally happens to include a few self-protection questions which include response categories covering resistance with a gun. Its survey instrument has been carefully refined and evaluated over the years to do as good a job as possible in getting people to report illegal things which *other* people have done *to* them. This is the exact opposite of the task which faces anyone trying to get good DGU estimates—to get people to admit controversial and possibly illegal

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<sup>28</sup> Patrick Blackman, *Carrying Handguns for Personal Protection* 31 (1985) (unpublished paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Society of Criminology) (Nov. 13-16, 1985); KLECK, *supra* note 18, at 412.

<sup>29</sup> Kent M. Ronhovde & Gloria P. Sugars, *Survey of Select State Firearm Control Laws, in FEDERAL REGULATION OF FIREARMS 204-05* (H. Hogan ed., 1982) (report prepared for the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee by the Congressional Research Service).

<sup>30</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *supra* note 26, at 75.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 124, 128.

things which the *Rs themselves have done*. Therefore, it is neither surprising, nor a reflection on the survey's designers, to note that the NCVS is singularly ill-suited for estimating the prevalence or incidence of DGU. It is not credible to regard this survey as an acceptable basis for establishing, in even the roughest way, how often Americans use guns for self-protection.

#### B. THE GUN SURVEYS

At least thirteen previous surveys have given a radically different picture of the frequency of DGUs. The surveys, summarized in Table 1, can be labelled the "gun surveys" because they were all, at least to some extent, concerned with the ownership and use of guns. Some were primarily devoted to this subject, while others were general purpose opinion surveys which happened to include some questions pertaining to guns. They are an extremely heterogeneous collection, some conducted by academic researchers for scholarly purposes, others by commercial polling firms. Moreover, their sponsors differed; some were sponsored by pro-gun control organizations (Cambridge Reports, Hart), others were sponsored by anti-control organizations (DMIa, DMIb), while still others were paid for by news media organizations, governments, or by research grants awarded to independent academics.

None of the surveys were meant as exclusive studies of DGU. Indeed, they each contained only one or two questions on the subject. Consequently, none of them are very thorough or satisfactory for estimating DGU frequency, even though they otherwise seem to have been conducted quite professionally. Some of the surveys were flawed by asking questions that used a lifetime recall period ("Have you ever . . .?"), making it impossible to estimate uses within any specified time span.<sup>32</sup> Some surveys limited coverage to registered voters, while others failed to exclude defensive uses against animals, or occupational uses by police officers, military personnel, or private security guards.<sup>33</sup> Some asked the key questions with reference only to the R, while others asked Rs to report on the experiences of all of the members of their households, relying on second-hand reports.<sup>34</sup> Methodological research on the NCVS indicates that substantially fewer crime incidents are reported when one household member reports for all household members than when each person is interviewed separately about their own experiences.<sup>35</sup> The same should also be true of those

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<sup>32</sup> See Table 1, row labelled "Time Span of Use."

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at row labelled "Excluded military, police uses."

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at row labelled "Defensive question refers to."

<sup>35</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *supra* note 26, at 144.

crime incidents that involve victims using guns.

The least useful of the surveys did not even ask the defensive use question of all Rs, instead it asked it only of gun owners, or, even more narrowly, of just handgun owners or just those who owned handguns for protection purposes.<sup>36</sup> This procedure was apparently based on the dubious assumption that people who used a gun defensively no longer owned the gun by the time of the survey, or that the gun belonged to someone else, or that the R owned the gun for a reason other than protection or kept it outside the home.

Most importantly, the surveys did not ask enough questions to establish exactly what was done with the guns in reported defensive use incidents. At best, some of the surveys only established whether the gun was fired. The lack of such detail raises the possibility that the guns were not actually "used" in any meaningful way. Instead, Rs might be remembering occasions on which they merely carried a gun for protection "just in case" or investigated a suspicious noise in their backyard, only to find nothing.

Nevertheless, among these imperfect surveys, two were relatively good for present purposes. Both the Hart survey in 1981 and the Mauser survey in 1990 were national surveys which asked carefully worded questions directed at all Rs in their samples. Both surveys excluded uses against animals and occupational uses. The two also nicely complemented each other in that the Hart survey asked only about uses of handguns, while the Mauser survey asked about uses of all gun types. The Hart survey results implied a minimum of about 640,000 annual DGUs involving handguns, while the Mauser results implied about 700,000 involving any type of gun.<sup>37</sup> It should be stressed, contrary to the claims of Reiss and Roth,<sup>38</sup> that neither of these estimates entailed the use of "dubious adjustment procedures." The percent of sample households reporting a DGU was simply multiplied by the total number of U.S. households, resulting in an estimate of DGU-involved households. This figure, compiled for a five year period, was then divided by five to yield a per-year figure.

In effect, each of the surveys summarized in Table 1 was measuring something different; simple estimates derived from each of them is not comparable in any straight-forward way. The figures in the bottom row reflect adjustments designed to produce estimates which are

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<sup>36</sup> CAMBRIDGE REPORTS, INC., AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS HANDGUN CONTROL (1978); THE OHIO STATISTICAL ANALYSIS CENTER, OHIO CITIZEN ATTITUDES CONCERNING CRIME AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE (1982); H. Quinley, Memorandum reporting results from Time/CNN Poll of Gun Owners, dated Feb. 6, 1990 (1990).

<sup>37</sup> KLECK, *supra* note 18, at 106-07.

<sup>38</sup> UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING VIOLENCE, *supra* note 15, at 266.

roughly comparable across surveys. The adjustments were based on a single standard, the Mauser survey. That is, all survey results were adjusted to approximate what they would have been had the surveys all been, like the Mauser survey, national surveys of noninstitutionalized U.S. adult residents in 1990, using the same question Mauser used. The question was addressed to all Rs; it concerned the experiences of all household members; it pertained to the use of any type of gun; and it excluded uses against animals. The full set of adjustments is explained in detail elsewhere.<sup>39</sup>

Eleven of the surveys permitted the computation of a reasonable adjusted estimate of DGU frequency. Two surveys for which estimates could not be produced were the Cambridge Reports and the Time/CNN. Neither asked the DGU question of all Rs; thus, it would be sheer speculation what the responses would have been among those Rs not asked the DGU question. All of the eleven surveys yielded results that implied over 700,000 uses per year. None of the surveys implied estimates even remotely like the 65,000 to 82,000 figures derived from the NCVS. To date, there has been no confirmation of even the most approximate sort of the NCVS estimates. Indeed, no survey has ever yielded an estimate which is of the same magnitude as those derived from the NCVS.

However, even the best of the gun surveys had serious problems. First, none of them established how many times Rs used a gun defensively within the recall period. It was necessary to conservatively assume that each DGU-involved person or household experienced only one DGU in the period, a figure which is likely to be an underestimation. Second, although the Mauser and Hart surveys were the best available surveys in other respects, they asked Rs to report for their entire households, rather than speaking only for themselves. Third, while these two surveys did use a specific recall period, it was five years, which encouraged a greater amount of both memory loss and telescoping. The longer the recall period, the more memory loss predominates over telescoping as a source of response error,<sup>40</sup> supporting the conclusion that a five year recall period probably produces a net underreporting of DGUs. Fourth, while the surveys all had acceptably large samples by the standards of ordinary national surveys, mostly in the 600 to 1500 range, they were still smaller than one would prefer for estimating a phenomenon which is fairly rare. While on average the sample size has no effect on the point estimate of DGU

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<sup>39</sup> Gary Kleck, *Guns and Self-Defense* (1994) (unpublished manuscript on file with the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL).

<sup>40</sup> Seymour Sudman & Norman M. Bradburn, *Effects of Time and Memory Factors on Response in Surveys*, 68 J. AM. STAT. ASS'N 808 (1973).

frequency, it will affect the amount of sampling error. Finally, none of the surveys established exactly what Rs did with their guns in reported DGUs, making it impossible to be certain that they were actually used in any meaningful way. In sum, while the gun surveys are clearly far superior to the NCVS for estimating DGU frequency, they have significant shortcomings. These are discussed in greater detail elsewhere.<sup>41</sup>

It was the goal of the research reported here to remedy those flaws, to develop a credible estimate of DGU frequency, and to learn something about the nature of DGU incidents and the people who defend themselves with guns.

### C. THE NATIONAL SELF-DEFENSE SURVEY

#### 1. *Methods*

The present survey is the first survey ever devoted to the subject of armed self-defense. It was carefully designed to correct all of the known correctable or avoidable flaws of previous surveys which critics have identified. We use the most anonymous possible national survey format, the anonymous random digit dialed telephone survey. We did not know the identities of those who were interviewed, and made this fact clear to the Rs. We interviewed a large nationally representative sample covering all adults, age eighteen and over, in the lower forty-eight states and living in households with telephones.<sup>42</sup> We asked DGU questions of all Rs in our sample, asking them separately about both their own DGU experiences and those of other members of their households. We used both a five year recall period and a one year recall period. We inquired about uses of both handguns and other types of guns, and excluded occupational uses of guns and uses against animals. Finally, we asked a long series of detailed questions designed to establish exactly what Rs did with their guns; for example, if they had confronted other humans, and how had each DGU connected to a specific crime or crimes.

We consulted with North America's most experienced experts on gun-related surveys, David Bordua, James Wright, and Gary Mauser, along with survey expert Seymour Sudman, in order to craft a state-of-the-art survey instrument designed specifically to establish the frequency and nature of DGUs.<sup>43</sup> A professional telephone polling firm,

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<sup>41</sup> Kleck, *supra* note 39.

<sup>42</sup> Completed interviews, n=4,977.

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., DAVID J. BORDUA ET AL., ILLINOIS LAW ENFORCEMENT COMMISSION, PATTERNS OF FIREARMS OWNERSHIP, REGULATION AND USE IN ILLINOIS (1979); SEYMOUR SUDMAN & NORMAN BRADBURN, RESPONSE EFFECTS IN SURVEYS (1974); JAMES WRIGHT & PETER ROSSI, ARMED AND CONSIDERED DANGEROUS (1986); Alan J. Lizotte & David J. Bordua, *Firearms Ownership for Sport and Protection*, 46 AM. SOC. REV. 499 (1980); Gary Mauser, *A Comparison of Canadian*

Research Network of Tallahassee, Florida, carried out the sampling and interviewing. Only the firm's most experienced interviewers, who are listed in the acknowledgements, were used on the project. Interviews were monitored at random by survey supervisors. All interviews in which an alleged DGU was reported by the R were validated by supervisors with call-backs, along with a 20% random sample of all other interviews. Of all eligible residential telephone numbers called where a person rather than an answering machine answered, 61% resulted in a completed interview. Interviewing was carried out from February through April of 1993.

The quality of sampling procedures was well above the level common in national surveys. Our sample was not only large and nationally representative, but it was also stratified by state. That is, forty-eight independent samples of residential telephone numbers were drawn, one from each of the lower forty-eight states, providing forty-eight independent, albeit often small, state samples. Given the nature of randomly generated samples of telephone numbers, there was no clustering of cases or multistage sampling as there is in the NCVS;<sup>44</sup> consequently, there was no inflation of sampling error due to such procedures. To gain a larger raw number of sample DGU cases, we oversampled in the south and west regions, where previous surveys have indicated gun ownership is higher.<sup>45</sup> We also oversampled within contacted households for males, who are more likely to own guns and to be victims of crimes in which victims might use guns defensively.<sup>46</sup> Data were later weighted to adjust for oversampling.

Each interview began with a few general "throat-clearing" questions about problems facing the R's community and crime. The interviewers then asked the following question: "Within the past *five years*, have you yourself or another member of your household *used* a gun, even if it was not fired, for self-protection or for the protection of property at home, work, or elsewhere? Please do *not* include military service, police work, or work as a security guard." Rs who answered "yes" were then asked: "Was this to protect against an animal or a person?" Rs who reported a DGU against a person were asked: "How many incidents involving defensive uses of guns against persons happened to members of your household in the past five years?" and "Did this incident [any of these incidents] happen in the *past twelve*

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and *American Attitudes Towards Firearms*, 32 CAN. J. CRIMINOLOGY 573 (1990); Gary Mauser, 'Sorry, Wrong Number': Why Media Polls on Gun Control Are Often Unreliable, 9 POL. COMM. 69 (1992); Mauser, *supra* note 16.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *supra* note 26, at 141-42.

<sup>45</sup> KLECK, *supra* note 18, at 57.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 56.

*months?*" At this point, Rs were asked "Was it *you* who used a gun defensively, or did someone else in your household do this?"

All Rs reporting a DGU were asked a long, detailed series of questions establishing exactly what happened in the DGU incident. Rs who reported having experienced more than one DGU in the previous five years were asked about their most recent experience. When the original R was the one who had used a gun defensively, as was usually the case, interviewers obtained his or her firsthand account of the event. When the original R indicated that some other member of the household was the one who had the experience, interviewers made every effort to speak directly to the involved person, either speaking to that person immediately or obtaining times and dates to call back. Up to three call-backs were made to contact the DGU-involved person. We anticipated that it would sometimes prove impossible to make contact with these persons, so interviewers were instructed to always obtain a proxy account of the DGU from the original R, on the assumption that a proxy account would be better than none at all. It was rarely necessary to rely on these proxy accounts—only six sample cases of DGUs were reported through proxies, out of a total of 222 sample cases.

While all Rs reporting a DGU were given the full interview, only a one-third random sample of Rs not reporting a DGU were interviewed. The rest were simply thanked for their help. This procedure helped keep interviewing costs down. In the end, there were 222 completed interviews with Rs reporting DGUs, another 1,610 Rs not reporting a DGU but going through the full interview by answering questions other than those pertaining to details of the DGUs. There were a total of 1,832 cases with the full interview. An additional 3,145 Rs answered only enough questions to establish that no one in their household had experienced a DGU against a human in the previous five years (unweighted totals). These procedures effectively under-sampled for non-DGU Rs or, equivalently, oversampled for DGU-involved Rs. Data were also weighted to account for this oversampling.

Questions about the details of DGU incidents permitted us to establish whether a given DGU met all of the following qualifications for an incident to be treated as a genuine DGU: (1) the incident involved defensive action against a human rather than an animal, but not in connection with police, military, or security guard duties; (2) the incident involved actual contact with a person, rather than merely investigating suspicious circumstances, etc.; (3) the defender could state a specific crime which he thought was being committed at the time of the incident; (4) the gun was actually used in some way—at a minimum it had to be used as part of a threat against a person, either by

verbally referring to the gun (e.g., "get away—I've got a gun") or by pointing it at an adversary. We made no effort to assess either the lawfulness or morality of the Rs' defensive actions.

An additional step was taken to minimize the possibility of DGU frequency being overstated. The senior author went through interview sheets on every one of the interviews in which a DGU was reported, looking for any indication that the incident might not be genuine. A case would be coded as questionable if even just one of four problems appeared: (1) it was not clear whether the R actually confronted any adversary he saw; (2) the R was a police officer, member of the military or a security guard, and thus might have been reporting, despite instructions, an incident which occurred as part of his occupational duties; (3) the interviewer did not properly record exactly what the R had done with the gun, so it was possible that he had not used it in any meaningful way; or (4) the R did not state or the interviewer did not record a specific crime that the R thought was being committed against him at the time of the incident. There were a total of twenty-six cases where at least one of these problematic indications was present. It should be emphasized that we do not know that these cases were *not* genuine DGUs; we only mean to indicate that we do not have as high a degree of confidence on the matter as with the rest of the cases designated as DGUs. Estimates using all of the DGU cases are labelled herein as "A" estimates, while the more conservative estimates based only on cases devoid of any problematic indications are labelled "B" estimates.

## 2. Results

Table 2 displays a large number of estimates of how often guns are used defensively. These estimates are not inconsistent with each other; they each measure different things in different ways. Some estimates are based only on incidents which Rs reported as occurring in the twelve months preceding the interview, while others are based on incidents reported for the preceding five years. Both telescoping and recall failure should be lower with a one year recall period, so estimates derived from this period should be superior to those based on the longer recall period. Some estimates are based only on incidents which Rs reported as involving themselves, (person-based estimates), while others were based on all incidents which Rs reported as involving anyone in their household (household-based estimates). The person-based estimates should be better because of its first-hand character. Finally, some of the figures pertain only to DGUs involving use of handguns, while others pertain to DGUs involving any type of gun.

The methods used to compute the Table 2 estimates are very simple and straight-forward. Prevalence ("% Used") figures were computed by dividing the weighted sample frequencies in the top two rows of numbers by the total weighted sample size of 4,977. The estimated number of persons or households who experienced a DGU, listed in the third and fourth rows, was then computed by multiplying these prevalence figures by the appropriate U.S. population base, age eighteen and over for person-based estimates, and the total number of households for household-based estimates. Finally, the estimated number of defensive uses was computed by multiplying the number of DGU-involved persons or households by the following estimates of the number of all-guns DGU incidents per DGU-involved person or household, using a past-five-years recall period: person-based, A—1.478; person-based, B—1.472; household-based, A—1.531; household-based, B—1.535. We did not establish how many DGUs occurred in the past year, and for past-five-years DGUs, we did not separately establish how many of the DGUs involved handguns and how many involved other types of guns. Therefore, for all past-year estimates, and for past-five-years handgun estimates, it was necessary to conservatively assume that there was only one DGU per DGU-involved person or household.

The most technically sound estimates presented in Table 2 are those based on the shorter one-year recall period that rely on Rs' first-hand accounts of their own experiences (person-based estimates). These estimates appear in the first two columns. They indicate that each year in the U.S. there are about 2.2 to 2.5 million DGUs of all types by civilians against humans, with about 1.5 to 1.9 million of the incidents involving use of handguns.

These estimates are larger than those derived from the best previous surveys, indicating that technical improvements in the measurement procedures have, contrary to the expectations of Cook,<sup>47</sup> Reiss and Roth,<sup>48</sup> and McDowall and Wiersema,<sup>49</sup> *increased* rather than decreased estimates of the frequency that DGUs occur. Defensive gun use is thus just another specific example of a commonplace pattern in criminological survey work, which includes victimization surveys, self-report surveys of delinquency, surveys of illicit drug use, etc.: the better the measurement procedures, the higher the estimates of controversial behaviors.<sup>50</sup>

The present estimates are higher than earlier ones primarily due

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<sup>47</sup> Cook, *supra* note 4.

<sup>48</sup> UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING VIOLENCE, *supra* note 15.

<sup>49</sup> McDowall & Wiersema, *supra* note 15.

<sup>50</sup> See, e.g., MICHAEL HINDELANG ET AL., MEASURING DELINQUENCY (1981).

to three significant improvements in the present survey: (1) a shorter recall period; (2) reliance on person-based information rather than just household-based information; and (3) information on how many household DGUs had been experienced in the recall period by those Rs reporting any such experiences. Using a shorter recall period undoubtedly reduced the effects of memory loss by reducing the artificial shrinkage to which earlier estimates were subject. Although telescoping was also undoubtedly reduced, and this would, by itself, tend to reduce estimates, the impact of reducing telescoping was apparently smaller than the impact of reducing case loss due to forgetting. Evidence internal to this survey directly indicates that a one year recall period yields larger estimates than a five year recall period; compare figures in the right half of Table 2 with their counterparts in the left half. This phenomenon, where less behavior is reported for a longer recall period than would be expected based on results obtained when using a shorter period, also has been observed in surveys of self-reported use of illicit drugs.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, basing estimates on Rs reports about DGUs in which they were personally involved also increases the estimates. One of the surprises of this survey was how few Rs were willing to report a DGU which involved some other member of their household. Eighty-five percent of the reports of DGUs we obtained involved the original R, the person with whom the interviewer first spoke. Given that most households contain more than one adult eligible to be interviewed, it was surprising that in a DGU-involved household the person who answered the phone would consistently turn out to be the individual who had been involved in the DGU. Our strong suspicion is that many Rs feel that it is not their place to tell total strangers that some other member of their household has used a gun for self-protection. Some of them are willing to tell strangers about an incident in which they were themselves involved, but apparently few are willing to "inform" on others in their household. Still others may not have been aware of DGUs involving other household members. Evidence internal to the present survey supports this speculation, since person-based estimates are 66 to 77% higher than household-based estimates; a figure that suggests that there was more complete reporting of DGUs involving the original respondent than those involving other household members.<sup>52</sup> For this reason, previous surveys including those which yielded only household-based estimates, four of the six gun surveys which yielded usable annual estimates, and all of those which

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<sup>51</sup> See Jerald Bachman & Patrick O'Malley, *When Four Months Equal a Year: Inconsistencies in Student Reports of Drug Use*, 45 PUB. OPINION Q. 536, 539, 543 (1981).

<sup>52</sup> See Table 2.

were national in scope, probably substantially underestimated DGUs.

We also had information on the number of times that DGU-involved households had experienced DGUs during the five year recall period. While it was necessary in computing previous estimates to conservatively assume that each DGU-involved person or household had experienced only one DGU, our evidence indicates that repeat experiences were not uncommon, with 29.5% of DGU-involved households reporting more than one DGU within the previous five years. The average number of DGUs in this time span was 1.5 per DGU-involved household. This information alone could account for a roughly 50% increase in DGU incidence estimates based on the five year recall period.

Finally, our survey was superior to the NCVS in two additional ways: it was free of the taint of being conducted by, and on behalf of, employees of the federal government, and it was completely anonymous.

It would be incorrect to say that the present estimates are inconsistent with those derived from the earlier gun surveys. Avoiding apples-and-oranges comparisons, compare figures from Table 2 with earlier results summarized in Table 1. The household prevalence figures from the national Hart and Mauser surveys, which used a DGU question most similar to the one used in the present survey, indicate that in 1990, 3.8% of households reported a DGU involving a gun of any kind in the previous five years<sup>53</sup> and in 1981, 4% reported a DGU involving a handgun in the previous five years.<sup>54</sup> The past-five-years, household-based "% Used" figures in Table 2 indicate 3.9% for all guns, and 3.0% for handguns. Where directly comparable, the present results are within sampling error of the results of the best two previous surveys. Indeed, the consistency is remarkable given the substantial differences among the surveys and the twelve year difference between the Hart survey and the current one. Further, the only prior survey with person-based estimates and a *one* year recall period, the 1976 Field poll in California, yielded a 1.4% prevalence figure for handguns,<sup>55</sup> compared to 1.0% in the present survey.<sup>56</sup>

With a sample size of 4,977, random sampling error of the estimates is small. For example, the all-guns prevalence percent used *A* estimates, with a 95% confidence interval, are plus or minus 0.32% for past year, person; 0.35% for past year, household; 0.50% for past five

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<sup>53</sup> Mauser, *supra* note 19.

<sup>54</sup> Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., Questionnaire used in October 1981 Violence in America Survey, with marginal frequencies (1981).

<sup>55</sup> See Table 1, note A.

<sup>56</sup> See Table 2, second column.

years, person; and 0.54% for past five years, household. Given how small these are already, even increasing samples to the size of the enormous ones in the NCVS could produce only slight reductions in sampling error.

Are these estimates plausible? Could it really be true that Americans use guns for self-protection as often as 2.1 to 2.5 million times a year? The estimate may seem remarkable in comparison to expectations based on conventional wisdom, but it is not implausibly large in comparison to various gun-related phenomena. There are probably over 220 million guns in private hands in the U.S.,<sup>57</sup> implying that only about 1% of them are used for defensive purposes in any one year—not an impossibly high fraction. In a December 1993 Gallup survey, 49% of U.S. households reported owning a gun, and 31% of adults reported personally owning one.<sup>58</sup> These figures indicate that there are about 47.6 million households with a gun, with perhaps 93 million, or 49% of the adult U.S. population living in households with guns, and about 59.1 million adults personally owning a gun. Again, it hardly seems implausible that 3% (2.5 million/93 million) of the people with immediate access to a gun could have used one defensively in a given year.

Huge numbers of Americans not only have access to guns, but the overwhelming majority of gun owners, if one can believe their statements, are willing to use a gun defensively. In a December 1989 national survey, 78% of American gun owners stated that they would not only be willing to use a gun defensively in some way, but would be willing to *shoot* a burglar.<sup>59</sup> The percentage willing to use a gun defensively in *some* way, though not necessarily by shooting someone, would presumably be even higher than this.

Nevertheless, having access to a gun and being willing to use it against criminals is not the same as actually doing so. The latter requires experiencing a crime under circumstances in which the victim can get to, or already possesses, a gun. We do not know how many such opportunities for crime victims to use guns defensively occur each year. It would be useful to know how large a fraction of crimes with direct offender-victim contact result in a DGU. Unfortunately, a large share of the incidents covered by our survey are probably outside the scope of incidents that realistically are likely to be reported to either the NCVS or police. If the DGU incidents reported in the present survey are not entirely a subset within the pool of cases

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<sup>57</sup> KLECK, *supra* note 18, at 50 (extrapolating up to 1994, from 1987 data).

<sup>58</sup> David W. Moore & Frank Newport, *Public Strongly Favors Stricter Gun Control Laws*, 340 THE GALLUP POLL MONTHLY 18 (1994).

<sup>59</sup> Quinley, *supra* note 36.

covered by the NCVS, one cannot meaningfully use NCVS data to estimate the share of crime incidents which result in a DGU. Nevertheless, in a ten state sample of incarcerated felons interviewed in 1982, 34% reported having been "scared off, shot at, wounded or captured by an armed victim."<sup>60</sup> From the criminals' standpoint, this experience was not rare.

How could such a serious thing happen so often without becoming common knowledge? This phenomenon, regardless of how widespread it really is, is largely an invisible one as far as governmental statistics are concerned. Neither the defender/victim nor the criminal ordinarily has much incentive to report this sort of event to the police, and either or both often have strong reasons *not* to do so. Consequently, many of these incidents never come to the attention of the police, while others may be reported but without victims mentioning their use of a gun. And even when a DGU is reported, it will not necessarily be recorded by the police, who ordinarily do not keep statistics on matters other than DGUs resulting in a death, since police record-keeping is largely confined to information helpful in apprehending perpetrators and making a legal case for convicting them. Because such statistics are not kept, we cannot even be certain that a large number of DGUs are *not* reported to the police.

The health system cannot shed much light on this phenomenon either, since very few of these incidents involve injuries.<sup>61</sup> In the rare case where someone is hurt, it is usually the criminal, who is unlikely to seek medical attention for any but the most life-threatening gunshot wounds, as this would ordinarily result in a police interrogation. Physicians in many states are required by law to report treatment of gunshot wounds to the police, making it necessary for medically treated criminals to explain to police how they received their wounds.

Finally, it is now clear that virtually none of the victims who use guns defensively tell interviewers about it in the NCVS. Our estimates imply that only about 3% of DGUs among NCVS Rs are reported to interviewers.<sup>62</sup> Based on other comparisons of alternative survey estimates of violent events with NCVS estimates, this high level of underreporting is eminently plausible. Loftin and Mackenzie reported that rapes might be thirty-three times as frequent as NCVS estimates indicate, while spousal violence could easily be twelve times as high.<sup>63</sup>

There is no inherent value to knowing the exact number of

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<sup>60</sup> WRIGHT & ROSSI, *supra* note 43, at 155.

<sup>61</sup> See Table 3, Panels A, E.

<sup>62</sup> The 85,000 DGUs estimated from the NCVS, divided by the 2.5 million estimate derived from the presented survey equals .03.

<sup>63</sup> Loftin & MacKenzie, *supra* note 27, at 22-23.

DGUs any more than there is any value to knowing the exact number of crimes which are committed each year. The estimates in Table 2 are at best only rough approximations, which are probably too low. It is sufficient to conclude from these numbers that DGU is very common, far more common than has been recognized to date by criminologists or policy makers, and certainly far more common than one would think based on any official sources of information.

What does "very common" mean? One natural standard of comparison by which the magnitude of these numbers could be judged is the frequency with which guns are used for criminal purposes. The highest annual estimate of criminal gun use for the peak year of gun crime is the NCVS estimate for 1992, when there were an estimated 847,652 violent crime incidents in which, according to the victim, at least one offender possessed a gun.<sup>64</sup> This NCVS figure is not directly comparable with our DGU estimates because our DGU estimates are restricted only to incidents in which the gun was actually used by the defender, as opposed to incidents in which a victim merely possessed a gun. Many of the "gun crimes" in the NCVS, on the other hand, do not involve the gun actually being used by the criminal. Thus, the NCVS estimate of "gun crimes" overstates the number of crimes in which the offender actually used the gun. The only "gun crimes" reported in NCVS interviews that one can be confident involved offenders actually using guns are those in which they shot at a victim; but these were only 16.6% of "handgun crimes" reported in the NCVS from 1987 to 1992.<sup>65</sup>

Another 46.8% of the "handgun crimes" are labelled "weapon present" cases by the Bureau of Justice (BJS)<sup>66</sup> and an unknown fraction of these *could* involve actual use of a gun in a threat; but NCVS data do not permit us to know just how large a fraction. For these cases, the relevant NCVS interview items are ambiguous as to whether the gun was used to threaten a victim. Response category four of question fourteen ("How were you threatened?") of the NCVS Crime Incident Report reads: "Weapon present or threatened with weapon"<sup>67</sup> When this category is recorded by the interviewer, it is impossible to determine whether the victim was actually threatened with a gun or merely reported that the offender possessed a gun. In the remaining 36.6% of the "handgun crimes,"<sup>68</sup> there is no indica-

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<sup>64</sup> Computed from U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *supra* note 26, at 82-83.

<sup>65</sup> RAND, *supra* note 17, at 2.

<sup>66</sup> *Id.*

<sup>67</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *supra* note 26, at 126.

<sup>68</sup> 100%, minus the 16.6% where the victim was shot at, minus the 46.8% where the victim reported a "weapon present or threatened with a weapon" = 36.6%.

tion at all that the gun allegedly possessed by the offender was actually used.

Even the presence of a weapon is debatable, since victims are not asked why they thought the offender possessed a gun or if they saw a gun. This raises the possibility that some victims assumed that the offender had a gun, or inferred it from a bulge in the offender's clothing, or accepted the word of an offender who was bluffing about having a gun.

Thus, somewhere between 16.6% and 63.4%<sup>69</sup> of NCVS-defined "handgun crime" victimizations involve the gun actually being used in an attack or threat. Applying these figures to the estimates of 847,652 gun crime incidents and 689,652 handgun crime incidents, we can be confident that in 1992 there were at least 140,710 nonfatal crime incidents in which offenders used guns, 114,482 with handguns or about 157,000 total gun crime incidents, and 129,000 with handguns, when one includes gun homicides.<sup>70</sup> Or, generously assuming that all of the ambiguous "weapon present" cases involved guns being used to threaten the victim, estimates of 554,000 total, fatal and nonfatal, gun crime incidents and 451,000 handgun crime incidents are obtained.

All of these estimates are well short of even the most conservative estimates of DGUs in Table 2. The best estimates of DGUs (first two columns), even if compared to the more generous estimates of gun crimes, are 4.6 times higher than the crime counts for all guns, and 4.2 times higher for handguns, or 3.9 and 3.4, respectively, if the more conservative *B* estimates of DGU are used. In sum, DGUs are about three to five times as common as criminal uses, even using generous estimates of gun crimes.

There is good reason to believe that survey estimates of both criminal and defensive gun uses, including the DGU estimates presented here, are too low. Cook has shown that NCVS estimates of gunshot wounds are far too low.<sup>71</sup> Our estimates of DGUs are probably also too low, partly because, unlike the NCVS, our survey did not cover adolescents, the age group most frequently victimized in violence. Furthermore, our use of telephone surveying excludes the 5% of the nation's households without telephones, households which are disproportionately poor and/or rural. Low income persons are more likely to be crime victims,<sup>72</sup> while rural persons are more likely to own

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<sup>69</sup> 16.6% plus the 46.8% in the ambiguous "weapon present" category.

<sup>70</sup> FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES 1992—UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS 18, 58 (1993).

<sup>71</sup> Philip J. Cook, *The Case of the Missing Victims: Gunshot Woundings in the National Crime Survey*, 1 J. QUANTITATIVE CRIMINOLOGY 91 (1985).

<sup>72</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *supra* note 26, at 33.

guns and to be geographically distant from the nearest police officer.<sup>73</sup> Both groups therefore may have more opportunities to use guns for self-protection and excluding them from the sample could contribute to an underestimation of DGU.

Both parameters also are subject to underestimation due to intentional respondent underreporting. It is also probable that typical survey Rs are more reluctant to tell interviewers about questionable acts that they themselves have committed, such as threatening another person with a gun for purportedly defensive reasons, than they are to report criminal acts that other people have committed *against* them. Assuming this is correct, it would imply that DGUs, even in the best surveys, are underreported more than gun crime victimizations, and that correcting for underreporting would only increase the degree to which DGUs outnumber gun crimes.

The only known significant source of overestimation of DGUs in this survey is "telescoping," the tendency of Rs to report incidents which actually happened earlier than the recall period, such as reporting a six year old incident as having happened in the past five years. It is likely that telescoping effects are more than counterbalanced by Rs who actually experienced DGUs failing to report them. Nevertheless, it is worth discussing how much effect telescoping could have on these estimates. In evaluating the ability of crime victims to recall crime events in victim surveys, the U.S. Census Bureau selected a sample of crimes that were reported to the police, and then interviewed the victims of these known crime events. Using a twelve month recall period (the same as we used in the present survey), they surveyed victims who had been involved in crimes which had actually occurred *thirteen to fourteen* months before the interview, i.e., one or two months before the recall period. Of these ineligible crimes, 21% were telescoped forward—wrongly reported as having occurred in the twelve month recall period.<sup>74</sup>

Since the months just before the start of the recall period will show the highest rates of telescoping, the rate should be even smaller for crimes which occurred earlier. Nevertheless, even if it is assumed that the 21% rate applied to events that occurred as much as one year earlier, thirteen to twenty-four months before the interview, telescoping could inflate the DGU estimates for a one year recall period by only 21%. Adjusting the 2.5 million DGU estimate downward for telescoping effects of this magnitude would reduce it to about 2.1 mil-

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<sup>73</sup> KLECK, *supra* note 18, at 57.

<sup>74</sup> Richard W. Dodge, *The Washington, D.C. Recall Study*, in 1 THE NATIONAL CRIME SURVEY: WORKING PAPERS: CURRENT AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES 14 (Robert G. Lehnen & Wesley G. Skogan eds., 1981).

lion (2.5 million/1.21=2.1 million), an adjustment which would have no effect on any of our conclusions. Telescoping would inflate estimates based on the five year recall period even less, since the ratio of memory loss errors over telescoping errors increases as the recall period lengthens.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, it should be stressed that this is just a numerical demonstration. There is no reason to believe that these modest telescoping effects outweigh the effects of Rs failing to report DGUs, and therefore, no reason to believe that these estimates are even slightly too high.

### III. THE NATURE OF DEFENSIVE GUN USE

A total of 222 sample cases of DGUs against humans were obtained. For nine of these, the R broke off discussion of the incident before any significant amount of detail could be obtained, other than that the use was against a human. This left 213 cases with fairly complete information. Although this dataset constitutes the most detailed body of information available on DGU, the sample size is nevertheless fairly modest. While estimates of DGU frequency are reliable because they are based on a very large sample of 4,977 cases, results pertaining to the details of DGU incidents are based on 213 or fewer sample cases, and readers should treat these results with appropriate caution.

Apart from the sample size, the results of this survey also are affected by sample censoring. Beyond the incidents our interviewers were told about, there were almost certainly other DGUs which occurred within the recall period but which Rs did not mention to interviewers. In debriefings by the authors, almost all of our interviewers reported that they had experienced something like the following: they asked the key DGU question, which was followed by a long silence on the other end of the line, and/or the R asking something like "Who wants to know?" or "Why do you want to know?" or some similarly suspicious remark, followed by a "no" answer. In contrast, only one interviewer spoke with a person he thought was inventing a nonexistent incident. One obvious implication is that the true frequency of DGU is probably even higher than our estimates indicate. Another is that the incidents which were reported might differ from those that were not.

We believe that there are two rather different kinds of incidents that are especially likely to go unreported: (1) cases that Rs do not want to tell strangers on the phone, because the Rs deem them legally

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<sup>75</sup> Henry S. Woltman et al., *Recall Bias and Telescoping in the National Crime Survey*, in 2 THE NATIONAL CRIME SURVEY: WORKING PAPERS: METHODOLOGICAL STUDIES 810 (Robert G. Lehnen & Wesley G. Skogan eds., 1984); Sudman & Bradburn, *supra* note 40.

or morally dubious or they think the interviewer would regard them that way; and (2) relatively minor cases that Rs honestly forget about or did not think were serious enough to qualify as relevant to our inquiries. Thus, in addition to the mostly legitimate and serious cases covered in our sample, there are still other, less legitimate or serious DGU incidents that this or any other survey are likely to miss. This supposition would imply two kinds of bias in our descriptive results: (1) our DGUs would look more consistently "legitimate" than the entire set of all DGUs actually are; and (2) our DGUs would look more serious, on average, than the entire set of DGUs really are. These possibilities should be kept in mind when considering the following descriptive information.

Table 3 summarizes what our sample DGU incidents were like. The data support a number of broad generalizations. First, much like the typical gun crime, many of these cases were relatively undramatic and minor compared to fictional portrayals of gun use. Only 24% of the gun defenders in the present study reported firing the gun, and only 8% report wounding an adversary.<sup>76</sup> This parallels the fact that only 17% of the gun crimes reported in the NCVS involve the offender shooting at the victim, and only 3% involve the victim suffering a gunshot wound.<sup>77</sup>

Low as it is, even an 8% wounding rate is probably too high, both because of the censoring of less serious cases, which in this context would be cases without a wounding, and because the survey did not establish how Rs knew they had wounded someone. We suspect that in incidents where the offender left without being captured, some Rs "remembered with favor" their marksmanship and assumed they had hit their adversaries. If 8.3% really hit their adversaries, and a total of 15.6% fired at their adversaries, this would imply a 53% (8.3/15.6) "incident hit rate," a level of combat marksmanship far exceeding that typically observed even among police officers. In a review of fifteen reports, police officers inflicted at least one gunshot wound on at least one adversary in 37% of the incidents in which they intentionally fired at someone.<sup>78</sup> A 53% hit rate would also be triple the 18% hit rate of criminals shooting at crime victims.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, we believe that even the rather modest 8.3% wounding rate we found is probably too high, and that typical DGUs are less serious or dramatic in their consequences than our data suggest. In any case, the 8.3% figure was pro-

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<sup>76</sup> See Table 3, panel A.

<sup>77</sup> RAND, *supra* note 17.

<sup>78</sup> WILLIAM A. GELLER & MICHAEL S. SCOTT, POLICE EXECUTIVE RESEARCH FORUM, DEADLY FORCE: WHAT WE KNOW 100-106 (1993).

<sup>79</sup> RAND, *supra* note 17.

duced by just seventeen sample cases in which Rs reported that they wounded an offender.

About 37% of these incidents occurred in the defender's home, with another 36% near the defender's home.<sup>80</sup> This implies that the remaining 27% occurred in locations where the defender must have carried a gun through public spaces. Adding in the 36% which occurred *near* the defender's home and which may or may not have entailed public carrying, 36 to 63% of the DGUs entailed gun carrying.

Guns were most commonly used for defense against burglary, assault, and robbery.<sup>81</sup> Cases of "mutual combat," where it would be hard to tell who is the aggressor or where both parties are aggressors, would be a subset of the 30% of cases where assault was the crime involved. However, only 19% of all DGU cases involved *only* assault and no other crime where victim and offender could be more easily distinguished. Further, only 11% of all DGU cases involved only assault and a male defender—we had no information on gender of offenders—some subset of these could have been male-on-male fights. Thus, very few of these cases fit the classic mutual combat model of a fight between two males. This is not to say that such crimes where a gun-using combatant might claim that his use was defensive are rare, but rather that few of them are in this sample. Instead, cases where it is hard to say who is victim and who is aggressor apparently constitute an additional set of questionable DGUs lying largely outside of the universe of more one-sided events that our survey methods could effectively reach.

This survey did not attempt to compare the effectiveness of armed resistance with other forms of victim self-protection, since this sort of work has already been done and reviewed earlier in this paper. Panels D and E nevertheless confirm previous research on the effectiveness of self-defense with a gun—crime victims who use this form of self-protection rarely lose property and rarely provoke the offender into hurting them. In property crime incidents where burglary, robbery, or other thefts were attempted, victims lost property in just 11% of the cases. Gun defenders were injured in just 5.5% of all DGU incidents. Further, in 84% of the incidents where the defender was threatened or attacked, it was the offender who first threatened or used force. In *none* of the eleven sample cases where gun defenders were injured was the defender the first to use or to threaten force. The victim used a gun to threaten or attack the offender only *after* the offender had already attacked or threatened them and usually after

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<sup>80</sup> See Table 3, Panel B.

<sup>81</sup> *Id.* at Panel C.

the offender had inflicted the injury. There is no support in this sample for the hypothesis that armed resistance provokes criminals into attacking victims; this confirms the findings of prior research.<sup>82</sup>

While only 14% of *all* violent crime victims face offenders armed with guns,<sup>83</sup> 18% of the gun-using victims in our sample faced adversaries with guns.<sup>84</sup> Although the gun defenders usually faced unarmed offenders or offenders with lesser weapons, they were more likely than other victims to face gun-armed criminals. This is consistent with the perception that more desperate circumstances call forth more desperate defensive measures. The findings undercut the view that victims are prone to use guns in "easy" circumstances which are likely to produce favorable outcomes for the victim regardless of their gun use.<sup>85</sup> Instead, gun defenders appear to face more difficult circumstances than other crime victims, not easier ones.

Nevertheless, one reason crime victims are willing to take the risks of forcefully resisting the offender is that most offenders faced by victims choosing such an action are unarmed, or armed only with less lethal weapons. Relatively few victims try to use a gun against adversaries who are themselves armed with guns. According to this survey, offenders were armed with some kind of weapon in 48% of DGU incidents but had guns in only 18% of them.<sup>86</sup>

The distribution of guns by type in DGUs is similar to that of guns used by criminals. NCVS and police-based data indicate that about 80% of guns used in crime are handguns,<sup>87</sup> and the present study indicates that 80% of the guns used by victims are handguns.<sup>88</sup>

Incidents where victims use a gun defensively are almost never gunfights where both parties shoot at one another. Only 24% of the incidents involved the defender firing their gun, and only 16% involved the defender shooting *at* their adversary.<sup>89</sup> In only 4.5% of the cases did the offender shoot at the defender.<sup>90</sup> Consequently, it is not surprising that only 3% of all the incidents involved both parties shooting at each other.

Among our sample cases, the offenders were strangers to the de-

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<sup>82</sup> Kleck, *supra* note 3, at 7-9; Kleck & DeLone, *supra* note 3, at 75-77.

<sup>83</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *supra* note 26, at 83.

<sup>84</sup> See Table 3, Panel F.

<sup>85</sup> For a related speculation, see UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING VIOLENCE, *supra* note 15, at 266.

<sup>86</sup> *Id.*

<sup>87</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *supra* note 26, at 83; U.S. FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, *supra* note 70, at 18.

<sup>88</sup> See Table 3, Panel H.

<sup>89</sup> *Id.* at Panel A.

<sup>90</sup> *Id.* at Panel G.

fender in nearly three quarters of the incidents.<sup>91</sup> We suspect that this again reflects the effects of sample censoring. Just as the NCVS appears to detect less than a tenth of domestic violence incidents,<sup>92</sup> our survey is probably missing many cases of DGU against family members and other intimates.

While victims face multiple offenders in only about 24% of *all* violent crimes,<sup>93</sup> the victims in our sample who used guns faced multiple offenders in 53% of the incidents.<sup>94</sup> This mirrors the observation that criminals who use guns are also more likely than unarmed criminals to face multiple victims.<sup>95</sup> A gun allows either criminals or victims to handle a larger number of adversaries. Many victims facing multiple offenders probably would not resist at all if they were without a gun or some other weapon. Another possible interpretation is that some victims will resort to a defensive measure as serious as wielding a gun only if they face the most desperate circumstances. Again, this finding contradicts a view that gun defenders face easier circumstances than other crime victims.

Another way of assessing how serious these incidents appeared to the victims is to ask them how potentially fatal the encounter was. We asked Rs: "If you had *not* used a gun for protection in this incident, how likely do you think it is that you or someone else would have been *killed*? Would you say almost certainly *not*, probably not, might have, probably would have, or almost certainly would have been killed?" Panel K indicates that 15.7% of the Rs stated that they or someone else "almost certainly would have" been killed, with another 14.2% responding "probably would have" and 16.2% responding "might have."<sup>96</sup> Thus, nearly half claimed that they perceived some significant chance of someone being killed in the incident if they had not used a gun defensively.

It should be emphasized that these are just stated perceptions of participants, not objective assessments of actual probabilities. Some defenders might have been bolstering the justification for their actions by exaggerating the seriousness of the threat they faced. Our cautions about sample censoring should also be kept in mind—minor, less life-threatening events are likely to have been left out of this sample, either because Rs forgot them or because they did not think them important enough to qualify as relevant to our inquiries.

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<sup>91</sup> *Id.* at Panel I.

<sup>92</sup> Loftin & MacKenzie, *supra* note 27, at 22-23.

<sup>93</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *supra* note 26, at 82.

<sup>94</sup> See Table 3, Panel J.

<sup>95</sup> Cook, *supra* note 4.

<sup>96</sup> See Table 3, Panel K.

If we consider only the 15.7% who believed someone almost certainly would have been killed had they not used a gun, and apply this figure to estimates in the first two columns of Table 2, it yields national annual estimates of 340,000 to 400,000 DGUs of any kind, and 240,000 to 300,000 uses of handguns, where defenders stated, if asked, that they believed they almost certainly had saved a life by using the gun. Just how many of these were truly life-saving gun uses is impossible to know. As a point of comparison, the largest number of deaths involving guns, including homicides, suicides, and accidental deaths in any one year in U.S. history was 38,323 in 1991.<sup>97</sup>

Finally, we asked if Rs had reported these incidents to the police, or if the police otherwise found out about them; 64% of the gun-using victims claimed that the incidents had become known to the police. This figure should be interpreted with caution, since victims presumably want to present their use of guns as legitimate and a willingness to report the incident to the police would help support an impression of legitimacy. Rs who had in fact not reported the incident to the police might have wondered whether a "no" reply might not lead to discomfiting follow-up questions like "why not?" (as indeed it does in the NCVS). Further, it is likely that some Rs reported these incidents but did not mention their use of a gun.

#### IV. WHO IS INVOLVED IN DEFENSIVE GUN USE?

Finally, this Article will consider what sorts of people use guns defensively, and how they might differ from other people. Table 4 presents comparisons of five groups: (1) "defenders," i.e., people who reported using a gun for defense; (2) people who personally own guns but did not report a DGU; (3) people who do not personally own a gun; (4) people who did not report a DGU, regardless of whether they own guns; and (5) all people who completed the full interview.

Some of the earlier gun surveys asked the DGU question only of Rs who reported owning a gun. The cost of this limitation is evident from the first two rows of Table 4. Nearly 40% of the people reporting a DGU did not report personally owning a gun at the time of the interview. They either used someone else's gun, got rid of the gun since the DGU incident, or inaccurately denied personally owning a gun. About a quarter of the defenders reported that they did not even have a gun in their household at the time of the interview. Another possibility is that many gun owners were falsely denying their ownership of the "incriminating evidence" of their DGU.

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<sup>97</sup> NATIONAL SAFETY COUNCIL, ACCIDENT FACTS 11 (1994). This assumes that 95% of "legal intervention" deaths involved guns.

Many of the findings in Table 4 are unsurprising. Gun defenders are more likely to carry a gun for self-protection, consistent with the large share of DGUs which occurred away from the defender's home. Obviously, they were more likely to have been a victim of a burglary or robbery in the past year, a finding which is a tautology for those Rs whose DGU was in connection with a robbery or burglary committed against them in the preceding year. They were also more likely to have been a victim of an assault since becoming an adult.

Defenders are more likely to believe that a person must be prepared to defend their homes against crime and violence rather than letting the police take care of it compared to either gun owners without a DGU and nonowners. Whether this is cause or consequence of defenders' defensive actions is impossible to say with these data.

Some might suspect that DGUs were actually the aggressive acts of vengeful vigilantes intent on punishing criminals. If this were true of gun defenders as a group, one might expect them to be more supportive of punitive measures like the death penalty. In fact, those who reported a DGU were no more likely to support the death penalty than those without such an experience, and were somewhat *less* likely to do so compared with gun owners as a group. Similarly, gun defenders were no more likely than other people to endorse the view that the courts do not deal harshly enough with criminals.

Perhaps the most surprising finding of the survey was the large share of reported DGUs that involved women. Because of their lower victimization rates and lower gun ownership rates, one would expect women to account for far less than half of DGUs. Nevertheless, 46% of our sample DGUs involved women. This finding could be due to males reporting a lower fraction of actual DGUs than women. If a larger share of men's allegedly DGUs were partly aggressive actions, a larger share would be at the "illegitimate" end of the scale and thus less likely to be reported to interviewers. Further, women may be more likely than men to report their DGUs because they are less afraid of prosecution. Consequently, although there is no reason to doubt that women use guns defensively as often as this survey indicates, it is probable that males account for a larger number and share of DGUs than these data indicate.

A disproportionate share of defenders are African-American or Hispanic compared to the general population and especially compared to gun owners. Additionally, defenders are disproportionately likely to reside in big cities compared to other people, and particularly when compared to gun owners, who reside disproportionately in rural areas and small towns. Finally, defenders are disproportionately likely to be single. These patterns are all presumably due to the higher rates

of crime victimization among minorities, big city dwellers, and single persons.<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, defenders are not likely to be poor. The effect of higher victimization among poor people may be cancelled out by the lower gun ownership levels among the poor.<sup>99</sup>

One might suspect that, despite instructions not to report such events, some of the Rs reporting a DGU might have been describing an event which occurred as part of their occupational activities as a police officer, a member of the military, or a security guard. This could not have been true for more than a handful of our DGU cases, since only 2.4% (five sample cases) involved a person who had this type of occupation. Even these few cases may have occurred off-duty and thus would not necessarily be occupational DGUs. Gun defenders were in fact somewhat *less* likely to have a gun-related occupation than other gun owners.

#### V. CONCLUSION

If one were committed to rejecting the seemingly overwhelming survey evidence on the frequency of DGU, one could speculate, albeit without any empirical foundation whatsoever, that nearly all of the people reporting such experiences are simply making them up. We feel this is implausible. An R who had actually experienced a DGU would have no difficulty responding with a "no" answer to our DGU question because a "no" response was not followed up by further questioning. On the other hand, lying with a false "yes" answer required a good deal more imagination and energy. Since we asked as many as nineteen questions on the topic, this would entail spontaneously inventing as many as nineteen plausible and internally consistent bits of false information and doing so in a way that gave no hint to experienced interviewers that they were being deceived.

Suppose someone persisted in believing in the anomalous NCVS estimates of DGU frequency and wanted to use a "dishonest respondent" hypothesis to account for estimates from the present survey that are as much as thirty times higher. In order to do this, one would have to suppose that twenty-nine out of every thirty people reporting a DGU in the present survey were lying. There is no precedent in criminological survey research for such an enormous level of intentional and sustained falsification.

The banal and undramatic nature of the reported incidents also undercuts the dishonest respondent speculation. While all the incidents involved a crime, and usually a fairly serious one, only 8% of the

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<sup>98</sup> U.S. BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *supra* note 26, at 25-26, 31, 38-39.

<sup>99</sup> KLECK, *supra* note 18, at 56.

alleged gun defenders claimed to have shot their adversaries, and only 24% claim to have fired their gun. If large numbers of Rs were inventing their accounts, one would think they would have created more exciting scenarios.

By this time there seems little legitimate scholarly reason to doubt that defensive gun use is very common in the U.S., and that it probably is substantially more common than criminal gun use. This should not come as a surprise, given that there are far more gun-owning crime victims than there are gun-owning criminals and that victimization is spread out over many different victims, while offending is more concentrated among a relatively small number of offenders.

There is little legitimate reason to continue accepting the NCVS estimates of DGU frequency as even approximately valid. The gross inconsistencies between the NCVS and all other sources of information make it reasonable to suppose that all but a handful of NCVS victims who had used a gun for protection in the reported incidents refrained from mentioning this gun use. In light of evidence on the injury-preventing effectiveness of victim gun use, in some cases where the absence of victim injury is credited to either nonresistance or some unarmed form of resistance, the absence of injury may have actually been due to resistance with a gun, which the victim failed to mention to the interviewer.

The policy implications of these results are straightforward. These findings do *not* imply anything about whether moderate regulatory measures such as background checks or purchase permits would be desirable. Regulatory measures which do not disarm large shares of the general population would not significantly reduce beneficial defensive uses of firearms by noncriminals. On the other hand, prohibitionist measures, whether aimed at all guns or just at handguns, are aimed at disarming criminals and noncriminals alike. They would therefore discourage and presumably decrease the frequency of DGU among noncriminal crime victims because even minimally effective gun bans would disarm at least some noncriminals. The same would be true of laws which ban gun carrying. In sum, measures that effectively reduce gun availability among the noncriminal majority also would reduce DGUs that otherwise would have saved lives, prevented injuries, thwarted rape attempts, driven off burglars, and helped victims retain their property.

Since as many as 400,000 people a year use guns in situations where the defenders claim that they "almost certainly" saved a life by doing so, this result cannot be dismissed as trivial. If even one-tenth of these people are accurate in their stated perceptions, the number of lives saved by victim use of guns would still exceed the total number

of lives taken with guns. It is not possible to know how many lives are actually saved this way, for the simple reason that no one can be certain how crime incidents would have turned out had the participants acted differently than they actually did. But surely this is too serious a matter to simply assume that practically everyone who says he believes he saved a life by using a gun was wrong.

This is also too serious a matter to base conclusions on silly statistics comparing the number of lives taken with guns with the number of criminals *killed* by victims.<sup>100</sup> Killing a criminal is not a benefit to the victim, but rather a nightmare to be suffered for years afterward. *Saving* a life through DGU would be a benefit, but this almost never involves killing the criminal; probably fewer than 3,000 criminals are lawfully killed by gun-wielding victims each year,<sup>101</sup> representing only about 1/1000 of the number of DGUs, and less than 1% of the number of purportedly life-saving DGUs. Therefore, the number of justifiable homicides cannot serve as even a rough index of life-saving gun uses. Since this comparison does not involve any measured benefit, it can shed no light on the benefits and costs of keeping guns in the home for protection.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Arthur L. Kellermann & Donald T. Reay, *Protection or Peril?*, 314 NEW ENG. J. MED. 1557 (1986).

<sup>101</sup> KLECK, *supra* note 18, at 111-117.

<sup>102</sup> See *id.* at 127-129 for a more detailed critique of these "junk science" statistics. See UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING VIOLENCE, *supra* note 15, at 267 for an example of a prestigious source taking such numbers seriously.

**Table 1**  
**FREQUENCY OF DEFENSIVE GUN USE IN PREVIOUS SURVEYS<sup>80</sup>**

Survey:	Field	Bordua	Cambridge Reports	DMIa	DMIb	Hart	Ohio
Area:	California	Illinois	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	Ohio
Year of Interviews:	1976	1977	1978	1978	1978	1981	1982
Population covered:	Noninst. adults	Noninst. adults	Noninst. adults	Registered voters	Registered voters	Registered voters	"Residents"
Gun Type Covered:	Handguns	All guns	Handguns	All guns	All guns	Handguns	Handguns
Recall Period:	Ever/1,2 yrs.	Ever	Ever	Ever	Ever	5 yrs.	Ever
Excluded Uses Against Animals?	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Excluded Military, Police Uses?	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Defensive question asked of:	All Rs	All Rs	Protection hgun owners	All Rs	All Rs	All Rs	Rs in hgun households
Defensive question refers to:	Respondent	Respondent	Respondent	Household	Household	Household	Respondent
% Who Used	1.4/3/8.6 <sup>a</sup>	5.0	18	15	7	4	6.5
% Who Fired Gun	2.9	n.a.	12	6	n.a.	n.a.	2.6
Implied number of def. gun uses <sup>b</sup>	3,052,717	1,414,544	n.a.	2,141,512	1,098,409	1,797,461	771,043

<sup>80</sup> FIELD INSTITUTE, TABULATIONS OF THE FINDINGS OF A STUDY OF HANDGUN OWNERSHIP AND ACCESS AMONG A CROSS SECTION OF THE CALIFORNIA ADULT PUBLIC (1976); BORDUA ET AL., *supra* note 43; CAMBRIDGE REPORTS, *supra* note 36; DMI (DECISION/MAKING/INFORMATION), ATTITUDES OF THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE TOWARD GUN CONTROL (1979); Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., *supra* note 54; Ohio, *supra* note 36; Quinley, *supra* note 36; Mauser, *supra* note 19; the Gallup polls of 1991 and 1993, L.A. Times poll, and Tarrance poll were taken from a search of the DIALOG Public Opinion online computer database.

**Table 1 (continued)**  
**FREQUENCY OF DEFENSIVE GUN USE IN PREVIOUS SURVEYS**

Survey:	Time/CNN	Mauser	Gallup	Gallup	L.A. Times	Tarrance
Area:	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.	U.S.
Year of Interviews:	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1994
Population covered:	"Firearm owners"	Residents	Noninst. Adults	Noninst. Adults	Noninst. Adults	Noninst. Adults
Gun Type Covered:	All guns	All guns	All guns	All guns	All guns	All guns
Recall Period:	Ever	5 years	Ever	Ever	Ever	5 years
Excluded Uses Against Animals?	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Excluded Military, Police Uses?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Defensive question asked of:	Gun owners	All Rs	Rs in hgun hshlds	Gun owners	All	All
Defensive question refers to:	Respondent	Hshld.	Respondent	Respondent	Respondent	Respondent/Household
% Who Used	n.a.	3.79	8	11	8 <sup>c</sup>	1/2 <sup>d</sup>
% Who Fired Gun	9-16 <sup>e</sup>	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Implied number of def. gun uses <sup>b</sup>	n.a.	1,487,342	777,153	1,621,377	3,609,682	764,036

## Notes:

a. 1.4% in past year, 3% in past two years, 8.6% ever.

b. Estimated annual number of defensive uses of guns of all types against humans, excluding uses connected with military or police duties, after any necessary adjustments were made, for U.S., 1993. Adjustments are explained in detail in Kleck (1994).

c. Covered only uses outside the home.

d. 1% of respondents, 2% of households.

e. 9% fired gun for self-protection, 7% used gun "to scare someone."

An unknown share of the latter could be defensive uses not overlapping with the former.

**Table 2**  
PREVALENCE AND INCIDENCE OF CIVILIAN DEFENSIVE GUN USE, U.S., 1988-1993<sup>a</sup>

Recall Period:		Past Year				Past Five Years			
Base:		Person		Household		Person		Household	
Gun Types:		All Guns	Handguns	All Guns	Handguns	All Guns	Handguns	All Guns	Handguns
Weighted	A: <sup>c</sup>	66	49	79	55	165	132	194	148
Sample Cases	B: <sup>c</sup>	56	40	68	46	148	115	172	129
% Used <sup>b</sup>	A:	1.326	0.985	1.587	1.105	3.315	2.652	3.898	2.974
	B:	1.125	0.804	1.366	0.924	2.974	2.311	3.456	2.592
Persons/ Households	A:	2,549,862	1,893,079	1,540,405	1,072,434	6,374,655	5,099,724	3,782,767	2,885,822
	B:	2,163,519	1,545,371	1,325,918	896,945	5,717,872	4,442,941	3,353,794	2,515,345
Annual Uses	A:	2,549,862	1,893,079	1,540,405	1,072,434	1,884,348	1,442,941	1,158,283	515,345
	B:	2,163,519	1,545,371	1,325,918	896,945	1,683,342	888,588	1,029,615	505,069

*Population Bases:* Estimated resident population, age eighteen and over, U.S., April, 1993: 190,538,000; estimated households (assuming the 1992-1993 percentage increase was the same as the 1991-1992 increase): 97,045,525 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993, at 17, 55).

*Notes:*

- a. Defensive uses of guns against humans by civilians (i.e. excluding uses by police officers, security guards or military personnel). All figures are based on weighted data (see text).
- b. Percent of persons (households) with at least one defensive gun use during the five years (one year) preceding the interview.
- c. *A* estimates are based on all reported defensive gun uses reported in the survey. *B* estimates are based on only cases with no indications that the case might not be a genuine defensive gun use.

**Table 3**  
**THE NATURE OF DEFENSIVE GUN USE INCIDENTS<sup>a</sup>**

	%
<b>A. What the Defender Did with the Gun<sup>b</sup></b>	
Brandished or showed gun	75.7
Verbally referred to gun	57.6
Pointed gun at offender	49.8
Fired gun (including warning shots)	23.9
Fired gun at offender, trying to shoot him/her	15.6
Wounded or killed offender	8.3
<b>B. Location of Incident</b>	
In defender's home	37.3
Near defender's home	35.9
At, in, near home of friend, relative, neighbor	4.2
Commercial place (bar, gas station, office, factory)	7.5
Parking lot, commercial garage	4.5
School (in building, on school property, playground)	0.3
Open area, on street or public transportation	7.4
Other locations	2.3
<b>C. Type of Crime Defender Thought Was Being Committed<sup>b</sup></b>	
Burglary	33.8
Robbery	20.5
Other theft	6.2
Trespassing	14.8 <sup>c</sup>
Rape, sexual assault	8.2
Other assault	30.4
Other crime	9.5
<b>D. Did Offender Get Away with Money or Property?</b>	
% of property crimes with property loss:	11.0
<b>E. Violence Directed at Defender</b>	
No threat or attack	46.8
Threatened only	32.3
Attacked but not injured	15.3
Attacked and injured	5.5
(In incidents where defender was threatened or attacked): Who was first to threaten or use force?	
Defender	15.3
Offender	83.5
Someone else	1.3
<b>F. Offender's Weapons<sup>b</sup></b>	
None (unarmed)	51.9
Weapon	48.1
Handgun	13.4
Other gun	4.5
Knife	17.8
Other sharp object	2.0
Blunt object	9.9
Other weapon	5.9
<b>G. Shooting</b>	
Did offender shoot at defender?	
% of all incidents	4.5
% of incidents with offender armed with gun	26.2
Did both parties shoot?	
% of all incidents	3.1
<b>H. Type of Gun Used by Defender</b>	
Revolver	38.5
Semi-automatic pistol	40.1
Other, unspecified handgun	1.1
Rifle	6.4
Shotgun	13.9

<b>I. Relationship of Offender to Defender</b>	
Stranger	73.4
Casual acquaintance	8.3
Neighbor	1.3
Boyfriend, girlfriend	1.0
Other friend, coworker	1.0
Brother, sister	0.0
Son, daughter	0.5
Husband, wife	3.1
Other relationship	4.2
Unknown	7.3
<b>J. Number of Offenders</b>	
1	47.2
2	26.1
3-4	17.6
5-6	4.0
7 or more (includes 3 cases where defender could only say there was a very large number)	5.0
<b>K. Defender's Perceived Likelihood that Someone Would Have Died Had Gun Not Been Used for Protection</b>	
Almost certainly not	20.8
Probably not	19.3
Might Have	16.2
Probably would have	14.2
Almost certainly would have	15.7
Could not say	13.7
<b>L. Were Police Informed of Incident or Otherwise Find Out?</b>	64.2

*Notes:*

- Table covers only defensive uses against persons, and excludes nine cases where respondents refused to provide enough detail to confirm incidents as genuine defensive uses.
- Percentages will sum to more than 100% because respondents could legitimately select or report more than one category.
- Only 3.7% of incidents involved trespassing as *only* crime.

**Table 4**  
**COMPARISON OF DEFENDERS WITH OTHER PEOPLE**  
**(WEIGHTED PERCENTAGES)**

	Sample <sup>a</sup>				All Persons
	Defenders	No-DGU Gun owners	Non-owners	No DGU	
Personally owns gun	59.5	100.0	0.0	23.9	25.5
Gun in household	79.0	100.0	16.3	36.3	37.9
Carries gun for protection	47.3	23.3	2.1	7.3	8.8
Burglary victim, past year	19.3	4.5	4.9	4.9	5.5
Robbery victim, past year	12.9	1.9	2.0	2.1	2.5
Assault victim as adult	46.8	29.3	18.3	21.5	22.5
Nights away from home, monthly average					
0	8.2	5.2	8.9	8.2	8.2
1-6	27.5	24.1	33.4	31.5	31.2
7-13	23.2	28.2	22.7	23.8	23.9
14+	42.0	42.5	35.0	36.8	36.6
Must depend on self rather than cops	77.0	69.7	50.0	55.0	55.8
Supports death penalty	72.4	85.2	65.8	70.5	70.6
Courts not harsh enough	75.2	78.9	71.5	74.0	74.0
Gender (% male)	53.7	75.4	37.1	46.4	46.7
Age					
18-24	25.7	10.2	14.3	13.1	13.5
25-34	36.9	21.6	22.6	22.1	22.6
35-44	20.6	26.8	25.2	25.5	25.4
45-64	14.2	30.6	25.9	27.3	26.8
65+	2.6	10.9	12.1	12.0	11.7
Race					
White	72.4	90.3	83.0	84.6	84.1
Black	16.8	5.1	9.7	8.6	8.9
Hispanic	8.0	3.2	4.9	4.6	4.8
Other	2.8	1.3	2.4	2.2	2.1
Place of Residence					
Large City (over 500,000)	32.5	14.7	24.7	22.2	22.6
Small city	29.8	32.2	27.7	29.4	29.3
Suburb of large city	25.5	28.1	32.6	31.3	31.1
Rural area	12.2	24.9	15.1	17.2	17.0
Marital Status					
Married	50.8	69.1	57.5	60.5	60.1
Widowed	0.6	2.2	6.5	6.2	6.0
Divorced/Separated	15.3	10.9	11.2	11.8	12.0
Never married	33.3	17.8	24.8	21.4	21.9
Annual Household Income					
Under \$15,000	12.3	7.4	15.3	13.6	13.5
\$15,000-29,999	30.1	23.2	27.9	26.9	27.2
\$30,000-44,999	22.2	30.3	23.0	24.5	24.4
\$45,000-59,999	18.6	17.8	20.0	19.2	19.2
\$60,000-79,999	7.9	12.1	8.0	8.9	8.9
\$80,000 or more	8.8	9.2	5.8	6.8	6.9
Gun-related Occupation	2.4	4.9	2.0	3.2	3.1

*Notes:*

a. "Defenders" are persons who reported a defensive gun use against another person in the preceding five years, excluding uses in connection with military, police, or security guard duties. This sample includes nine cases where such a use was reported, but the respondent did not provide further details.

"No-DGU gun owners" are persons who report personally owning a gun but did not report a defensive gun use.

"Nonowners" are persons who did not report personally owning a gun and who did not report a defensive gun use. These persons may, however, live in a household where others own a gun.

"No DGU" are persons who did not report a defensive gun use, regardless of whether they reported owning a gun.

## **Violence, firearms, and the coronavirus pandemic: Findings from the 2020 California Safety and Wellbeing Survey**

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## Key Points

**QUESTIONS:** Has the coronavirus pandemic modified (1) individuals' worry about violence for themselves or others, (2) the prevalence of and reasons for firearm and ammunition acquisition, and (3) firearm storage practices?

**FINDINGS:** In this cross-sectional, population-representative survey of 2,870 adults in California, worry about multiple types of violence for oneself increased during the pandemic; pandemic-related loss contributed to concern that someone else might physically harm themselves on purpose; an estimated 110,000 people acquired firearms due to the pandemic (2.4% of firearm owners in the state), including approximately 47,000 new owners; and 6.7% of owners who currently store firearms loaded and not locked up adopted this unsecure storage practice in response to the pandemic.

**MEANING:** Violence is a significant public health problem that touches the lives of far more people than is typically recognized. The coronavirus pandemic and efforts to lessen its spread have compounded this burden.

## Abstract

**IMPORTANCE:** Violence is a significant public health problem that has become entwined with the coronavirus pandemic. Conditions that contribute to violence—poverty, unemployment, lack of available resources, isolation, hopelessness, and loss—have intensified and are further compounded by the recent surge in firearm sales, which is itself a risk factor for firearm-related harm.

**OBJECTIVE:** To describe individuals' worry about violence for themselves and others in the context of the pandemic, pandemic-related unfair treatment, as well as the prevalence of and reasons for firearm acquisition and changes in firearm storage practices due to the pandemic.

**DESIGN, SETTING, AND PARTICIPANTS:** This cross-sectional study used data from the California Safety and Wellbeing Survey, a statewide Internet survey of 2,870 California adults (18 years of age and older) conducted from July 14 to July 27, 2020. Responses were weighted to be representative of the state population of adults.

**MAIN OUTCOMES AND MEASURES:** Survey topics for this study included: changes in worry about violence happening to oneself, by type of violence and location, before and during the pandemic; concern someone else might physically hurt another person or themselves on purpose due to a pandemic-related loss; experiences of unfair treatment related to the pandemic; firearm and ammunition acquisition and changes in firearm storage practices due to the pandemic; and participation in civic and political activities “in response to gun violence” during the pandemic.

**RESULTS:** Worry about violence significantly increased during the pandemic for all violence types except mass shootings. More than 1 in 10 respondents were concerned that someone they know might intentionally harm another person (12.2%) or themselves (13.1%). Of those concerned about self-harm for someone else, 7.5% said it was because the person had suffered a pandemic-related loss. An estimated 110,000 individuals acquired a firearm in response to the

pandemic (2.4% of current firearm owners), including 47,000 new owners. Approximately 55,000 individuals (1.2% of owners) who currently store at least one firearm loaded and not locked up said they had adopted this unsecure storage practice in response to the pandemic.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RELEVANCE:** Given the impulsive nature of many types of violence, short-term crisis interventions, such as options for temporary firearm storage outside the home, extreme risk protection orders, and efforts involving community-based violence intervention workers, may be critical for reducing violence-related harm now and following other societal shocks.

## INTRODUCTION

In the United States (US), in 2018, there were nearly 68,000 violence-related deaths.<sup>1</sup> An additional 3.3 million people reported having been victims of nonfatal violent crime.<sup>2</sup> Most deaths (57%) and nearly 471,000 nonfatal violent victimizations involved a firearm.<sup>1,2</sup> Black, Indigenous, and people of color endure a disproportionate share of this burden.<sup>3-5</sup> It is reasonable to expect that the emergence and progression of the coronavirus pandemic—with nearly 7.2 million confirmed cases and over 205,000 deaths nationally as of September 30, 2020<sup>6</sup>—combined with the social, psychological, and economic fallout associated with efforts to lessen its spread, are intensifying violence-related harms and inequities therein.

The pandemic has exacerbated longstanding injustices rooted in systemic racism and other oppressive systems of power that contribute to the underlying conditions (e.g., poverty, unemployment, lack of available resources) that elevate risk for, and compound the consequences of, community violence.<sup>7-10</sup> Recent, largely peaceful,<sup>11</sup> protests decrying structural inequities, which simultaneously allow police violence and the uneven burden of disease to persist, have been met, at times, by law enforcement use of crowd-control weapons<sup>12</sup> and heavily armed white supremacist and far-right vigilantes.<sup>13</sup> Pandemic-induced social isolation, hopelessness, and loss, particularly for people with existing mental health problems such as depression, may result in thoughts of suicide. Violence in the home may increase in frequency and severity as household members, including intimate partners, children, and vulnerable elders, spend more time at home together under high-stress conditions. Having a firearm readily available in these situations creates additional risk.<sup>14-17</sup>

While most major news sources reported initial decreases in violent crime, as measured by local police calls for service, following pandemic-related lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, the latest indications are that more serious acts of violence, particularly those involving firearms, have remained the same or increased.<sup>18</sup> In addition to a marked rise in shootings in several big

cities across the country,<sup>19</sup> the pandemic appears to have fueled a surge in firearm background checks, an established proxy for firearm sales. Previous spikes in purchasing, such as those following mass shootings and political elections, have been associated with increased firearm violence.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, recent research suggests an excess of 2.1 million firearm purchases during the first three months of the pandemic, corresponding with an additional 216 to 1,335 fatal and nonfatal firearm-related injuries nationwide.<sup>21</sup>

However, the lack of self-report data capturing individuals' lived experiences of violence in the context of the pandemic has limited our understanding of the intersection of these coinciding public health problems. One of the only studies to survey individuals who purchased a firearm due to the pandemic relied on a non-representative sample of respondents who did not reflect the socio-demographic profile of most firearm owners.<sup>22</sup> The current study provides what is to our knowledge the first population-representative estimates of individuals' worry about violence for themselves, before and during the pandemic; concern someone they know might harm themselves or others due to a pandemic-related loss; experiences of unfair treatment related to the pandemic; firearm and ammunition purchasing and changes in firearm storage practices due to the pandemic; and civic or political activities undertaken "in response to gun violence" during the pandemic.

## METHODS

Data for this cross-sectional survey study come from the 2020 California Safety and Wellbeing Survey, a statewide survey designed by the University of California Firearm Violence Research Center and the Violence Prevention Research Program, both at the University of California Davis, and administered online from July 14 to July 27, 2020 by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos). The survey was approved by the University of California Davis Institutional Review Board.

Respondents were drawn from KnowledgePanel, an online survey research panel with approximately 60,000 members who are randomly recruited on an ongoing basis through probability-based sampling. Panel members who were aged 18 years and older and residents of California, except those currently serving in the US Armed Forces, were eligible to participate. Invitations were sent by e-mail; automatic reminders were e-mailed to non-responders three days later. Of 5,018 panel members invited to participate, 2,870 completed the survey, yielding a 57% completion rate. The median survey completion time was 26 minutes.

A final survey weight variable provided by Ipsos adjusts for the initial probability of selection into KnowledgePanel and for survey-specific non-response and over- or under-coverage using post-stratification raking ratio adjustments based on cross-classifications of age, gender, race-ethnicity, education, household income, language proficiency, and California region. The weighted sample is representative of the noninstitutionalized adult population of California as reflected in the 2018 American Community Survey.

Survey questions for this study covered five broad domains: (1) worry about violence happening to oneself, by type of violence (homicide, suicide, mass shooting, assault, robbery, police violence, accidental shooting, and stray bullet shooting) and incident location, before and during the pandemic; (2) concern that someone else might physically harm another person or themselves in response to a pandemic-related loss; (3) experiences of unfair treatment related to the pandemic; (4) firearm and ammunition acquisition and firearm storage practices (among current firearm owners) in response to the pandemic; and (5) participation in civic and political activities “in response to gun violence” during the pandemic. Detailed survey items and response options are in **Appendix 1**. Sociodemographic information was collected as part of ongoing panel membership and merged with survey responses.

### Statistical Analysis

To generate statewide prevalence estimates, we calculated weighted percentages and 95% confidence intervals (CI) for each measure or cross-tabulation of measures using the survey and weighting commands in Stata v15.1 (StataCorp LP, College Station, TX). To evaluate differences in responses during compared with before the pandemic, overall and by respondent characteristics, we fit weighted repeated measures multinomial logistic regression models, including interactions between respondent characteristics and an indicator for the period of reference. The margins command was used to generate prevalence differences and 95% CI.

## RESULTS

Approximately two in five respondents (39.8%; 95% CI: 37.1-42.6) reported that they personally know someone who had tested positive for coronavirus, and 1.3% (95% CI: 0.9-2.0) reported that they themselves had tested positive, while 4.2% (95% CI: 3.2-5.3) reported that they had been sick with coronavirus but had not been tested. Additional sociodemographic and firearm ownership-related characteristics of respondents are in **Appendix 2**.

### Worry about violence

The percentage of respondents who reported that they were somewhat or very worried about violence happening to them significantly increased during the pandemic for all violence types except mass shootings, ranging from a 2.8 percentage point increase for robbery (from 65.5% to 68.2%;  $p < 0.01$ ) to 5.4 percentage points each for police violence (from 45.3% to 50.6%;  $p < 0.001$ ) and unintentional shootings (from 42.7% to 48.0%;  $p < 0.001$ ) and 5.6 percentage points for stray bullet shootings (from 44.5% to 50.0%;  $p < 0.001$ ) (**Table 1**). In contrast, worry about mass shootings declined 4.6 percentage points (from 59.9% to 55.3%;  $p < 0.001$ ) during the pandemic.

The percentage of respondents who reported being somewhat or very worried about violence happening to them in their neighborhood significantly increased during the pandemic, from 48.4% to 52.2% ( $p < 0.01$ ); there was no change in worry about violence in the home or somewhere else (**Table 1**). Among those who expressed worry about violence in their home, neighborhood, or somewhere else, before and/or during the pandemic, similar percentages reported that their worry was at least in part due to their spouse or intimate partner (9.7% [95% CI: 7.9-11.9] before and 9.0% [95% CI: 7.3-11.1] during) (**Appendix 3**). Of those, most were somewhat or very willing to ask for help from a domestic violence hotline (75.4%; 95% CI: 65.5-83.3), family member or friend (86.8%; 95% CI: 77.1-92.8), and law enforcement (89.5%; 95% CI: 80.5-94.6) (**Appendices 4-6**).

The share of respondents who reported worry about violence by sociodemographic characteristics and firearm ownership status is in **Appendices 3-17**.

#### Concern about violence for others

Of the 12.1% (95% CI: 10.4-14.1) of respondents who reported concern that someone they know might physically hurt another person on purpose, 1.8% (95% CI: 0.7-4.4) reported that their concern was at least in part because the person had suffered a major loss (e.g., loss of someone they cared about, a job, or housing) that was related to the pandemic (**Table 2**). Likewise, but more pronounced, of the 13.3% (95% CI: 11.5-15.3) of respondents who reported concern that someone they know might physically hurt themselves on purpose, 7.5% (95% CI: 4.5-12.2) reported that their concern was at least in part because the person had suffered a pandemic-related loss.

Among respondents whose concerns were due to a pandemic-related loss, most said they did not know whether the other person had access to a firearm (89.8% [95% CI: 58.9-98.2] for other-directed harm and 57.4% [95% CI: 32.9-78.7] for self-harm); 6.0% (95% CI: 1.2-25.8) of

respondents who were concerned that someone they know might harm themselves due to a pandemic-related loss said the person had access to a firearm (**Table 2**).

### Experiences of unfair treatment

More than two-thirds of respondents (69.2%; 95% CI: 66.6-71.7) reported that they had experienced at least one form of unfair treatment in the past 12 months (**Table 3**). Of those, 7.4% (95% CI: 5.6-9.6) said the unfair treatment was related to the pandemic. Asian respondents most often reported pandemic-related unfair treatment: 17.2% (95% CI: 10.2-27.5) of Asian respondents who experienced unfair treatment said it was related to the pandemic, compared with 10.7% (95% CI: 2.2-39.5) of those who identified as multiracial or other race, 7.5% (95% CI: 2.4-20.5) of Black respondents, 7.4% (95% CI: 5.1-10.7) of white respondents, and 3.0% (95% CI: 1.5-5.9) of Latinx respondents.

### Firearm acquisition and storage practices

Nearly one in four respondents (23.5%; 95% CI: 21.3-25.9) reported that they or someone else in their household owned firearms; 15.2% (95% CI: 13.4-17.2) of respondents reported that they were a firearm owner (**Appendix 1**). Among owners, 2.4% (95% CI: 1.1-5.0) reported that they had acquired a firearm in response to the pandemic, while 8.5% (95% CI: 5.0-14.0) of owners, including all of those who had acquired a firearm, said that they had purchased ammunition in response to the pandemic (**Table 4**). Among those who had acquired a firearm in response to the pandemic, 43.0% (95% CI: 14.8-76.6) reported that they did not already own a firearm. Extrapolating to the population of adults in California (30.1 million in 2018), we estimate approximately 110,000 Californians acquired firearms in response to the pandemic, including 47,000 new owners.

The most common reason given for firearm acquisition in response to the pandemic was worry about lawlessness (75.9%; 95% CI: 27.6-96.3), followed by worry about prisoner releases

(56.1; 95% CI: 22.0-85.3), the government going too far (49.2%; 95% CI: 17.7-81.3), government collapse (38.0%; 95% CI: 12.2-73.0), and gun stores closing (31.1%; 95% CI: 9.7-65.4) (**Table 4**). Reasons for ammunition purchases in response to the pandemic were similar. Firearm owners (vs non-owners) and those who had acquired a firearm in response to the pandemic (vs non-owners and owners without a pandemic-related acquisition) also had the largest percentage increases in their level of worry about multiple types of violence during (vs before) the pandemic (**Appendices 7-17**).

Among firearm owners, 62.7% (95% CI: 56.2-68.7) reported that they currently store all of their firearms in the most secure way (i.e., unloaded and locked up), 18.0% (95% CI: 13.1-24.1) store at least one firearm in the least secure way (i.e., loaded and not locked up), and the remainder store their firearms in some other way (18.6%; 95% CI: 14.8-23.1) (e.g., unloaded but not locked up) (**Table 4**). Of owners who currently store at least one firearm in the least secure way, 6.7% (95% CI: 2.7-15.6) reported that this reflected a change in storage practice due to the pandemic. Of those, approximately half (53.0%; 95% CI: 17.2-86.0) lived in households with children or teens.

#### Civic and political activity

More than half (52.4%; 95% CI: 50.0-55.2) of respondents reported that they had done one or more civic or political activities “in response to gun violence” in the past 12 months (**Table 5**). Of those, the plurality reported that they had read about a political candidate’s position (40.7%; 95% CI: 38.1-43.4). Nearly one in four respondents (22.2%; 95% CI: 19.4-25.3) who reported having done something in the past 12 months (11.6% [95% CI: 10.1-13.4] of adults in the state) said that they had also done something in the past 2 months, during the pandemic and protests for racial justice and police accountability.

## DISCUSSION

Violence is a significant public health problem which touches the lives of far more people than is typically recognized; violence affects people not only through direct involvement, but also through indirect and vicarious experiences that ripple across individuals, families, and entire communities. Our findings from this first-of-its-kind population-representative survey of California adults add support to a growing body of research suggesting that the coronavirus pandemic and efforts to lessen its spread have compounded the burden of violence-related harms.

Our respondents expressed increased levels of worry about violence during compared with before the pandemic, ranging from 2.8 to 5.6 percentage point increases in the estimated statewide prevalence of adults who reported that they were somewhat or very worried about multiple types of interpersonal violence (i.e., robbery, assault, homicide, police violence), suicide, and unintentional firearm injury happening to them. Pandemic-related experiences of unfair treatment were also reported and disproportionately common among Asian Americans. In addition, more than one in ten respondents were concerned that someone they know might physically harm another person (12.1%) or themselves (13.3%) on purpose. The role of the pandemic was particularly pronounced for those concerned about self-harm for someone else: 7.5% said their concern was at least in part because the person had suffered a pandemic-related loss. In 6.0% of these cases, the person had known access to a firearm.

Emerging research also indicates a surge in firearm background checks in the months coinciding with the pandemic,<sup>21</sup> though we are among the first to estimate the prevalence of and motivations for ammunition and firearm acquisition in direct response to the pandemic. We found that approximately 1 in 12 (8.5%) firearm owners in California purchased ammunition in response to the pandemic, including roughly 110,000 individuals who also acquired firearms (2.4% of owners in the state). Of those, an estimated 47,000 were new owners, who may have little past experience or training with firearms. Previous spikes in firearm purchasing have been

associated with increased firearm violence,<sup>20</sup> and recent evidence suggests a similar relationship exists during the pandemic.<sup>21</sup>

Consistent with the most common reasons for firearm ownership generally,<sup>23,24</sup> respondents who acquired firearms in response to the pandemic usually did so for self-protection: three-quarters (75.9%) indicated worry about lawlessness and more than half (56.1%) endorsed worry about prisoner releases. Although the perceived need for self-protection continues to motivate firearm ownership amid the pandemic, an extensive body of evidence suggests instead that the presence of a firearm in the home elevates risk for firearm-related harm, particularly unintentional shootings (often involving children), female homicide victimization, and completed suicide.<sup>14-17</sup> More concerning, perhaps, is that people who own firearms primarily for protection are more likely to store firearms in the home loaded and/or not locked up,<sup>25</sup> an independent risk factor for firearm injury and death. Our findings suggest the pandemic may contribute to this risk: an estimated 55,000 people (1.2% of owners in the state) who currently store at least one firearm loaded and not locked up reported adopting this unsecure storage practice in response to the pandemic.

Taken together, our findings add support to long-term public health-oriented prevention and intervention strategies designed to address the enduring psychological trauma associated with exposure to and worry about violence, as well as the intermediary (e.g., firearm ownership and storage) and upstream (e.g., socioeconomic, education, the environment) determinants of violence risk. More immediately, given the impulsive nature of many types of violence, and the multiple acute disruptions associated with the pandemic, short-term crisis interventions, such as options for temporary firearm storage outside the home, extreme risk protection orders, and efforts involving community-based violence intervention workers, may be particularly critical for reducing the burden of violence. As underscored in our results, many respondents (52.4%) have already taken action in response to this prevailing public health problem.

## Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, we rely on self-report data, which is subject to social desirability, non-response, and recall biases. However, several administrative data sources provide an opportunity to broadly assess the validity of our estimates. The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center documented 346,000 to 458,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus in California at the time our survey was in the field, close to our 391,000 estimate after extrapolating to the population of adults in the state. Similarly, National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) data show roughly 557,000 people underwent a firearm background check in California from March through June 2020, compared with 465,000 during the same period in 2019. This amounts to a year-over-year increase of 92,000, close to our 110,000 estimate of pandemic-related firearm acquisitions.

Second, given state-level differences in infection rates and in efforts to lessen the spread and impacts of coronavirus, as well as California's relatively low rates of firearm ownership and more comprehensive firearm regulations, our findings might not be generalizable to other states. However, coronavirus is a near ubiquitous exposure across the US and nationally-representative studies have similarly found deleterious impacts of the pandemic on psychological health,<sup>26</sup> as well as nationwide pandemic-related spikes in firearm purchasing.<sup>21</sup>

Third, we use a retrospective pre-post approach to compare responses before and during the pandemic, which may inaccurately reflect the impacts of the pandemic if respondents' knowledge or experiences associated with the pandemic led them to interpret questions in a qualitatively different manner. However, some research suggests that when individuals are asked to respond to questions about a particular subject after they have some basic knowledge of or experience with the subject itself, they are better able to accurately reflect on the degree of change.<sup>27</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated persistent structural, economic, and social inequities in the conditions that contribute to violence and its consequences. Findings from this study assessing the near-term effects of the pandemic on individual perceptions, motivations, and behaviors related to violence and firearm ownership can inform prevention and intervention efforts now and following other societal shocks, as well as lay the groundwork for more comprehensive research and prevention efforts in the future.

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<b>Table 1. Prevalence of worry about violence, before and during the coronavirus pandemic, by violence type and location, 2020 California Safety and Wellbeing Survey, N=2870</b>						
	Before the pandemic		During the pandemic		During - Before	
	% (95% CI)		% (95% CI)		Difference (p-value)	
	Not worried	Somewhat/very worried	Not worried	Somewhat/very worried	Not worried	Somewhat/very worried
Type						
Homicide	54.7 (51.9-57.5)	44.0 (41.2-46.9)	51.2 (48.4-54.0)	47.6 (44.8-50.4)	3.5 (0.001)	3.6 (0.001)
Suicide	74.6 (71.9-77.1)	24.5 (22.0-27.2)	71.0 (68.3-73.7)	27.7 (25.1-30.5)	3.5 (0.001)	3.2 (0.002)
Mass shooting	39.1 (36.5-41.7)	59.9 (57.3-62.6)	43.2 (40.5-46.0)	55.3 (52.6-58.1)	4.2 (0.000)	4.6 (0.000)
Assault	39.9 (37.3-42.6)	59.1 (56.4-61.8)	36.5 (33.9-39.2)	62.4 (59.7-65.1)	3.4 (0.001)	3.3 (0.002)
Robbery	33.5 (31.0-36.2)	65.5 (62.8-68.0)	30.8 (28.4-33.4)	68.2 (65.6-70.7)	2.7 (0.008)	2.8 (0.008)
Police violence	53.7 (50.8-56.5)	45.3 (42.5-48.1)	48.1 (45.4-50.9)	50.6 (47.8-53.4)	5.5 (0.000)	5.4 (0.000)
Unintentional shooting	56.2 (53.3-59.0)	42.7 (39.9-45.5)	51.0 (48.2-53.8)	48.0 (45.3-50.9)	5.2 (0.000)	5.4 (0.000)
Stray bullet shooting	54.7 (51.9-57.5)	44.5 (41.7-47.3)	48.8 (46.0-51.6)	50.0 (47.3-52.8)	5.9 (0.000)	5.6 (0.000)
Location						
Home	70.6 (67.9-73.1)	27.9 (25.4-30.5)	69.4 (66.7-72.0)	29.1 (26.5-31.7)	1.2 (0.294)	1.2 (0.291)
Neighborhood	50.0 (47.3-52.8)	48.8 (46.0-51.6)	46.5 (43.7-49.2)	52.2 (49.4-55.0)	3.6 (0.002)	3.4 (0.003)
Somewhere else	27.2 (24.8-29.7)	71.3 (68.8-73.7)	26.7 (24.3-29.1)	71.7 (69.2-74.1)	0.1 (0.654)	0.0 (0.710)

<b>Table 2. Prevalence of respondents concerned that someone they know might physically hurt another person or themselves on purpose, reasons for concern, and firearm access, California Safety and Wellbeing Survey, N=2870</b>		
	Another person	Themselves
	% (95% CI)	% (95% CI)
Total	12.1 (10.4-14.1)	13.3 (11.5-15.3)
Reasons for concern		
Pandemic-related loss	1.8 (0.7-4.4)	7.5 (4.5-12.2)
Firearm access		
Yes	0	6.0 (1.2-25.8)
No	10.2 (1.8-41.1)	36.6 (17.2-61.6)
Don't know	89.8 (58.9-98.2)	57.4 (32.9-78.7)
Other non-pandemic reasons only	98.2 (95.6-99.3)	92.5 (87.8-95.5)

	Experienced unfair treatment	Coronavirus-related unfair treatment
	% (95% CI)	% (95% CI)
Total	69.2 (66.6-71.7)	7.4 (5.6-9.6)
Asian	66.9 (58.4-74.4)	17.2 (10.2-27.5)
Black	75.9 (63.8-85.0)	7.5 (2.4-20.5)
Latinx	69.1 (64.3-73.5)	3.0 (1.5-5.9)
Multiracial/other	69.2 (50.7-83.1)	10.7 (2.2-39.5)
White	69.1 (65.7-72.3)	7.4 (5.1-10.7)

<b>Table 4. Prevalence of firearm and ammunition acquisition in response to the pandemic and related characteristics among firearm owners, 2020 California Safety and Wellbeing Survey, N=529</b>		
	Firearms	Ammunition
	% (95% CI)	% (95% CI)
Acquired in response to the pandemic	2.4 (1.1-5.0)	8.5 (5.0-14.0)
Did not already own a firearm	43.0 (14.8-76.6)	
Reasons for acquisition		
Lawlessness	75.9 (27.6-96.3)	77.1 (46.6-92.8)
Prisoner releases	56.1 (22.0-85.3)	49.2 (24.6-74.2)
Government going too far	49.2 (17.7-81.3)	38.5 (17.8-64.4)
Government collapse	38.0 (12.2-73.0)	52.9 (27.6-76.7)
Gun stores closing	31.1 (9.7-65.4)	35.8 (15.3-63.3)
Hunting	10.5 (1.4-49.4)	7.2 (1.8-24.6)
Sport shooting	10.5 (1.4-49.4)	8.1 (2.7-22.2)
Some other reason	0	4.0 (0.9-15.9)
Firearm storage		
All guns unloaded and locked up	62.7 (56.2-68.7)	
Change in response to the pandemic	0	
≥1 gun(s) loaded and not locked up	18.0 (13.1-24.1)	
Change in response to the pandemic	6.7 (2.7-15.6)	
Some other way	18.6 (14.8-23.1)	
Note: Reasons for acquisition are not mutually exclusive		

<b>Table 5. Prevalence of participation in civic or political activities in response to gun violence in America, California Safety and Wellbeing Survey, N=2870</b>	
	% (95% CI)
Total, past 12 months	52.4 (50.0-55.2)
Read about political candidate's position	40.7 (38.1-43.4)
Signed a petition	18.0 (16.0-20.2)
Encouraged family/friends to take action	16.6 (14.7-18.7)
Gave money to a political candidate or party	11.6 (10.2-13.1)
Posted thoughts/comments online	11.3 (9.7-13.1)
Gave money to an advocacy or nonprofit organization	9.8 (8.4-11.5)
Contacted an elected official	8.9 (7.7-10.2)
Volunteered with an organization	7.7 (6.4-9.2)
Participated in an organized protest	5.5 (4.4-6.9)
Attended a political campaign event	3.9 (3.2-4.9)
Total, past 2 months	11.6 (10.1-13.4)
Political party	
Democrat	13.3 (11.1-15.7)
Republican	9.6 (7.4-12.4)
Undecided/independent/other	4.1 (1.5-11.2)
Political ideology	
Conservative	9.5 (7.1-12.7)
Liberal	18.2 (14.8-22.3)
Moderate	6.0 (4.3-8.3)

**Los Angeles Times**

**Gun sales are soaring. And it's not just conservatives stocking up**

By Kate Linthicum

Oct. 30, 2020

SANTA FE, N.M. —

Bill Roney was steaming.

The owner of the largest gun store in Santa Fe, N.M., had more customers clamoring for firearms than ever before — but he was running out of guns and bullets to sell to them.

“You’re telling me you’re not receiving ammunition — not a single round?” he badgered a supplier on the phone who had just informed him that everything was out of stock. “Now I don’t want to be grumpy, but I also want my business to continue.”

Firearm stores around the country are in the same situation, with largely barren shelves and gun racks that have been nearly cleaned out.

Americans have purchased almost 17 million guns so far in 2020, more than in any other single full year on record, according to Small Arms Analytics & Forecasting, a research firm that tracks firearms.

Higher-than-average gun sales have long been a common feature of presidential election years, as American as brightly colored yard signs and nonstop political advertisements on television.

But this year’s buying spree is different — and not just because it’s bigger.

In previous election years, sales spikes were believed to be driven almost entirely by longtime gun owners who worried that a Democratic president might impose new restrictions on firearms.

This time, the sales appear to be driven by fears of societal instability, and gun shop owners and trade groups say the customer base is much broader, including large numbers of Black Americans, women and people who identify as politically liberal.

“People are uneasy,” said Jay Winton, who works at Roney’s Santa Fe shop, the Outdoorsman, which is out of stock of many varieties of weapons and ammunition, as well as accessories such as gun safes.

“They’re concerned about the long-term path of the country,” he said. “And just like they were hoarding toilet paper, they’re hoarding guns and ammo.”

Left-leaning retirees have been coming through the doors in droves, waiting in lines alongside ranchers and overlooking the blue Trump-Pence posters that hang near the hunting rifles.

Winton said many are like the older couple that recently came in to buy a gun for the first time.

“They were self-described Berkeley liberals who said they were preparing for the coming societal collapse,” he said.

Adding to the ammo shortage is Inez Russell, a writer in Santa Fe, who said she was worried about right-wing militias that have staged protests around the state.

“Either side feels like if their side loses, the country is coming to an end,” she said. “And one side has more guns than the other.”

Lately, Russell has been doing more target shooting and working on her gun-loading skills.

“I find shooting very calming because you have to really concentrate and be in the moment,” she said. “It is very satisfying to have control in such a tumultuous world.”

The COVID-19 pandemic, economic uncertainty and a summer of civil unrest in response to police killings of unarmed Black people have raised national anxieties like no time in recent memory, said Florida State University sociologist Benjamin Dowd-Arrow, who studies gun owners.

Nationally, homicides have surged during the pandemic, climbing 15% in the first half of 2020, according to the FBI. The reasons are unclear, although some observers speculate that it may have to do with the

shaky economy or with officers pulling back from their duties because of greater community distrust in police.

Concerns over a chaotic election and the specter of political violence have only further fueled gun sales, with people on the left and the right worried about the months to come.

“We’ve created a powder keg of people who are afraid for different reasons,” Dowd-Arrow said. “When people feel that they can become victimized, they want to protect themselves.”

The FBI performed 28.8 million background checks on people seeking to buy firearms and accessories in the first nine months of 2020 — more than the annual total for any previous year. The total for all of last year was 28.3 million.

Early in the pandemic, factory shutdowns interrupted supply chains for gun makers, but manufacturing quickly resumed to pre-pandemic levels, said Mark Oliva, a spokesman for the National Shooting Sports Foundation, a trade association for the firearms and ammunition industries.

Now, he said, “this is an issue of overwhelming demand.”

His organization recently surveyed firearm retailers and found that an estimated 40% of customers nationally this year were first-time gun buyers, up from an average of 24% in recent years.

Black Americans bought guns at a rate 58% higher than in previous years — the largest increase for any demographic group.

At Los Ranchos Gun Shop in Los Ranchos de Albuquerque, a community of farmland and stately adobe homes set along the Rio Grande, it’s become common for people to walk in and say, “I’ve never owned a gun before,” said store owner Mark Abramson.

Most new clients say they want a gun for self-defense. Abramson said his store has seen an increase in women and people of color. Some Asian Americans have told him they were afraid of being targeted in racially motivated attacks after President Trump repeatedly blamed China for spreading the coronavirus to the rest of the world.

Abramson, who considers himself a liberal, said he sees more gun sales as a natural consequence of heightened political tensions, which he believes have been exacerbated by the news media. He and his employees have talked about the need to defend their store from looting should violence break out after the election.

“If you’re fomenting fear and violence at the very extremes, there’s a point where people take up arms,” Abramson said.

There are other reasons people are buying guns, he said.

When the government was offering federal unemployment insurance subsidies to people who lost work because of the pandemic, many people were earning more than they were when they had jobs.

“There was a lot of people with a lot of extra cash,” he said.

And there’s crime. Albuquerque has some of the highest rates of property and violent crime in the nation, although homicides have decreased slightly this year.

“A lot of people feel they cannot rely on the police,” Abramson said.

He said he fields about 75 calls a day from people looking for products that he usually sells but hasn’t been able to keep in stock lately.

On a recent morning, a man named Jason stopped by on his way to work looking for ammo. He was in luck.

There was one box of bullets left for his AR-15-style rifle. He was surprised to see that the package of 20 bullets was available for just \$11 as opposed to the \$20 or \$30 being charged online.

“There’s been so much price gouging,” he said.

The man, who declined to give his last name because he did not want his employer to know that he owns a gun, said he had been into firearms for a few years.

“But I’m not a gun nut,” he said. “I’m not a Republican or anything.”

He said several of his friends who never were gun owners bought firearms for the first time this year.

“Everyone is scared,” he said. “On all sides.”

FIREARM AND AMMUNITION INDUSTRY

# ECONOMIC IMPACT

REPORT | 2021



**NSSF**  
The Firearm Industry  
Trade Association

# Who is the National Shooting Sports Foundation?

The National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) is the trade association for firearm, ammunition, hunting and recreational shooting sports industry. Formed in 1961, its mission is to promote, protect and preserve hunting and the shooting sports. NSSF's membership comprises approximately 9,000 manufacturers, distributors, firearm retailers, shooting ranges, sportsmen's organizations and publishers.

America's firearm and ammunition industry is a critical component of our nation's security, public safety, and economic well-being. For more than 200 years, the industry has made products

that have been part of our country's tradition of freedom, self-reliance and enjoyment of the outdoors. The firearm and ammunition industry is proud to provide the U.S. military and federal, state and local law

**NSSF**<sup>®</sup>  
**The Firearm Industry  
Trade Association**

enforcement agencies with the tools they need to carry out their vital national security and public

safety missions, and is essential for law-abiding Americans to exercise their Second Amendment right to acquire a firearm and ammunition for personal protection and home defense. Without our industry, the right to keep and bear arms would be a mere illusion.

The firearm industry is committed to the safe, legal, and responsible ownership and use of firearms, and works on a daily basis to stop their criminal misuse. Through Real Solutions. Safer Communities<sup>®</sup>, NSSF leads the way in promoting responsible ownership of firearms and helping to keep guns out of the wrong hands.

## The Firearm and Ammunition Industry Economic Impact Report

This report details the significant economic impact the firearm and ammunition industry has on our economy, both nationally and at the state level. The economic growth America's firearm and ammunition industry has experienced in recent years has been nothing short of remarkable and has been driven by an unprecedented number of Americans choosing to exercise their fundamental right to keep and bear arms. This includes an estimated 8.4 million new gun owners in 2020.

The report also notes the significant impact the firearm and ammunition industry has on wildlife conservation funding in America through its growing Pittman-Robertson excise tax contributions to the Wildlife Restoration Trust Fund.

Regardless of economic conditions across the country, our industry has grown and created over 176,000 new, well-paying jobs since the middle of the Great Recession in 2008. Our industry is proud to be one of the bright spots in our economy.

Take a look for yourself and see the impact we have nationally and on your home state.

(See center spread.)



**The Firearm Industry Creates Jobs in America**

United States manufacturers, distributors, and retailers of firearms, ammunition, and supplies are an important part of our economy. They provide Americans well-paying jobs and pay significant amounts in federal and state taxes.

**The Economic Impact of the Commercial Arms and Ammunition Industry in the United States**




**The Firearm & Ammunition Industry is an Important Part of America’s Economy**

Companies in the United States that manufacture, distribute, and sell firearms, ammunition, and hunting equipment employ as many as 153,414 people in the country and generate an additional 188,916 jobs in supplier and ancillary industries. These include jobs in supplying goods and services to manufacturers, distributors, and retailers, and those that depend on sales to workers in the firearm and ammunition industry.<sup>1</sup>

These are good jobs paying an average of \$56,400 in wages and benefits. And today, every job is important. The United States currently has an unemployment rate of 6.71 percent. This means that there are already 10,779,000 people trying to find jobs in the state and collecting unemployment benefits.<sup>2</sup>

**The Economic Benefit of the Industry Spreads Throughout the Country**

Not only does the manufacture and sale of firearms and hunting supplies create good jobs in the United States, but the industry also contributes to the economy as a whole. In fact, in 2020 the firearm and ammunition industry was responsible for as much as \$63.49 billion in total economic activity.

The broader economic impact flows throughout the economy, generating business for firms seemingly unrelated to firearms. Real people, with real jobs, working in industries as varied as banking, retail, accounting, metal working, even in printing, all depend on the firearm and ammunition industry for their livelihood.

**The Country Also Benefits From the Taxes Paid By The Industry**

Not only does the industry create jobs, it also generates sizeable tax revenues. In the United States, the industry and its employees pay over \$6.98 billion in taxes including property, income, and sales based levies.<sup>3</sup>

Taxes Generated in The United States		
Tax Impact	Business Taxes	Excise Taxes
<b>Federal Taxes</b>	<b>\$4,054,260,100</b>	<b>\$665,253,000</b>
<b>State Taxes</b>	<b>\$2,931,471,500</b>	
<b>Total Taxes</b>	<b>\$6,985,731,600</b>	<b>\$665,253,000</b>

<sup>1</sup> John Dunham & Associates, New York, December 2020. Direct impacts include those jobs in firearms and ammunition manufacturers, as well as companies that manufacture products such as ammunition holders and magazines, cases, decoys, game calls, holsters, hunting equipment, scopes, clay pigeons and targets. Direct impacts also include those resulting from the wholesale distribution and retailing of these products.

<sup>2</sup> The Bureau of Labor Statistics. Available online at: [www.bls.gov/lau/home.htm](http://www.bls.gov/lau/home.htm). Data for Nov.-2020.

<sup>3</sup> This is in addition to over \$665.25 million in federal excise taxes.

# ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF ARMS AND AMMUNITION INDUSTRIES, 2020

	Direct			Suppliers			Jobs
	Jobs	Wages	Output	Jobs	Wages	Output	
Alabama	3,227	\$ 131,004,200	\$ 508,477,900	1,477	\$ 94,148,900	\$ 332,637,000	1,947
Alaska	677	\$ 20,857,000	\$ 56,493,100	161	\$ 9,391,200	\$ 28,438,300	297
Arizona	3,901	\$ 272,039,200	\$ 911,161,500	2,095	\$ 167,389,500	\$ 467,407,400	3,509
Arkansas	3,423	\$ 136,463,900	\$ 839,248,300	1,633	\$ 101,124,000	\$ 374,049,100	2,057
California	10,010	\$ 521,860,900	\$ 1,478,666,000	5,318	\$ 476,949,600	\$ 1,325,131,200	7,868
Colorado	2,966	\$ 144,309,800	\$ 442,582,800	1,603	\$ 122,523,100	\$ 328,147,700	2,271
Connecticut	2,146	\$ 184,771,200	\$ 711,099,200	1,287	\$ 136,966,700	\$ 357,770,100	1,906
Delaware	189	\$ 5,488,400	\$ 10,663,300	77	\$ 5,274,700	\$ 20,991,700	134
District of Columbia	115	\$ 6,888,300	\$ 10,936,300	33	\$ 3,789,400	\$ 7,699,300	65
Florida	7,870	\$ 340,271,800	\$ 1,260,968,100	4,307	\$ 285,999,000	\$ 860,543,900	6,248
Georgia	4,630	\$ 206,401,700	\$ 873,537,000	2,613	\$ 186,938,400	\$ 620,633,500	3,520
Hawaii	210	\$ 8,228,200	\$ 20,633,400	69	\$ 4,242,700	\$ 13,304,000	142
Idaho	3,103	\$ 147,232,900	\$ 644,717,200	1,493	\$ 95,621,700	\$ 309,033,200	2,027
Illinois	5,178	\$ 298,818,100	\$ 1,193,248,800	3,471	\$ 297,087,300	\$ 897,390,300	4,629
Indiana	2,980	\$ 84,953,300	\$ 240,249,600	1,416	\$ 96,635,500	\$ 383,776,700	1,787
Iowa	1,344	\$ 47,863,700	\$ 149,785,500	618	\$ 39,811,700	\$ 137,276,100	902
Kansas	2,631	\$ 125,062,700	\$ 402,553,900	836	\$ 57,056,400	\$ 176,186,400	1,332
Kentucky	2,080	\$ 66,611,500	\$ 198,149,200	885	\$ 53,421,300	\$ 207,183,500	1,233
Louisiana	2,392	\$ 69,812,100	\$ 207,256,300	960	\$ 54,895,800	\$ 235,540,100	1,328
Maine	1,144	\$ 41,413,200	\$ 149,059,900	459	\$ 26,684,100	\$ 80,191,500	712
Maryland	1,648	\$ 111,609,400	\$ 421,709,500	803	\$ 75,974,900	\$ 194,045,500	1,344
Massachusetts	2,996	\$ 224,052,400	\$ 1,212,251,200	1,948	\$ 211,452,400	\$ 572,514,400	2,878
Michigan	4,410	\$ 173,732,400	\$ 487,156,500	2,475	\$ 174,627,100	\$ 528,067,900	3,117
Minnesota	5,010	\$ 367,392,100	\$ 1,261,609,700	3,014	\$ 272,535,700	\$ 742,413,400	4,908
Mississippi	2,334	\$ 103,243,500	\$ 419,653,300	1,101	\$ 64,587,400	\$ 247,976,000	1,438
Missouri	5,472	\$ 203,731,100	\$ 655,453,000	2,313	\$ 149,905,500	\$ 444,823,600	3,537
Montana	1,366	\$ 42,867,300	\$ 167,880,400	514	\$ 26,799,400	\$ 88,116,100	757
Nebraska	1,925	\$ 74,270,500	\$ 296,475,000	771	\$ 50,639,600	\$ 167,175,700	1,198
Nevada	1,907	\$ 71,905,100	\$ 223,004,800	734	\$ 44,593,400	\$ 131,291,000	1,068
New Hampshire	2,572	\$ 218,129,400	\$ 966,084,400	1,539	\$ 150,997,800	\$ 384,041,700	2,405
New Jersey	1,153	\$ 85,463,400	\$ 261,952,800	807	\$ 79,923,200	\$ 225,871,000	1,223
New Mexico	783	\$ 19,776,900	\$ 60,941,400	243	\$ 11,498,600	\$ 44,845,200	404
New York	3,359	\$ 224,766,600	\$ 860,427,800	2,117	\$ 230,540,300	\$ 633,734,600	3,124
North Carolina	5,655	\$ 236,277,300	\$ 850,318,500	3,027	\$ 199,624,400	\$ 622,476,800	3,912
North Dakota	621	\$ 19,750,100	\$ 41,523,900	172	\$ 9,727,600	\$ 27,759,000	320
Ohio	5,668	\$ 201,883,000	\$ 532,660,700	2,673	\$ 178,059,500	\$ 625,972,600	3,709
Oklahoma	2,400	\$ 68,610,200	\$ 204,754,300	897	\$ 47,631,100	\$ 163,547,100	1,282
Oregon	2,694	\$ 179,614,300	\$ 650,859,700	1,971	\$ 167,814,500	\$ 453,087,400	2,417
Pennsylvania	5,792	\$ 248,026,500	\$ 758,219,200	2,947	\$ 236,703,800	\$ 708,844,200	4,245
Rhode Island	259	\$ 20,672,500	\$ 79,107,500	178	\$ 14,978,900	\$ 49,197,600	223
South Carolina	3,633	\$ 146,996,700	\$ 551,326,200	1,953	\$ 119,796,800	\$ 393,799,000	2,332
South Dakota	1,130	\$ 37,741,000	\$ 158,706,600	394	\$ 23,309,600	\$ 75,647,800	631
Tennessee	3,772	\$ 144,629,800	\$ 375,946,600	1,660	\$ 115,152,200	\$ 347,639,300	2,347
Texas	12,037	\$ 479,544,000	\$ 1,610,047,900	6,040	\$ 438,093,100	\$ 1,494,418,100	8,570
Utah	3,491	\$ 134,896,600	\$ 528,882,200	1,771	\$ 112,418,300	\$ 344,172,000	2,300
Vermont	587	\$ 27,910,700	\$ 89,273,900	230	\$ 15,918,500	\$ 44,728,500	385
Virginia	2,624	\$ 98,979,400	\$ 385,723,300	1,311	\$ 94,351,200	\$ 297,418,700	1,727
Washington	3,443	\$ 145,207,400	\$ 493,866,400	1,546	\$ 122,132,400	\$ 348,280,000	2,144
West Virginia	873	\$ 22,154,500	\$ 69,880,100	296	\$ 16,538,900	\$ 66,411,500	440
Wisconsin	2,799	\$ 108,257,000	\$ 373,101,700	1,692	\$ 115,952,300	\$ 371,322,800	2,021
Wyoming	785	\$ 32,949,900	\$ 167,775,000	269	\$ 16,637,800	\$ 60,647,100	379
<b>Total</b>	<b>153,414</b>	<b>\$ 7,135,393,100</b>	<b>\$ 25,526,060,800</b>	<b>78,217</b>	<b>\$ 5,904,867,200</b>	<b>\$ 18,063,616,600</b>	<b>110,699</b>

Source: John Dunham and Associates, Inc.  
New York, New York 2020

# STATE BY STATE ECONOMIC IMPACT REPORT

Induced		Total			Average	Federal
Wages	Output	Jobs	Wages	Output	Wage	Excise Tax
\$ 93,620,600	\$ 314,704,400	6,651	\$ 318,773,700	\$ 1,155,819,300	\$ 47,929	\$ 14,383,819
\$ 13,272,700	\$ 37,425,400	1,135	\$ 43,520,900	\$ 122,356,800	\$ 38,344	\$ 3,440,933
\$ 221,360,900	\$ 638,598,100	9,505	\$ 660,789,600	\$ 2,017,167,000	\$ 69,520	\$ 12,584,888
\$ 94,990,400	\$ 388,947,900	7,113	\$ 332,578,300	\$ 1,602,245,300	\$ 46,756	\$ 10,236,452
\$ 524,337,100	\$ 1,610,480,300	23,196	\$ 1,523,147,600	\$ 4,414,277,500	\$ 65,664	\$ 56,673,281
\$ 126,476,000	\$ 379,303,600	6,840	\$ 393,308,900	\$ 1,150,034,100	\$ 57,501	\$ 13,808,085
\$ 155,744,400	\$ 433,758,600	5,339	\$ 477,482,300	\$ 1,502,627,900	\$ 89,433	\$ 6,005,193
\$ 7,461,100	\$ 31,540,100	400	\$ 18,224,200	\$ 63,195,100	\$ 45,561	\$ 1,023,875
\$ 5,839,300	\$ 13,576,800	213	\$ 16,517,000	\$ 32,212,400	\$ 77,545	\$ 1,171,009
\$ 319,156,000	\$ 1,033,606,100	18,425	\$ 945,426,800	\$ 3,155,118,100	\$ 51,312	\$ 34,179,648
\$ 184,638,300	\$ 637,750,000	10,763	\$ 577,978,400	\$ 2,131,920,500	\$ 53,700	\$ 18,361,082
\$ 7,055,200	\$ 27,347,900	421	\$ 19,526,100	\$ 61,285,300	\$ 46,380	\$ 1,673,325
\$ 104,849,600	\$ 335,291,200	6,623	\$ 347,704,200	\$ 1,289,041,600	\$ 52,500	\$ 7,824,223
\$ 301,256,500	\$ 970,823,500	13,278	\$ 897,161,900	\$ 3,061,462,600	\$ 67,568	\$ 15,782,637
\$ 83,771,800	\$ 293,960,700	6,183	\$ 265,360,600	\$ 917,987,000	\$ 42,918	\$ 15,793,186
\$ 43,281,300	\$ 171,886,300	2,864	\$ 130,956,700	\$ 458,947,900	\$ 45,725	\$ 5,961,881
\$ 72,191,600	\$ 225,348,900	4,799	\$ 254,310,700	\$ 804,089,200	\$ 52,992	\$ 12,235,536
\$ 54,595,500	\$ 185,831,900	4,198	\$ 174,628,300	\$ 591,164,600	\$ 41,598	\$ 10,598,157
\$ 55,337,300	\$ 214,457,900	4,680	\$ 180,045,200	\$ 657,254,300	\$ 38,471	\$ 12,671,410
\$ 32,713,000	\$ 100,263,100	2,315	\$ 100,810,300	\$ 329,514,500	\$ 43,547	\$ 5,838,028
\$ 94,131,300	\$ 292,344,400	3,795	\$ 281,715,600	\$ 908,099,400	\$ 74,233	\$ 6,017,728
\$ 222,147,300	\$ 710,133,800	7,822	\$ 657,652,100	\$ 2,494,899,400	\$ 84,077	\$ 4,591,562
\$ 157,455,400	\$ 489,905,800	10,002	\$ 505,814,900	\$ 1,505,130,200	\$ 50,571	\$ 23,121,090
\$ 333,878,400	\$ 924,290,000	12,932	\$ 973,806,200	\$ 2,928,313,100	\$ 75,302	\$ 13,735,727
\$ 69,522,000	\$ 236,166,600	4,873	\$ 237,352,900	\$ 903,795,900	\$ 48,708	\$ 6,469,238
\$ 170,134,500	\$ 507,620,300	11,322	\$ 523,771,100	\$ 1,607,896,900	\$ 46,261	\$ 24,410,199
\$ 30,698,300	\$ 99,482,800	2,637	\$ 100,365,000	\$ 355,479,300	\$ 38,060	\$ 4,952,534
\$ 60,190,700	\$ 204,143,300	3,894	\$ 185,100,800	\$ 667,794,000	\$ 47,535	\$ 7,378,783
\$ 50,418,900	\$ 154,294,500	3,709	\$ 166,917,400	\$ 508,590,300	\$ 45,003	\$ 11,924,304
\$ 172,317,800	\$ 512,607,600	6,516	\$ 541,445,000	\$ 1,862,733,700	\$ 83,095	\$ 2,898,511
\$ 94,067,300	\$ 303,803,100	3,183	\$ 259,453,900	\$ 791,626,900	\$ 81,512	\$ 5,850,412
\$ 14,700,300	\$ 53,187,800	1,430	\$ 45,975,800	\$ 158,974,400	\$ 32,151	\$ 4,201,260
\$ 270,619,800	\$ 807,822,800	8,600	\$ 725,926,700	\$ 2,301,985,200	\$ 84,410	\$ 10,523,522
\$ 202,607,700	\$ 662,163,400	12,594	\$ 638,509,400	\$ 2,134,958,700	\$ 50,699	\$ 22,150,999
\$ 13,625,900	\$ 41,050,300	1,113	\$ 43,103,600	\$ 110,333,200	\$ 38,727	\$ 3,555,215
\$ 179,911,500	\$ 579,888,600	12,050	\$ 559,854,000	\$ 1,738,521,900	\$ 46,461	\$ 32,669,267
\$ 51,102,900	\$ 168,144,100	4,579	\$ 167,344,200	\$ 536,445,500	\$ 36,546	\$ 12,450,670
\$ 147,422,800	\$ 440,943,400	7,082	\$ 494,851,600	\$ 1,544,890,500	\$ 69,875	\$ 7,908,006
\$ 234,503,200	\$ 709,985,400	12,984	\$ 719,233,500	\$ 2,177,048,800	\$ 55,394	\$ 29,182,129
\$ 15,228,700	\$ 50,324,600	660	\$ 50,880,100	\$ 178,629,700	\$ 77,091	\$ 630,073
\$ 110,698,400	\$ 357,858,200	7,918	\$ 377,491,900	\$ 1,302,983,400	\$ 47,675	\$ 14,351,732
\$ 28,562,000	\$ 96,488,400	2,155	\$ 89,612,600	\$ 330,842,800	\$ 41,584	\$ 4,695,308
\$ 124,249,100	\$ 350,630,400	7,779	\$ 384,031,100	\$ 1,074,216,300	\$ 49,368	\$ 22,189,460
\$ 448,062,800	\$ 1,506,238,400	26,647	\$ 1,365,699,900	\$ 4,610,704,400	\$ 51,252	\$ 61,185,536
\$ 108,923,900	\$ 360,176,700	7,562	\$ 356,238,800	\$ 1,233,230,900	\$ 47,109	\$ 14,665,957
\$ 20,604,000	\$ 59,157,500	1,202	\$ 64,433,200	\$ 193,159,900	\$ 53,605	\$ 2,768,933
\$ 85,733,700	\$ 313,872,800	5,662	\$ 279,064,300	\$ 997,014,800	\$ 49,287	\$ 11,062,176
\$ 121,467,400	\$ 379,485,300	7,133	\$ 388,807,200	\$ 1,221,631,700	\$ 54,508	\$ 20,838,824
\$ 16,721,200	\$ 58,029,800	1,609	\$ 55,414,600	\$ 194,321,400	\$ 34,440	\$ 4,306,075
\$ 101,468,700	\$ 349,494,800	6,512	\$ 325,678,000	\$ 1,093,919,300	\$ 50,012	\$ 12,150,405
\$ 18,152,900	\$ 72,179,000	1,433	\$ 67,740,600	\$ 300,601,100	\$ 47,272	\$ 2,170,719
<b>\$ 6,271,277,400</b>	<b>\$ 19,896,816,600</b>	<b>342,330</b>	<b>\$ 19,311,537,700</b>	<b>\$ 63,486,494,000</b>	<b>\$ 2,766,789</b>	<b>\$ 665,253,000</b>



## Economic Output: Top Ten States

Total Economic Output, dollars
Texas
California
Florida
Illinois
Minnesota
Massachusetts
New York
Pennsylvania
North Carolina
Georgia

Total Economic Output, per capita
New Hampshire
Idaho
Arkansas
Wyoming
Minnesota
Connecticut
Utah
South Dakota
Oregon
Massachusetts

Growth in Economic Output
Wyoming
Rhode Island
Nevada
Utah
Colorado
Vermont
North Dakota
Georgia
Illinois
Alaska



## Jobs: Top Ten States

Total Jobs, number
Texas
California
Florida
Illinois
Pennsylvania
Minnesota
North Carolina
Ohio
Missouri
Georgia

Total Jobs, per capita
New Hampshire
Idaho
Wyoming
Montana
South Dakota
Utah
Arkansas
Minnesota
Nebraska
Vermont

Growth in Jobs
Vermont
Nevada
Rhode Island
Wyoming
South Carolina
Tennessee
Hawaii
Delaware
Utah
North Dakota



## Excise Tax: Top Ten States

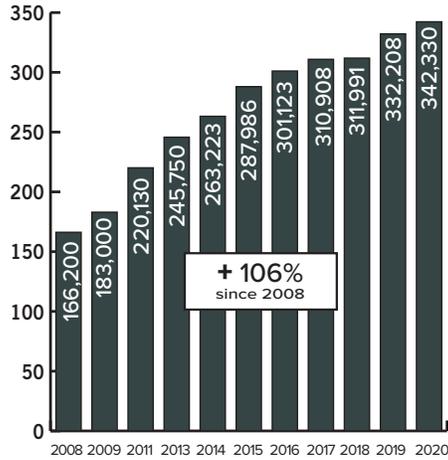
Federal Excise Taxes, number
Texas
California
Florida
Ohio
Pennsylvania
Missouri
Michigan
Tennessee
North Carolina
Washington

Federal Excise Taxes, per capita
South Dakota
Alaska
North Dakota
Montana
Utah
Vermont
Idaho
Maine
Kansas
Missouri

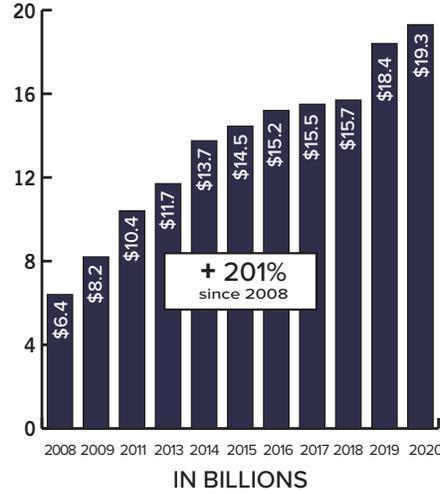
Growth in Excise Taxes
Vermont
South Carolina
Nevada
Michigan
Tennessee
Hawaii
Delaware
South Dakota
North Dakota
Rhode Island

# WHAT A GROWING INDUSTRY LOOKS LIKE...

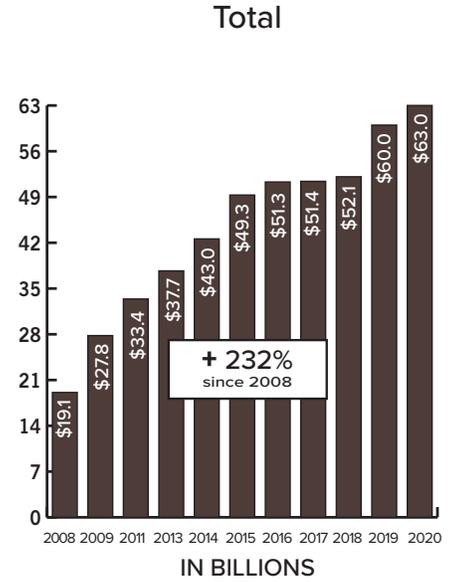
## JOBS



## WAGES

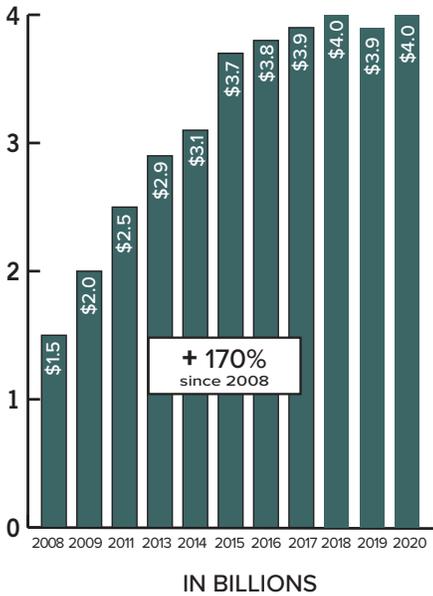


## ECONOMIC IMPACT

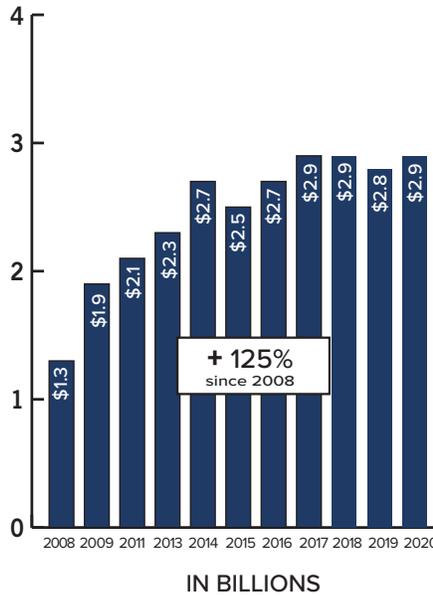


## TAXES GENERATED

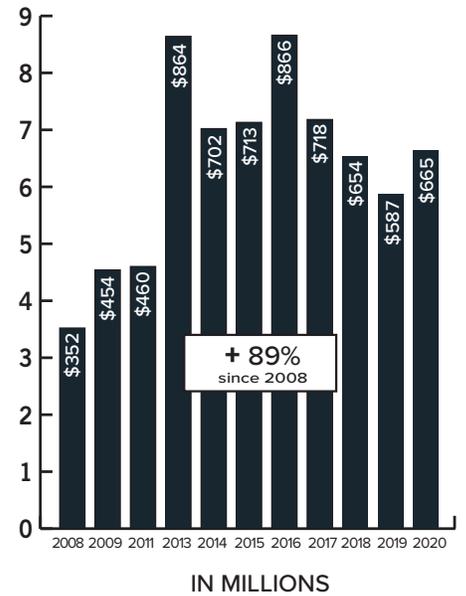
### Business Taxes Federal



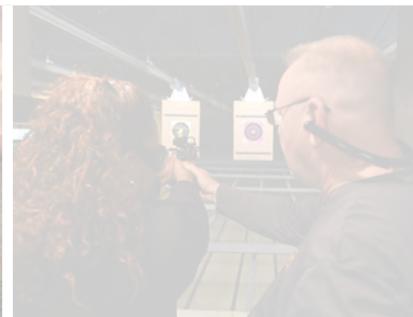
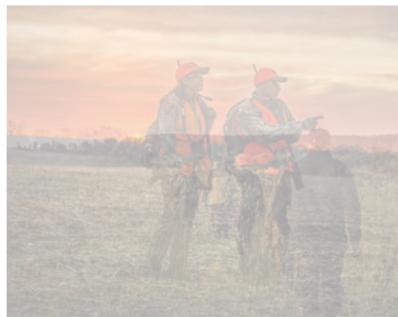
### Business Taxes State



### Excise Taxes



For any inquiries please contact us at:  
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The Firearm Industry  
Trade Association



# Novice Marksman's Field Guide to Your First AR-15

📅 May 25, 2021 | 👤 Matt | 💬 46 Comments

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## EQUIPMENT

### Quick Note from Matt

Welcome to Version 3.0 of this field guide, one of the most popular articles on the site. In this update, I included a bit more of my thinking about the "baseline" of the AR-15 platform and what it means to deviate from that baseline. Aside from that, there's the usual minor grammatical fixes or phrasing changes as well as some updated links.

As a bonus, I recorded a [podcast episode](#) to serve as a companion to this article. The content is very similar, but I know some readers prefer the more conversational tone of hearing me actually explain my thoughts.



This article contains affiliate links. [What does that mean?](#)

## Field Guide Introduction

I know your struggle right now. You're excited to jump into this new adventure and buy your first AR-15. But you don't quite know where to start. The huge number of options and configurations is downright overwhelming.

Before you go down this path, I want you to answer a simple question: Why do you want an AR-15?

I don't mean that in that judgemental way that a disbelieving friend or relative might ask it. Rather, I want you to think about the role you need this rifle to perform.

If you're like most first time buyers, then you might have a notion you want to have it for "just in case" moments. That means it needs to be reliable.

On the other hand, you might decide that you want to use it for competition or hunting someday, so it also needs to be accurate.

Then, of course, there's the "cool factor" and you want to proudly post pictures all over the internet. Frankly, this route is a bad idea- but regardless, that means it needs to look good, right?

It seems like there's more information out there than you can digest. In the end, you might get caught up in the same thing so many of us did when we started out: **paralysis by analysis**.

So let's start there.

## Bottom Line Up Front

If you're new to the site, then you likely don't know that I spend a lot of time explaining the "why" of things. It's a side effect of spending most of my professional life training others. But I get it, you might not have time to go through the rest of the article right now and get my reasoning.

This isn't a recipe blog, after all. So, let's get right to some recommendations.

I want to be up front and tell you that my recommendations aren't exactly on the budget end of the price spectrum. They aren't on the high end, either. Quality costs money and my goal is saving you time and expenses in

^

the long run.

Each of the rifles I suggest here are reliable, accurate, and will serve you well for years before you feel like you need something else. That's not to say you won't want something new, that's how black rifle disease (BRD) works.

One more thing, I am not sponsored and nobody is paying me to hawk their wares. What follows is simply my suggestions based on personal observation, research, and good reputation.

## Complete AR-15 Rifles

This is the most straight-forward path, though the slightly more expensive one. The alternative, which I'll get to in a minute, is buying the lower and assembled upper separately.

### Colt 6720 Lightweight Carbine

The [lightweight Colt 6720](#) is nearly perfect for a first AR-15. I would personally prefer that it have a mid-length gas system, but that's certainly not a deal breaker. With this particular option, you are set for a long time and are sure to have a very functional and easy to handle rifle.

With CZ's recent acquisition of Colt, I don't know what the future availability of this rifle will look like. But if you can find one, then jump on it.



^

The lightweight Colt 6270 is a near ideal first rifle

## Centurion Arms CM4

The [Centurion Arms CM4](#) is pretty much exactly the rifle I advocate in this article. It has a 16" barrel with a mid length gas system, lightweight rail and profile, and comes from a reputable source.

The owner, Monty, is a former Naval Special Warfare NCO with a wealth of experience on the weapons system and a reputation for innovation.



As a more premium option, the Centurion Arms CM4 is fantastic

## BCM Lightweight Recce

As a slightly more mainstream company, Bravo Company USA offers a ton of configurations and options. The [Lightweight Recce MCMR](#) is a fantastic alternative in the same style of the Centurion CM4.



The BCM Lightweight MCMR is well designed and will serve ust about anyone's needs for years

There are many other complete rifles I could recommend from Daniel Defense, Sionics, and other brands I like.

^

These companies all make great rifles, and I vouch for them. If this wasn't your first AR-15, I would probably even suggest one. But you will pay more for these than the ones I already listed, and they honestly don't bring a whole lot more to the table.

## Complete Uppers

Some people prefer to buy a lower and upper separately. This is actually my usual route.

You can actually save a little money with this path since you can buy half the weapon now and the other half later. You also have a lot more configuration options of pre-built uppers ready to go. I'm not really going to suggest complete lowers because there are simply too many out there to choose from, but an easy answer is any of the companies I've mentioned so far also have stripped and complete lower receivers.

These are my suggestions for your first AR-15 project:

## BCM Lightweight 16"

The [BCM Lightweight Standard 16"](#) is a great starter upper. It is what I used for my second project, and the base inspiration for the minimum capable carbine.

This provides a solid base to grow from, and comes in a lower price point than going with something a bit more "kitted out" with rails and other hardware.



## SIONICS Patrol Three Upper

SIONICS is not a commonly known name in the industry, but it's backed by some very dedicated people. Their [Patrol Three Upper](#) is a great option for a free-floated upper half.

SIONICS also produces this same configuration as a complete rifle if you wanted to go that route as well, and I think it's another great option as well.



## Guiding Principles for Your First AR-15

The AR-15 is the most popular self-loading rifle in the country.

Manufacturers spend an awful lot of advertising dollars to influence your opinion one way or another. Once you get to a certain level of quality, the subtle differences from one rifle to the next aren't really worth worrying about- but the marketing would have you think otherwise.

To start this off, I want to tell you my guiding principles when it comes to gear. You're going to see me repeat these all over the site as you read through articles.

I hate wasting money. Because of that, I spend a lot of time researching nearly every purchase I make. You're probably the same.

As an example, it took me three months to choose which 4" fixed blade knife I wanted for a gift. You can imagine what the year and a half looked like while I researched my first AR-15. Even then, I still got parts of it wrong.

^

I've learned to follow two guiding principles:

- **Mission drives gear**



## Key Takeaway

The simple truth is that a standard AR-15 with plastic handguards and a fixed front sight will do a solid job at any task you ask it to do. From CQB to mid range precision, it can handle it. However, there isn't money to be made by saying that you need to train and practice more than you need that super special barrel and bipod combo. As you dive deeper into the extra hardware and features, realize that you're just playing at the margins of performance and not having a dramatic impact on any of the most important features and functions of the rifle.

## Mission Drives Gear

This is an old military saying meaning that you should select equipment best suited to the task at hand. It doesn't make sense to use a very short-barreled rifle designed for close quarters in a long range precision role. Likewise, there is little benefit to using a nice precision match rifle for dumping high volumes of cheap ammunition into a dirt berm with you buddies.

As simple as the idea of mission drives gear may seem, there are an awful lot of people out there who aren't following it.

The AR-15, and all its various configurations, is one of the most well-understood and popular rifles in the world. There are hundreds, if not thousands of configurations.

The US military itself has worked through several variants:

- **M16A1** with triangular handguards, skinny barrel, and stupid-tough fixed rear sight
- **M16A2** with round handguards, "government" profile barrel and adjustable sights
- **M16A4** with railed handguards, detachable sights, and magnified optics
- **M4 and M4A1** carbine with short barrels and all sorts of gizmos



hanging off them, great for urban and mid-range combat.

- **Mk12 Special Purpose Rifle** with match barrel, free floated rail, and magnified optics
- **Mk18 CQBR** with a super short barrel, purpose-built for clearing buildings
- **The “Recce” rifle**, which was a special home brew precision M4 with 16” barrel

The thing to remember is that each of these configurations had a purpose in mind. Sure, government bureaucracy sometimes got in the way and drove some bad decisions, like the “government” profile barrel. But, in all, they do their specific jobs extremely well.

### **The Recce Rifle: Builder’s Guide to Modern Classic**

[Read More →](#)

### **A Builder’s Guide to the M16A5 Concept Rifle**

[Read More →](#)

### **Builder’s Guide to the Designated Marksman Rifle**

[Read More →](#)

## **Configuration Compromises**

The more you specialize an AR-15 for a particular role, the worse it performs at others. For example, short barreled rifles are great for quick handling at close range but have dramatic velocity drop off and skull-rattling concussion. Heavy barreled precision rifles suited to long-range shooting are a relative pain to carry.

This is at the extremes, of course.

That brings us back to the question: What is your mission? Why do *you* want to buy an AR-15?

If you’re like most of us, you don’t have an armory of each configuration to hand out on a situational basis. At least not starting out. Black rifles eventually tend to multiply like that, though.

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Consider that to be fair warning.

For someone starting out, it makes sense that the first one does a pretty good job at everything.

*A jack of all trades is a master of none, but oftentimes better than a master of one. It's just as true when it comes to choosing a rifle.*

[◀ Tweet That](#)

## Buy Nice or Buy Twice

If you are going to buy something, then buy enough quality to last.

When it comes to AR-15s, hucksters say Part X is **“just as good as”** Part Z. They usually don't have any proof of the claim, either. The end result is that the guy looking for a good deal buys the cheaper thing, and it break on them.

Now they need to buy a replacement.

I've seen someone buy three of the exact same cheap red dot sight. The first one broke after a few months, so they replaced it with the second. That one made it about a year before they replaced it with another. In all, **the money spent on three copies of the same cheap red dot was more than buying a single quality one.** That quality sight would have lasted practically forever, and come with a lifetime warranty.

Don't get me wrong, though, I'm not saying you should spend huge amounts of cash. I used to say *“Buy once, cry once” all of the time.* But I realized that I was encouraging the wrong line of thought.



### Key Takeaway

There is a point of diminishing returns in the AR-15 world. Right now, that point is around \$1400. Sure, you can spend a lot more than that. The difference between a \$1500 AR-15 and a \$3000 one isn't much. However, the difference between the \$500 and \$1000 price point is dramatic. Plan to spend the minimum amount to buy a quality rifle, which will be around \$900 for a bare bones carbine and \$1200 for

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something more fully featured.

## Market Price and Quality Control

The sweet spot for balancing quality and price with AR-15s is usually **between \$900 and \$1200**.

If a manufacturer starts advertising too far below that price, then you have to ask what compromises they are making to get there. I'm *not* saying that a bargain bin \$500 AR is going to explode in your hands tomorrow. But I am saying that to reach a \$500 price point, you don't know what kind of loose tolerances, quality control, testing, metallurgy, and care of assembly went into the product.

If the gun only ever turns money into noise by dumping lead into the berm, then it wouldn't matter. But if you *ever* suspect that you might be in a position where the rifle going bang every time you pulled the trigger is important to you, then you should consider spending a little more.

## Setting Baselines: A Brief History of the AR-15

With the basic rules on the table, let's talk about baselines. By that, I mean starting with a proven reliable configuration to serve as our model. I liken this to buying a new 4x4 vehicle like a 4Runner. Toyota designed, tested, and has proven that each component on the vehicle operates reliably for years upon years.

The problem is that enthusiasts aren't completely satisfied with a stock Toyota 4Runner. It's not terribly fast, nor does it have all of the electronic gizmos they want. Some folks want to add more lights, racks, bumpers, lift kits, suspension, and other mods. All of these things make for a more capable and fun vehicle, but the tradeoff has to come from somewhere. A supercharger adds power, but stresses the engine. Lift kits and larger tires add ground clearance and off road prowess, but shorten the life of other drivetrain components.

To summarize, every step you take away from the original design introduces variation and complexity that has drawbacks elsewhere, many have negative long term effects. I think the AR-15 is similar to this.

## The AR-15 Origin Story

The story of the AR-15 is less about the rifle and more about it's associated

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cartridge, the .223 Remington. I've written quite a bit about this evolution, but I'll give you the short version here for context.

For most of modern small arms history, there was a persistent belief that infantry rifles needed to fire the most powerful cartridges that could be tolerated by the average man. Such requirements usually included the ability to make aimed hits at 1000 yards and still take a target down.

As far back as the 1800s, there was a competing theory that a smaller and lighter bullet moving at high velocity was able to deliver most of the terminal capability of a larger bullet at relatively short distances, such as 200 to 300 yards. In 1930, the Army's R.H. Kent published a report backing the theory with evidence and hypothesized about future development.

The .30 caliber rifle reigned supreme until the 1950's when another science-driven effort by Norman Hitchman at the Army Operational Research Office (ORO) dug deeply into battlefield casualties, hit probability, and survival factors.



Hitchman stated that the Army's insistence on 1000-yard capability for the average rifleman was unfounded. Casualties from aimed small arms fire almost all happened within 100 yards, and almost never happened beyond 300 yards. Beyond that, it was essentially as random as shrapnel from artillery or a grenade.

The most important factor for whether or not someone is shot is how long they are exposed and how quickly the shooter can aim and fire. To survive meant being lighter and quicker, and to be effective meant improving sight acquisition and rate of accurate fire.

By those standards, Hitchman theorized that the ideal infantry weapon would be lightweight and effective up to 300 yards for aimed fire.

## Enter the AR-15

Around this same time, Armalite designs the AR-10 rifle around the newly-adopted 7.62 NATO battle rifle cartridge. Through the use of new manufacturing methods, lightweight aluminum, and composite materials, Armalite is able to reduce the weight of the heavy-hitting rifle. It unsuccessfully competes against the M-14 rifle for adoption by the US Army.

But the lightweight rifle made an impression, and Armalite eventually gets a request to scale the AR-10 down so that it shoots the lighter and faster experimental .223 cartridge gaining popularity with several Army Ordnance Office engineers.

I'm skipping a lot of details here, but the end result is a lightweight infantry rifle with a 20" barrel. The new rifle's lighter ammunition reduces the load on individual soldiers and allows them increased survivability (or increased ammunition capacity for the same weight) and improved hit probability due to lighter recoil and better ergonomics.

The rifle is ideally suited to combat at less than 300 yards, but still effective to a bit beyond that.

This is eventually the M-16, and the primary specs of being lightweight and primarily used as a general purpose rifle for up to 300 yards serves as our baseline.

## Your First AR-15: The Minimum Capable Carbine

I started developing this concept several years ago when interest in the AR-15 began spiking among my friends and coworkers. I was the "gun guy," so they wanted help. The suggestion that follows is the result of nearly ten years of experimentation, competition, training, and study.

It's not perfect, since everything is a compromise, but it works pretty darn well.

The **minimum capable carbine** is one that reliably performs most tasks well. This gives you time to learn the ins and outs of the platform and develop your skills with a rifle that *grows with you*.



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This AR-15 carries well, has good accuracy, and always fires as long as a basic maintenance routine is kept. It is equally suited to home defense as it is carrying on a hike through the woods.

## Minimum Capable Carbine Features

- **16" Lightweight** mid-length chrome lined barrel with a fixed front sight base
- *Alternative:* A 20" lightweight or government profile barrel with fixed front sight base
- Either quality plastic handguards or a basic free float rail
- Quality collapsible stock
- Quality pistol grip of choice
- **Standard trigger** or something close to it like the BCM PNT or ALG ACT
- Quality rear sight, with or without adjustment
- If you have the money to buy an optic, then do so- buy one of good quality. If you don't have the funds for a good one, then rock the iron sights until you save for it.
  
- **Bonus:** If you plan on using the weapon for defensive purposes, then you should mount a good light on it
- **Bonus:** You should get a sling, because retention matters

In a moment, I'll walk you through my choices here and explain each one. But before that, the question will come up:

## Should You Build or Buy Your First AR-15?

When I started out, buzz said was that it was cheaper to build your first

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AR-15. The idea was that you could buy the exact parts that you wanted and assemble them. This was cheaper than buying a complete quality-built rifle and then spending the money to replace the parts that you didn't want. It turns out that it was more expensive for me.

The **hidden costs** added up. From shipping all the individual parts to all the extra tools that I had to buy to complete the assembly. On top of that, I *still* had to pay someone else to assemble the upper correctly.

## The Story of My First AR-15: The Recce

📅 April 2, 2019 💬 16 Comments

I watched them do it and always questioned whether they did it right. To date, that upper has been rebuilt *three* times.

I spent about **\$2300** building my first AR, not including the optic. That kind of money could have bought me a KAC SR-15 or some other very high-quality rifle out of the box.



### Key Takeaway

Don't get caught in the trap of thinking you will save money buy building it yourself. There are too many hidden costs, and you aren't likely to do as good a job assembling it as a a factory with good QC practices.

These days, there are so many good manufacturers making such a wide variety of rifles that it is silly to choose the individual part selection route for a first rifle.

My suggestion, especially for your first AR-15, is to **buy a complete rifle** from a good manufacturer. My favorites include Colt, Centurion Arms, Bravo Company USA (BCM), SIONICS Weapon Systems, and Daniel Defense. These manufacturers produce a good product right around the sweet spot price point.

If you still have the itch to build, then you should buy a stripped lower receiver to finish. Then pick up a complete upper from one of the mentioned manufacturers.



## Let's Talk Specs

Several years ago, a gentleman by the name of Rob S put together the infamous *Chart*. In 2009, when I first read it, the chart was a list of technical specifications found in the government M16/M4 family. These specs contributed to the reliability and performance of the rifle.

It also highlighted which manufacturers were adhering to those specifications.

In the years since the chart went public, the gun buyers got smarter and more demanding about what they wanted. In response, manufacturers started touting their compliance, lest they be seen as inferior.

### AR-15 Technical Details: How to Read the Spec Sheet

📅 March 23, 2019    💬 8 Comments

These days, the chart is long gone, and nearly all those specs show up on every AR-15 sold. That made it more difficult to tell the difference between a good quality AR-15 and a lesser quality one by only looking only at the spec sheet.

That said, I want to run down the key specification points and offer some tips. This is not a comprehensive detailed breakdown. Each of these topics has their own associated blog post getting into more detail.

## Barrels

Choosing your barrel is a stressful decision for most beginners. There are simply a lot of options out there. I've copied some quick takeaways from that much larger article. I highly suggest you check out the full piece on [choosing an AR-15 barrel](#), which prepares you for making this decision.

The barrel, combined with the bolt carrier, is the beating heart of the rifle.

Buy a lightweight profile barrel made from **MIL-B-11595E** certified steel, which could either be 4150 ORD or CMV. Get it with a chrome lined bore and fixed front sight. This combination is the most versatile for people who own only one AR and need it to do lots of things well.

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- The lightweight barrel is accurate enough for target practice and some competition
- Lightweight barrels are easy to carry
- Chrome lined bores and chambers handle high rates of fire better than alternatives
- They handle well indoors for home defense.
- Fixed front towers are the strongest front sight available
- Fixed front towers offer the best accuracy potential with iron sights

I suggest either a 16" or 20" barrel. The length primarily affects the velocity and balance of the rifle. [Velocity has a huge impact on the trajectory of the bullet](#) as well as its effective range. The 16" is a good all-around length and a solid choice for most tasks. The 20" makes a fantastically shootable rifle with a flat trajectory, and is my personal favorite, but comes at the cost of a little more weight.

## The AR-15 Barrel Cheat Sheet: Everything You Need to Know

📅 November 16, 2020 🗨️ 73 Comments

### Barrel Profile

During the last Assault Weapons Ban, manufacturers pumped out heavy barreled (HBAR) variants. They targeted these towards competition shooters since heavy barrels tended to be more accurate. Their extra mass also helps put up with higher volumes of fire.

The accuracy thing is interesting. But if this is your first AR-15 then you are not likely to take advantage of the increased capability. If you're already a competitive high power shooter now moving into the AR platform, then a heavier barrel made of SS410 or 416r stainless steel might benefit you.

Otherwise, you are better served by learning the rifle and shooting out the first barrel as you practice. That will take about 20,000 rounds. For most people, that represents many years of shooting, if they ever get there. For professional shooters in competition, that's about a single season of practice, training, and competition.

It helps when your practice ammo and rebarreling costs are paid for by

^

someone else.

A **lightweight profile** puts up with plenty of abuse while also being easier to carry and maneuver. [Weight matters](#). I've been to many a training class where people start stripping junk off their rifles to save weight.

## **AR-15 Barrel Material**

^

There are a lot of barrel steels out there. Look for 4150 steel or better, as mentioned before with the government's 11595E specification. The cheaper 4140 steel isn't terrible, but 4150 is the minimum government spec for the AR-15. It has a bit more durability for use in firearms due to its higher carbon content.

Stainless barrels are often used in precision rifles. It's not that stainless is any more accurate than 4150, though. Historically, stainless barrels were easier to machine and polish, while also being more resistant to corrosion. That means manufacturers shorten their supply chain and produce more consistently machined barrels.



The Faxon Gunner barrel used on this rifle is made from 4150 steel and treated with a nitriding process

Better consistency means better accuracy.

^

Stainless barrels come with some risks in durability, particularly in very cold weather. For that reason, **stay away from lightweight profile stainless barrels**. They should always be a medium profile or heavier.

If you want to go the stainless route, then buy one made from 410 or 416r stainless. If you plan to use the rifle in below freezing weather, then stick to 416r.

## Lining

I chose chrome lining for your first AR-15 because it's more common, durable, and well understood. Nitrided barrels, which you often see advertised as Melonite/QPQ/Tenifer and other trade names, are barrels treated with a surface conversion process. This makes them very corrosion resistant and it doesn't have the accuracy trade-off of chrome lining.

The compromise is that nitrided barrels are much less heat tolerant of high rates of fire. This applies more to fully automatic rather than your regular semi-auto rifle. When it comes to nitrided barrels, I really like Faxon's options, and used one of their 18" gunner barrels on a lightweight project.

I know there are nitrided stainless barrels out there on the market. Be cautious here, since the temperature used for nitriding is very close to that used for tempering a barrel. Generally, I would avoid nitrided stainless barrels unless you're buying from a known high-quality manufacturer who certify the temperatures used in the process.

For more information here, [read my article all about barrel nitriding](#).

## AR-15 Twist Rate

Look for a **twist rate of 1-7 or 1-8**. Some cheaper barrels have a 1-9 twist rate, which work fine for shooting bulk ammo in the 55gr to 62gr range. But if you ever want to use the heavier and more accurate 77gr family of bullets, then you need the faster twist.

If you want more detailed information about selecting the right twist rate for your rifle, head over to [my article all about rifle twist rates](#).



## Rails and Handguards

Some people are particularly passionate about this. Plastic handguards work well for 95% of shooters out there. They are usually lighter, plenty durable, cheaper, and replaceable. I usually find them more comfortable as well since the shape is ergonomic and internal heat shields help protect my hand after lots of shooting.

I like the Magpul MOE series of plastic handguards.



Plastic handguards like the Magpul MOE are very comfortable and functional

Rails come in either free floated or non-free floated format. These days, I see no reason at all to have a non-free floated rail system.

The advantage of free floated rails is two fold:

- First, they offer lots of real estate for attaching accessories like lights or lasers.
- Second, they do not interfere with the barrel during firing. This provides a small, but noticeable, accuracy boost.

There are several well-made rails on the market that are even lighter than plastic handguards. Some of my favorites out there are made by **ALG**, **BCM**, and **Centurion Arms**.

^

Another of my rifles equipped with a lightweight BCM KMRA-A rail

## Triggers

AR-15 triggers are a highly personal thing, and everyone has their own preferences. I suggest reading my longer article about [AR-15 trigger selection](#) as a follow-up to this.

When I started out, I went immediately for a \$200+ Geissele SSA. Since then, I've installed an SSA-E, SD-E, and a Larue MBT. All of those are great triggers.

The last one used an ALG ACT, which simply a coated and polished mil-spec trigger.

### AR-15 Trigger Selection: Don't Overthink It

📅 October 30, 2018    💬 4 Comments

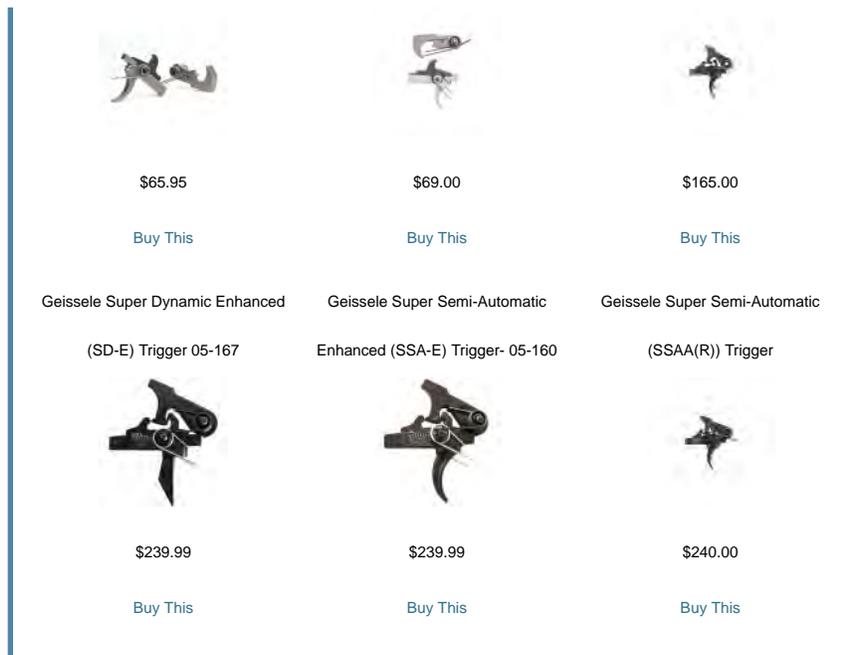
I prefer two stage triggers, but that doesn't mean it's the only way to go. I love my nice triggers, but I also realize they circumvented the process of learning to squeeze the trigger well. In truth, if I were starting over with my first AR-15, I would stay with a good mil spec trigger like the ALG ACT or BCM PNT for as long as possible.

Lighter triggers are not a replacement for poor fundamentals. A practiced shooter can take any trigger and use it effectively. Poor shooters seek to get "better" by fixing their issues with more gear. Get a decent mil-spec trigger and practice. Once you've mastered that, then consider a nicer trigger that gives you the extra accuracy with the skill you've already developed.

#### Mentioned in This Article

Bravo Company MFG (BCM) PNT	ALG Defense Combat Trigger - ACT	Geissele 2 Stage (G2S) Trigger
Trigger Assembly AR15		





## Muzzle Devices

To be honest, this is a bit of a pet peeve of mine. Far too many people are getting too complicated with this. The standard A2 birdcage flash hider is perfectly fine, and even desirable, for 90% of users.

But it's not expensive and fancy, so people want to replace it.

The bottom line is that muzzle brakes and compensators typically make more noise and flash in exchange for "fixing" something that you could do yourself with better shooting mechanics. For the average user, you're better off spending that money on more practice ammo to get a hold of your fundamentals and recoil management.

### What's the Difference Between Muzzle Brakes and Compensators?

📅 April 25, 2019    💬 11 Comments

For the other 10%, where a brake or comp might be useful, it means that you fall into one of three categories:

- You're already an expert at very fast shooting and need an extra edge in an action shooting match
- You live in a state that bans flash hidere (sorry about that)
- You have a suppressor that uses a muzzle brake as a sacrificial baffle

^

If one of those applies to you, then cool. Take your pick, as they all work about the same, and will cause you (and everyone else) the same amount of headache when you shoot it near them.

## The Buffer Tube and Stock

The stock is one of those things that most people take for granted. It's just...there. But it's also the only part of the rifle that makes contact with two parts of your body: your shoulder and your cheek.

That said, there's no need to over-complicate this. If you are buying a complete rifle, it probably comes with a pretty good stock already out of the box. Shoot it and enjoy it.

If you are taking the path of assembling your own or want to customize what you already have, then pick what looks good to you from Magpul, BCM, LMT, or B5. They all do their job well, and it isn't worth sifting through the small differences between them.



For a long time, I advocated for fixed rifle-length stocks. I still enjoy them. I

^

realize that there is a lot of utility sacrificed in the process, though. Fixed stocks offer much more stable cheek welds, which increases accuracy potential. This happens at the expense of adjustability and compactness. What you value more is up to you.

Remember, **mission drives gear**.

Whichever choice you make, make sure to get the right size. If you go for a rifle length stock, then you will need a rifle buffer tube (technically called the receiver extension). That also requires a different rifle spring and buffer.

Again, whatever path you choose, buy quality. There are small differences in the dimensions between "mil spec" buffer tubes and "commercial." All of the quality manufacturers follow the "mil spec."

## Other Accessories

Aside from the rifle itself, I think a minimum capable AR-15 should have an [optic, sling, and white light](#).

You'll find thousands of discussions between enthusiasts debating their preferred options. There is an optic targeted to every price point, from ultra cheap to high end. Most people are best served by a red dot sight. This projects a little red dot against an unmagnified lens, and it greatly speeds up the aiming process. It is best suited from 0 to 200 meters, give or take depending on your eyesight.

### AR-15 Optics: Making the Best Choice for You

📅 July 16, 2019    💬 19 Comments

## Optics for Your First AR-15

To keep things simple, I recommend the **Aimpoint PRO** model. This is a previous generation version of the US Military's M68 optic. You can find them today for very reasonable prices.

Regardless of the option you choose, expect to spend at least \$400 for a quality red dot from Aimpoint, Trijicon, Leupold, EOTech, Vortex, or others.

It's not cheap. I understand. Stick to your iron sights and master them while you save for the optic. It is *not* worth buying a cheaper optic in the

^





**Just a Quick Follow-Up on Iron Sight Usage**

You'll also need a mount. My favorites come from Gear Sector, Impact



**The Tactical Belt: Minimalist Duty Loadout for Everyday People**

The top two, in my opinion, are the Blue Force Gear VCAS and the Magpul

**BUY A ROUND**



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## Wrapping Up

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46 COMMENTS

Oldest First ▼



IAC.

Guest

First AR ? More like my only AR.  
I bought what I could afford.  
A 16" AR Stoner upper from MidwayUsa, a StarLos poly lower, UTG A2-style rear sight module, surplus A4 sight handle for Perry, and 2 tungsten recoil weights.  
The budget red dot, someone gave me.

1 Reply



Mark C

Guest

Did you polish this article a little? It's good. I know I've read it before, maybe it's the formatting.  
  
Anyway, spot on with so many good, solid, reliable and accurate suggestions and philosophies that any newbie or guy who has stepped away from the market for a while, like me, can come back to and reference.  
  
Solid, dawg. Killin' it.

4 Reply



The Marksman Author

Replying to [Mark C](#)

Yep, I rewrote a lot of it, added some new sections, photography, and redid the formatting. I figured the changes were enough for a repost to.

1 Reply



Ilya

Guest

It is good to re-visit this stuff. I am on board with most of what you



said, except for a few items. I have no use for fixed iron sights or plastic handguards. Also, the world of optics has been changing. If all you are looking for is a simple and durable red dot sight, there are plenty of options out there that cost less than the Aimpoint. Sometimes a lot less.

3 [Reply](#)

The Marksman Author

[Replying to Ilya](#)

I totally get where you're coming from, but you aren't exactly the audience for this article, though. You have enough experience and knowledge to separate good from bad and recognize a good deal. You're the man when it comes to optics, and it makes sense that you wouldn't have a use for fixed front sight posts and plastic handguards. My concern is for people who know next to nothing, and then get caught up in bad information and marketing hype. The front sight post is a good example of this. Is it ideal for magnifies optics? No. But is it... [Read more »](#)

4 [Reply](#)



Ilya Koshkin Guest

[Replying to The Marksman](#)

Didn't I warn you we will have an argument about this? Let's start with optics. Iron sights are a great thing to learn on for a healthy 18 year old with young eyes and very limited budget. Even there, simple Magpul folding BUIS will work fine. However, I assume your recommendations should be suitable for a broad range of people with widely varying experience levels, physical condition and eye health. Once you get a little older and your eyes start changing, iron sights become a major limiting factor. They are harder to use for a new shooter even with 18... [Read more »](#)

1 [Reply](#)



The Marksman Author

[Replying to Ilya Koshkin](#)

All great points 😊 I'm with you on the 1x prism sights, I think they are a very interesting option that I just don't have a lot of experience with. I would love to get my hands on a spitfire for some testing, though. I have a bit of astigmatism that hasn't gotten bad enough to make red dots and holos useless, but I know it could get there someday. You are absolutely on point regarding helping people actually have fun at the range. It's important that people feel good about shooting so that they keep coming back. There's also... [Read more »](#)

1 [Reply](#)





Ilya Koshkin Guest

Replying to [The Marksman](#)

If sacrifices have to be made, a sighting system is not where I would be doing it. We can argue about handguards, triggers and buttstocks all day long, but these, largely, are not critical. Someone's first AR should be reliable, reasonably accurate and easy to shoot things with. A simple 1x prism scope will make all the difference in the world if you actually want to hit something. No matter how good the rifle is, if you can't aim properly, it will be of no use. Reliability and sighting system, in many ways, trump everything else. Nearly all modern ARs... [Read more »](#)

1 Like Reply



Sunshine Shooter Member

Replying to [Ilya Koshkin](#)

I think this series of comments should be extracted and reproduced as it's own post.

2 Likes Reply



The Marksman Author

Replying to [Sunshine Shooter](#)

You're not wrong. I think it would be an interesting post.

0 Likes Reply



Al Anaday

Guest

Super post. Sites like this are pure gold.

For southpaw shooters looking to invest in their first AR rifle, what options, or path would you recommend to create an ambidextrous platform?

1 Like Reply



Sunshine Shooter Member

Replying to [Al Anaday](#)

Al, I shoot ARs left handed. I'm not a fan of brass at my face, so I picked up a left-handed upper from Stag Arms. It ejects on the left side. It may not be the most bombproof option on the market, but it fits me the best. As far as controls, I just picked up an ambitious selector from Strike Industries and a left-side mag release from Troy. Strike Industries just released a left-side mag release that looks promising, though I haven't picked one up yet. If I can help more, let me know.

2 Likes Reply





AI Anaday Guest

Replying to Sunshine Shooter

Good info. Thanks. The bolt carrier group for the Stag would be specific to the Stag and have to be ordered from them I would guess?

1 Like Reply



Sunshine Shooter Member

Replying to AI Anaday

That is correct. The bolts & carriers are proprietary, which is annoying, but I honestly don't mind what I get in return. I recently put a suppressor on my stag and had no gas in the face issues even knowing how overgassed it probably is.

0 Likes Reply



AI Anaday Guest

Replying to Sunshine Shooter

More good info. Thanks again!

0 Likes Reply



The Marksman Author

Replying to AI Anaday

Hey AI, thanks for coming by and I'm glad you like the site! I don't shoot left-handed, so my experience here is limited. But, when it comes down to it, you basically have three options: 1) Shoot a regular right-handed rifle from the left-hand position and "learn to deal." This would probably work out just fine, really. The biggest thing you'd have to contend with manipulating the safety and the charging handle. A few mods there are simple though, which gets me to option number two... 2) Swap in some ambi or left-handed parts. Ambi charging handles are pretty common,... [Read more »](#)

1 Like Reply



AI Anaday Guest

Replying to The Marksman

Super info! Very much appreciated. I'll run a few more rounds through the range rental unit to see how I feel about the brass flying past my face. At the moment, leaning towards a standard platform with the option 2 mods you mentioned above.

0 Likes Reply



The Marksman Author

Replying to AI Anaday



Glad to help, let us know how it works out for you!



Harold

Reply

Replying to [The Marksman](#)

As a predominantly left handed shooter, I disagree with using specialty parts. Over the last 15+ years & easily 50k in rounds down range all on standard right hand controls. I know I can pick up almost any AR on the planet and run it. If I became entrenched and relied on speciality parts I would be significantly less proficient with a random AR that I might be firing. Additionally, unless it is purely a range toy that the shooter is never ever possibly using for defense, shooting around barriers, or building clearing. The shooter should be training for shoulder... [Read more »](#)

0

Reply



shorty

Guest

how do you feel about a Ruger for the first AR?

0



Reply



The Marksman Author

Replying to [shorty](#)

Hi Shorty, thanks for coming by and asking! I'm assuming you mean one of the AR556 models, right? Take this with a grain of salt, because I've never handled one in person, but I can read spec sheets and make inferences. To me, it looks like they designed it to a specific price point rather than with durability in mind. Some things that stood out to me is that they don't actually list the barrel alloy material. They used 9310 steel in the bolt, which is probably fine since it's actually stronger than the standard Carpenter 158. The plastic handguards... [Read more »](#)

1

Reply



Cog Bear

Guest

Thanks for the info! Will be sure to bookmark and continue exploring your articles.Cog

0



Reply



Matt Author

Replying to [Cog Bear](#)

Thanks for reading and commenting, Cog! I always appreciate the feedback, and welcome to the site!



0 [Reply](#)



Filippo

Guest

I am surprised you didn't mention S&W M&P15, which seems to be collecting very good reviews, especially the newer Sport II with FA and dust cover fitted. I just ordered one with 14.5" barrel as my first AR, I'm currently waiting for it to be delivered at the gun shop. Do you have any experience with this gun? I know it is not a high-end AR, maybe even not a medium one, but keep in mind that this 500\$ gun here in Italy becomes 1100€...for a Colt, which was also available, one has to spend like 1600€, a bit too... [Read more »](#)

0 [Reply](#)



Matt Author

[Replying to Filippo](#)

Hi Filippo! First thanks for reading and I'm glad you're enjoying my work. To your question, I've handled a few M&P15 rifles. I don't think they're bad by any means, but I do think they make sacrifices in order to reach a particular price point. For example, the spec sheet lists the barrel steel as 4140 steel rather than the more expensive/durable 4150. The barrel is also a 1/9 twist instead of a 1/7 or 1/8 that's become the norm. I've also seen that they do batch testing on their bolts and barrels rather than individually testing each one, as... [Read more »](#)

1 [Reply](#)



Tilford

Guest

Hey Matt. Great article. I was wondering if you had any experience with or any thoughts on the Springfield Armory Saint line of ARs for a first time buyer.

0 [Reply](#)



Matt Author

[Replying to Tilford](#)

Hey, thanks for asking! I don't have any personal experience with the Saint other than seeing it on the rack and handling it a bit. From the spec sheet, it looks as though it would work just fine and feed most ammo well. I can't find any reports of it having serious problems, but I also can't find any examples of it running through a thousand rounds in a training course, either. In all probability, it will be a good buy. For the price, I would have directed you towards a Colt 6720, but just about anything colt is near... [Read more »](#)

0 [Reply](#)



 **Jarrood**  
 Guest

---

Bought a dpms oracle to get started. Built one to understand the process. Now I want about a 900-1200 rifle. All good points. Wish I would have read this first. I wasted time and money. I built a pistol and hate it. Loud and obnoxious with a diverter. Didn't know how easy it is to maneuver with a 16"barrel, until I practiced.

Thanks for this write up. I am thinking a Daniel defense or bcm is in my near future. The dpms will get shot to death and just buy a new barrel!

 0  [Reply](#)

 **Matt** Author

[Replying to Jarrood](#)

Jarrood, thanks for reading and commenting! A DD or BCM will definitely serve you well. The DPMS isn't as terrible as a lot of the hardcore guys would have you believe, but it was built to meet a certain price point. I say shoot it until it dies 😊

 0  [Reply](#)

 **Mark R. Holcomb**  
 Guest

---

Improved irons help me much and I'm legally blind, too. How Troy Industries SOCC rear folding sight and a Blitzkrieg Components LLC Luminescent Green triangle front sight post replacement. Hope this helps.

 0  [Reply](#)

 **Matt** Author

[Replying to Mark R. Holcomb](#)

Hey Mark, thanks for reading and commenting! I've always been curious about those blitzkrieg sights. I have an Ashley Performance aight on one of my rifles. It has a white strip that is much faster to pick up.

 0  [Reply](#)

 **J.J.**  
 Guest

---

Matt, this is a terrific write up and had this been around a few years ago I probably would have saved myself a ton of time spent browsing forums and Youtube! I recently re-read this as I currently have a carbine length 16" with an H buffer and was thinking of switching to a mid length. The carbine length is not that overgassed, but I would like to preserve longevity of the parts and not subject them to wear. What are your thoughts as far as making that switch? Is it kind of moot



since I have an H buffer?... [Read more »](#)

 0  [Reply](#)



Matt Author

[Replying to JJ.](#)

Hey JJ,

You could certainly try an H2 and see what it does for you, but I don't expect you will see much of a difference. The carbine has system is pretty well worked out.

Regarding the barrel flex, it's true that any leverage further out on the barrel can cause more flex, but I really wouldn't worry about it unless you're involved in competition or precision shooting.

It's very popular to free float everything these days, but remember that we issued these rifles for decades with plastic hand guards and a kings attached even further out.

 0  [Reply](#)



Corey Zablud

Guest

Hello. Thank you for the post. If you don't mind, could you check out the DiamondBack DB15 and let me know what you think. It seems to have everything going for it at \$529 (except being 4140 vs 4150). I've provided a link here... <https://diamondbackfirearms.com/portfolio/db15mzb/>

 0  [Reply](#)



Matt Author

[Replying to Corey Zablud](#)

Hi Corey, to be honest, I can't tell a whole lot from the spec sheet they provide. As you said, it does seem to check all of the boxes, which leads me to ask what they did in order to get the price point down. But I've never seen, held, or fired a DiamondBack so it wouldn't be fair of me to give an opinion one way or another.

 0  [Reply](#)



Austin Hernández

Guest

You probably won't ever see this because this article is old but all yes. Some input on accessories though, even though the application may be different. For weapon lights, I prefer the OWL as they focus on candela vs lumens. Optics depend on mission, expected engagement range and capabilities of the rifle. In the service I had an eotech holographic with a g33 magnifier on an hk416, an acog on an m4 and an lpvo 1-6x on an cqbr. Most people won't ever expect to have to design a weapon system to hold a competing measure of lethality

^

against other... [Read more »](#)

0 [Reply](#)



Matt Author

[Replying to Austin Hernández](#)

Hey Austin, thanks for commenting. I've never actually come across OWL before, but I like what I can find about it. It seems like a smartly-thought out design. As far as optics, you are definitely correct that they should always align to the expected use case.

0 [Reply](#)



Andrew

Guest

Hey great article I've been researching for my first gun purchase for several months. I think i have it narrowed down to the mossberg mmr pro chambered in .224 valkarie, it seems like a very quality firearm for the price of 1100 and seems like it can handle self defense hunting and competition/range shooting all very well.

0 [Reply](#)



Matt Author

[Replying to Andrew](#)

Hey Andrew, thanks for commenting. I've got nothing bad to say about the .224, but why go that route for a first gun? The Valkyrie is very specialized for competition and long range.

0 [Reply](#)



Andrew Guest

[Replying to Matt](#)

Well to be fair the choices for decent made relatively inexpensive ie not two grand or more are limited so when i found the mossberg and researched it it really stuck out. And why not go for .224 it seems like a superior .223. I also really like the design and the fact that the gun has a lot of room for anything I decide to put on it.

0 [Reply](#)



Matt Author

[Replying to Andrew](#)

I totally get that options today might be slim, and there's nothing saying you can't get another upper in the future to swap back and forth with. Ballistically, the Valkyrie is superior for long-range precision. But, all things being equal in a non-panic-buying season, the costs of running the Valkyrie in ammunition and parts will be higher. That's why I suggest most people, except



for seasoned match shooters, start with the classic .223 and build up their marksmanship base with something cheaper to practice with.

👍 0 🗨️ Reply



John H  
Guest

Excellent article, I really enjoyed reading this. Thank you!  
Could you list the specs for the top AR15 shown in the picture featuring two of your AR15s?

👍 0 🗨️ Reply



Matt Author

🗨️ [Replying to John H](#)

Hi John, sure thing. I assume you mean the one with the brown furniture? – BCM 16" midlength lightweight standard upper complete with BCM BCG – Magpul MOE handguard – An older AAC Blackout flash hider (I've since gone back to the A2 birdcage on that rifle) – EOTech XPS-2 on an ADM riser – BCM folding rear sight (made by Troy) – BCM complete lower – Magpul MOE stock with thicker butt pad – BCM Gunfighter pistol grip – Geissele SSA trigger – BAD short throw ambi safety The light is an older VTAC model made by Surefire mounted... [Read more »](#)

👍 0 🗨️ Reply



Frank parker  
Guest

Looking to buy an AR-15 in the next few months. I see there's a manufacturers in the south east. Any recommendations? Thanks

👍 0 🗨️ Reply



Sam  
Guest

For Europeans not affected by NFA regulations, do you recommend a 14.5 inch barrel instead of a 16 inch barrel?

👍 0 🗨️ Reply



Matt Author

🗨️ [Replying to Sam](#)

Hi Sam, if you are unencumbered by the nuance of the American National Firearms act, then the difference between a 14.5" and 16" barrel is more academic than anything. There is just a bit of gain in velocity with a 16", but it's probably not enough to really be noticed. Go with what "feels" right to you when it comes to weight and handling characteristics, but I



would suggest that if you go with a 14.5" then you should get it with a carbine gas system, whereas if you go with a 16" length you should use a mid length... [Read more »](#)

👍 0 🗨️ Reply

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Thank you for coming by The Everyday Marksman. This site and its community are a labor of love. I hope you stick around for a while, and maybe even join us.

-Matt

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## **RAND Corporation**

### **Firearm and Ammunition Taxes**

By Rosanna Smart

Updated April 15, 2021

Summary: Taxation has been a standard policy lever used to limit the harms associated with potentially dangerous goods (e.g., cigarettes, alcohol, and soda or sugary beverages). It has rarely been used to manage risks associated with gun violence, however. Although several states and localities have imposed special taxes on firearms and ammunition, these have typically been used to generate revenue, not as a strategy for reducing access to firearms or limiting gun crimes. Given limited variation in state and local firearm and ammunition taxes in recent history, as well as the absence of consistent data on firearm and ammunition prices over time and across geographies, there is little empirical evidence to indicate how taxation would influence firearm-related outcomes, such as violent crime, suicide, self-defense, or sales of firearms.

Taxation is a policy lever frequently used as a means to influence social welfare and well-being. For example, excise taxes on alcohol, gasoline, and cigarettes are intended to discourage consumption of these goods and subsequently reduce external harms associated with their consumption (e.g., injury, pollution, health care costs) (Hines, 2007). Taxation is also a revenue-generating mechanism, whereby revenues can be used to fund programs aligned with the purpose of the tax (e.g., earmarking tobacco tax revenues to support anti-tobacco education efforts), to cover costs related to the taxed activity (e.g., using gasoline tax revenues to maintain transportation infrastructure), to offset burdens generated by the tax (e.g., reducing taxes elsewhere), or to support other public aims (Marron and Morris, 2016). A wide body of research has found that taxation can serve as an effective policy lever for reducing consumption and consumption-related harms.<sup>[1]</sup> However, whether taxes change consumption varies and depends on the product being taxed (Wagenaar, Salois, and Komro, 2009), consumer characteristics (e.g., age, income, level of consumption) (Chaloupka, Yurekli, and Fong, 2012; Nelson, 2014), the visibility of the tax (i.e., tax salience) (Chetty, Looney, and Kroft, 2009; Finkelstein, 2009), and the availability of similar products not subject to the tax (Chaloupka, Powell, and Warner, 2019). Raising commodity taxes in various markets has been shown to reduce consumption and increase revenue (Chaloupka, Powell, and Warner, 2019), but uneven application of taxes across jurisdictions can result in tax avoidance (e.g., cross-border shopping) or tax evasion (e.g., interstate smuggling) behaviors that partially undermine the goals of the policy and may promote illicit manufacturing and trade (Joossens and Raw, 2012; Bate, Kallen, and Mathur, 2020).<sup>[2]</sup> There are also equity considerations: Uniform application of a commodity tax tends to be regressive, whereby lower-income individuals are disproportionately burdened by the tax (Hines, 2007; Allcott, Lockwood, and Taubinsky, 2019).

This essay synthesizes the limited research that has been conducted on firearm and ammunition taxes in the United States. It first discusses some of the conceptual considerations in the role of taxation as gun violence prevention policy. It then briefly describes some of the existing variation in firearm and ammunition taxes in the United States. The essay concludes with a

discussion of existing empirical evidence relevant for understanding the potential effects of firearm and ammunition taxes.

## Conceptual Considerations

Conceptually, the societal effects of increasing taxes on firearms or ammunition will hinge on how consumers respond to the tax, which depends on the magnitude and salience of the tax, how changes in tax translate to changes in price (i.e., the tax pass-through rate), how responsive gun purchasers are to changes in price (i.e., demand elasticity), and how this varies for different types of purchasers (e.g., those using firearms for recreational, self-protection, self-harm, or criminal purposes). In addition, because firearm and ammunition transactions occur through both formal and informal channels, there is a need to understand price linkages between the formal and informal markets.<sup>[3]</sup>

If the goal of the tax is to reduce societal harms of gun violence, an optimal policy design would impose differential taxes across firearm or ammunition types based on their probable use or lethality (similar to how alcohol taxes may differ for spirits, wine, or beer) (Gehrsitz, Saffer, and Grossman, 2020) and across individuals based on their propensity to misuse a firearm (Cook and Leitzel, 1996). For the former, differential tax rates could be applied based on caliber, magazine size supported, or concealability (Cook and Leitzel, 1996), although the effectiveness of the policy will depend on the extent to which these distinctions map onto risk of harm, including self-harm, as well as the availability of comparable products subject to lower tax rates. For the latter, given that it is highly unlikely that differential taxation by individual risk could be effectively implemented,<sup>[4]</sup> a uniformly applied tax would tend to overtax lower-risk purchasers and under-tax higher-risk purchasers (Diamond, 1973; Knittel and Sandler, 2018). But even these categories are problematic; for instance, the risk of suicide among gun purchasers is elevated even one year after the purchase (Wintemute et al., 1999; Studdert et al., 2020), suggesting that some high-risk purchasers may not be high risk at the time of purchase. If those who use firearms for nonviolent or legal, protective purposes are more responsive to changes in price than are those whose use engenders harm to themselves or others, this would mitigate the effectiveness of the tax as a means for gun violence prevention. Tax implications are further complicated if demands for different types of purchasers are interrelated (e.g., if reduced purchasing of guns for self-defense changes demand among those who seek to use guns for criminal purposes) (for theoretical models of these dynamics, see McDonald, 1999; Ehrlich and Saito, 2010). Furthermore, if individuals who use firearms for violent, non-legal purposes are most likely to obtain weapons or ammunition from illegal (untaxed) sources, the proximate burden of a tax would largely fall on those whose use is less related to harms. However, given connections between formal and informal firearm and ammunition markets, a tax imposed on the formal market would still be expected to increase prices in informal markets (Cook and Leitzel, 1996).

The existence of multiple channels for acquiring firearms or ammunition, each of which may be differentially exposed to a given tax policy, also creates the need to consider potential tax avoidance behavior. For example, some have voiced concern that increased local taxes will push legal consumers and suppliers to conduct business outside city limits (Beekman, 2015). In addition, others have noted the potential for taxes levied on federal firearms licensees (FFLs) to

shift sales from FFLs to private sellers (McClelland, 2018), which in some states do not require background checks at the point of transfer (for more, see Smart et al., 2020, Chapter Eight). Finally, if substantial state variation in taxes results in large price differentials, this may create incentives for interstate trafficking of firearms or ammunition. Some studies have shown evidence that crime guns flow from states with more-permissive firearm policies to states with more-restrictive policies (Kahane, 2013, 2020; Knight, 2013; Collins et al., 2018), which suggests that markets for firearms used for criminal purposes respond to cross-state cost differentials. However, these studies evaluated firearm policies (e.g., background checks, firearm purchase prohibitions) that impose nonmonetary access costs, and it is unclear the extent to which similar responses may occur in the existence of cross-state differences in monetary costs of firearms and ammunition.

The discussion in this section largely considers conceptual implications that would apply to taxing both firearms and ammunition. However, because guns are durable goods (i.e., they tend to last for a long time), the consequences of policies affecting the price of firearms may be different from the consequences of policies affecting the price of ammunition.<sup>[5]</sup> Given the large existing stock of privately owned firearms in the United States, estimated to be between 265 million and 390 million (Cook and Goss, 2014; Azrael et al., 2017; Karp, 2018), a tax on firearms may take far longer to have a meaningful impact on firearm use relative to a tax on ammunition.<sup>[6]</sup> If a change in tax policy is announced with some lag prior to implementation, individuals may find it easier to shift the timing of their firearm purchases to precede the tax than to foresee future ammunition needs (Kremer and Willis, 2016). However, given that regulations for ammunition are relatively less stringent than those for firearms are (e.g., at the federal level, ammunition sellers do not need to be licensed, and ammunition purchasers are not subject to background checks) (Tita et al., 2006), there may be greater challenges to preventing tax avoidance or evasion for ammunition purchases. There are also potential differences in the effects of firearm versus ammunition taxes because of variation in how they influence, for example, the distribution of tax incidence across different purchaser types (e.g., sport shooters may purchase fewer firearms but high volumes of ammunition), purchasing and re-trade decisions, and availability and prices in informal markets.

## Current Policy

Understanding the potential consequences of higher taxes on guns and ammunition is important both for considering policies moving forward and for assessing laws that increase the effective price of legal gun purchases. For example, permit-to-purchase laws do not increase the price of firearms themselves, but there is a cost associated with obtaining a permit, which is a requirement for legal purchase (Cook and Litzel, 1996). However, there is very little historic precedent for using taxation to manage harms associated with gun violence to inform these issues. A federal excise tax of 10–11 percent on the import and production of firearms and ammunition has been in place since 1919, but the rate has not been changed since it was first instituted. The National Firearms Act of 1934 imposed a \$200 tax on manufacturers for the transfer of certain firearms, but the tax applied to a very narrow set of weapons and has not been changed since initial enactment. Revenues from federal excise taxes fund matching grants to states and territories to support wildlife conservation efforts and education programs for hunters;

receipts from the National Firearms Act taxes are put into the General Fund of the Treasury (Crafton, Gravelle, and Krouse, 2018).

Few states impose special taxes on guns and ammunition over the standard sales tax.<sup>7</sup> Pennsylvania adds a \$3 surcharge on firearms subject to the sales tax, and revenues are deposited into the state background check system (Pinho and Rappa, 2013). Tennessee imposed a \$0.10 special privilege tax for use, possession, and sales of shotgun shells of metallic cartridges, but this tax was repealed, effective July 1, 2019.

Local jurisdictions have recently taken action to directly influence the prices of guns and ammunition. In January 2016, Seattle, Washington, began collecting taxes of \$25 at the point of sale for each firearm and \$0.02 to \$0.05 for each round of ammunition sold within city limits. Cook County, Illinois, which passed a \$25 tax on firearms in 2013, implemented a similar tax increase on ammunition of \$0.01 to \$0.05 per cartridge in June 2016.

Although these local tax increases were primarily intended as revenue-generating mechanisms to fund public safety or gun violence prevention, larger tax hikes have occasionally been proposed as a preventive mechanism to reduce new purchases of firearms or ammunition and limit gun violence. Most proposed state and local measures to this effect have not passed, but in April 2016, the Northern Mariana Islands (a U.S. territory) passed a provision imposing a \$1,000 tax on pistols; later that year, a federal judge struck down the excise tax as imposing undue burden on individuals' ability to exercise their constitutional rights.<sup>8</sup>

## **Empirical Evidence**

Several factors complicate evaluating firearm taxation policy and the price sensitivity of demand for guns or ammunition. First, although several studies have examined the theoretical consequences of increasing the price of firearms (see, for example, Cook and Leitzel, 1996; Chaudri and Geanakoplos, 1998; McDonald, 1999; Ehrlich and Saito, 2010), because few policy changes have occurred over time or across jurisdictions to change the price of firearms or ammunition, research has faced insufficient variation to empirically estimate the price responsiveness of participants in gun markets. Second, in the absence of exogenous price shocks (i.e., in which the price of firearms or ammunition changes as a result of external factors, such as the cost of material used to manufacture firearms), researchers cannot disentangle changes in consumer demand that are driven by changes in price from changes in price that are driven by changes in consumer demand (e.g., increases in sales that occur after high-profile mass public shootings) (Levine and McKnight, 2017; Studdert et al., 2017; Liu and Wiebe, 2019). And third, the market for firearms is highly differentiated, and there are no publicly available gun or ammunition price data over a sufficient period to support policy analysis (National Research Council, 2004). A few data sources provide information on national average prices of guns and ammunition,<sup>9</sup> but these averages obscure notable price variation across jurisdictions and offer only a rough approximation of the retail prices that consumers face. Thus, these data have generally been used to evaluate how demand shocks influence prices and not to estimate how responsive consumers are to changes in prices (Koper and Roth, 2002).

The few data sources that exist also apply solely to the formal market and provide little insight into linkages between the formal and informal markets, which limits analysis of how price changes in the formal market would affect criminal markets for firearms or ammunition. Theoretically, price changes in the primary market should affect informal markets; for example, significant price increases in formal markets may increase demand in informal markets. One study of street gun prices paid by members of criminal markets in Boston found a strong positive correlation between street gun price and the gun's legal market price (measured by *Blue Book* values), with street prices substantially marked up over the legal price, although the relationship weakened for guns with *Blue Book* prices above \$350 (Hureau and Braga, 2018).

However, some evidence suggests that the informal market for firearms operates quite differently from the formal market. For instance, qualitative interviews with adult male detainees in Cook County Jail in Chicago found that 40 percent of inmate respondents acquired firearms through means other than purchase or trade (Cook, Parker, and Pollack, 2015), most commonly through borrowing or sharing arrangements. The importance of social networks in illegal gun markets has been found in other studies (Sheley and Wright, 1993; Kennedy, Piehl, and Braga, 1996; Cook et al., 2007; Vittes, Vernick, and Webster, 2012; Chesnut et al., 2017). Though less well-studied, illegal markets for ammunition also appear to be distinct. An ethnographic study of participants in underground gun markets in Chicago found that individuals faced long wait times for obtaining ammunition through illegal markets, and street prices were marked up considerably relative to legal prices (Cook et al., 2007). Yet, in a more recent survey of male inmates from Chicago who had a criminal history involving a gun offense (Cook, Pollack, and White, 2018), most respondents reported that it was easier to obtain ammunition than to obtain firearms, although several respondents commented on the need to conserve ammunition. Overall, this research provides some evidence about how criminal markets for firearms and ammunition function, but there exist no reliable estimates of the price elasticity of demand for guns or ammunition by criminal organizations or individuals intending to use firearms for acts of violence (Cook and Pollack, 2017). As research grows in this area and examines underground gun markets across different jurisdictions, researchers may gain a better understanding of whether taxation can serve as an effective measure to prevent criminal acquisition and use of firearms or ammunition.

In contrast to the lack of evidence on how violent or criminal offenders respond to changes in price, there does exist some empirical evidence on how responsive hunters are to such changes. Several articles that exploited variation in hunting license fees have found hunting demand to be relatively unrelated to changes in license fees (Teisl, Boyle, and Record, 1999; Sun, van Kooten, and Voss, 2005; Poudyal, Cho, and Bowker, 2008; Schorr, Lukacs, and Gude, 2014). Although this research suggests that moderate tax increases on guns or ammunition would do little to disrupt hunting or recreational gun use, the evidence is based on changes in hunting license fees (which are a very small fraction of the total cost of hunting) and may not be congruent with the actual response to significant increases in the price of firearms or ammunition.

Understanding the responsiveness of firearm and ammunition demand to changes in price is also key to determining potential government revenues that could result from a tax. The use of these revenues for gun violence prevention efforts serves as another mechanism through which taxation may influence firearm-related death and injury, akin to how gasoline taxes are used to

make roads safer for driving. If gun or ammunition tax revenues are used to support the implementation of effective gun violence prevention strategies, taxation could reduce gun deaths and injury even in the absence of changes in demand for firearms. This is one of the stated goals of H.R. 5717, the Gun Violence Prevention and Community Safety Act of 2020, which was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives in January 2020 but did not receive a vote. The legislation would increase the federal excise tax to 30 percent on firearms and 50 percent on shells and cartridges and proposes partial allocation of tax revenues to support research and interventions focused on gun violence prevention (U.S. House of Representatives, 2020). Researchers currently have little evidence to suggest whether this strategy will be effective in reducing gun deaths and injuries, and effects will depend on the amount of revenue collected and how that revenue is targeted. Seattle's tax yielded \$93,000 in 2017, substantially less than the projected annual revenues of \$300,000 to \$500,000 (Beekman, 2018).

## Conclusions

Overall, researchers currently have little empirical evidence indicating how taxation would influence firearm-related outcomes, such as violent crime or suicides, or establishing how taxing firearms or ammunition would affect firearm prices, the supply of firearms, or defensive gun use. Marginal increases in price associated with hunting licenses offer little evidence to suggest how taxes would influence recreational gun use. Given that taxation has been a standard policy lever for other potentially harmful goods (e.g., cigarettes, alcohol, and soda or sugary beverages), researchers may be able to derive insights from policy changes in these markets, but there are significant differences in making these comparisons (e.g., firearms are durable goods relative to these other products). Furthermore, one needs to consider the varied purposes for which individuals acquire and retain firearms or ammunition and the relationship between various market sources for guns and ammunition. Empirically, understanding the costs and benefits of taxation in gun markets requires exogenous variation in the price of firearms over time or jurisdiction, which requires imposing price regulations in a market for which regulations are already highly contentious.

Originally published March 2, 2018

## Notes

1. For systematic reviews of the effects of taxes on alcohol, tobacco, and unhealthy food or beverages, see Elder et al. (2010); Hoffman and Tan (2015); and Wright, Smith, and Hellowell (2017), respectively. For studies of the effects of gasoline taxes, see Li, Linn, and Muehlegger (2014) and Knittel and Sandler (2018). For overviews of U.S. consumption-based tax policy, see Hines (2007) and National Conference of State Legislatures, Fiscal Affairs Program (2010). [Return to content ↪](#)
2. A large literature has found high rates of tax avoidance and tax evasion in response to cigarette tax differentials (see, for example, Stehr, 2005; Goolsbee, Lovenheim, and Slemrod, 2010; DeCicca, Kenkel, and Liu, 2013). A smaller literature suggests more-modest prevalence of cross-border shopping in response to alcohol price or tax

differentials in the United States (see, for example, Beard, Gant, and Saba, 1997; Stehr, 2007). [Return to content →](#)

3. The *informal market* is defined here as comprising legal but unrecorded private transactions (i.e., secondary markets), as well as illegal trade in firearms (i.e., black markets), following Cook and Leitzel (1996). [Return to content →](#)
4. For further discussion related to firearm taxes, see Cook and Leitzel (1996), Rangappa (2013), Fleischer (2015), and Stevenson (2019). [Return to content →](#)
5. Ammunition may also be considered durable in that it generally has a minimum shelf life of ten years if stored properly (Johnston, 2019). However, unlike firearms, ammunition is typically consumed after one use, although previously fired cartridge cases or shells can be reloaded and reused (Cave, 2019). [Return to content →](#)
6. Estimates of the existing stock of ammunition in the United States were not available. [Return to content →](#)
7. State taxes on the manufacture, sale, possession, carrying, and use of firearms appear to have been more common in the late 1800s and early 1900s. See Spitzer (2017) and Shearer and Anderman (2018) for discussion of the early history of firearm taxation policies. [Return to content →](#)
8. *Murphy v. Guerrero*, 2016 U.S. Dist. Northern Mariana Islands, 9th Circuit, September 28, 2016. [Return to content →](#)
9. See, for example, Fjestad (2017) and Firearms News (undated). WikiArms (undated), a relatively new website, provides web-scraped data on ammunition prices. [Return to content →](#)

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**Violence Policy Center**

# The Militarization of the U.S. Civilian Firearms Market

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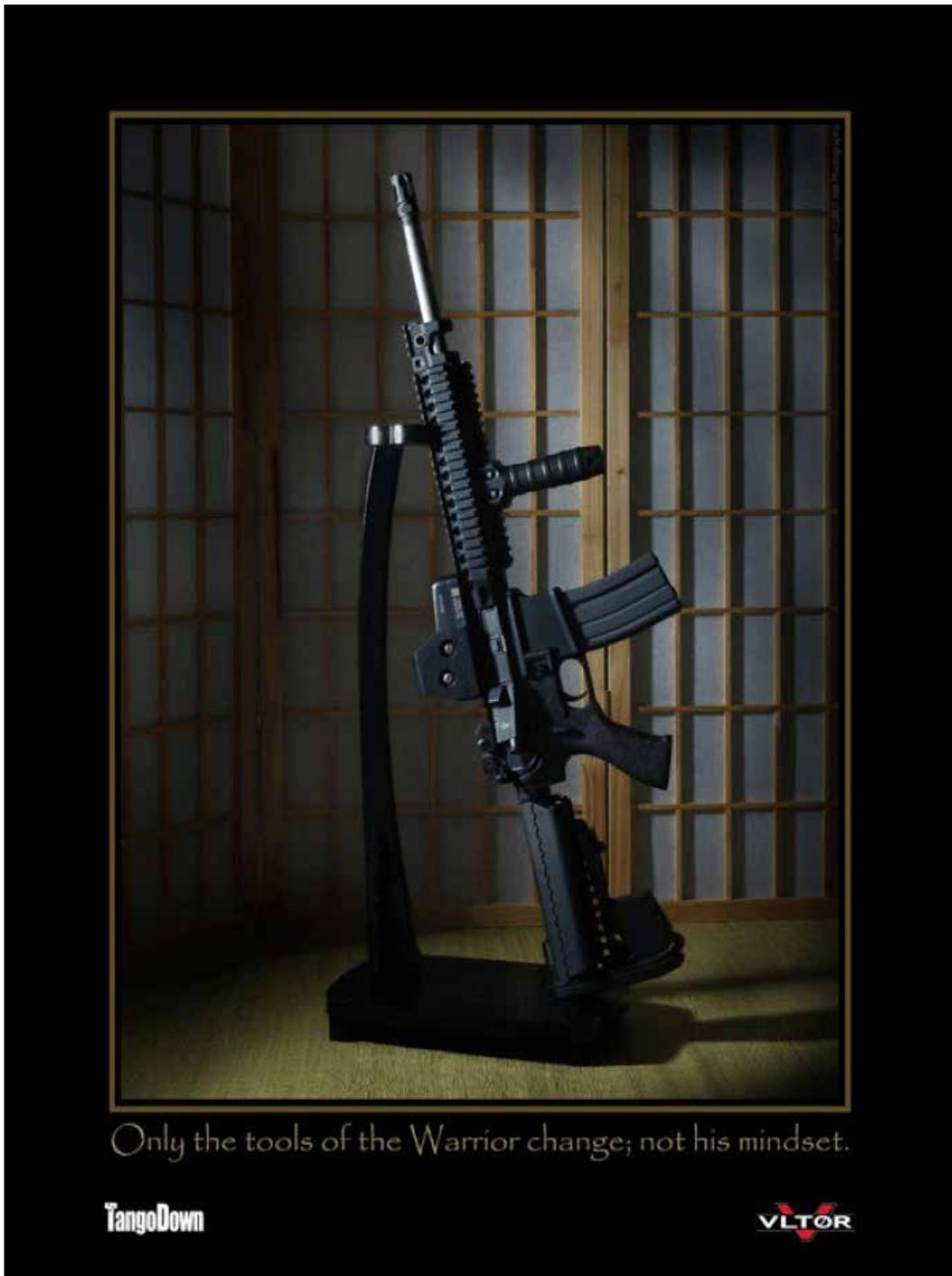
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Firearms accessories manufacturer TangoDown claims on its website that it "...exists for one reason. To design, develop and manufacture the highest quality products for the warriors of the United States Armed Forces." However, many of its products—like the poster reproduced above—and its advertising are aimed at the militarized civilian market.

[www.tangodown.com/td\\_pages/p\\_about.html](http://www.tangodown.com/td_pages/p_about.html)



Sgt. Brandon Paudert (left) and Officer Bill Evans (right) of the West Memphis (Arkansas) Police Department were shot to death May 20, 2010, following a traffic stop. The shooter, 16-year-old Joseph Kane, was armed with an AK-47 semiautomatic assault rifle. Kane and his father, Jerry, were killed in a gunfight with police in a nearby Walmart parking lot. The Kanes were reportedly members of the anti-government Sovereign Citizens Movement.

“Brandon and Bill had no chance against an AK-47,” [West Memphis Police Chief Bob] Paudert said. “They were completely outgunned. We are dealing with people who rant and rave about killing. They want government officials dead. We had a 16-year-old better armed than the police.”

“West Memphis police chief says officers’ pistols were no match for heavily armed teenager,”  
*The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), May 25, 2010

“Sovereign Citizens Movement members leave two police officers dead in shootout,”  
*NBC News Transcripts*, July 5, 2010

## KEY FINDINGS

**The civilian firearms industry in the United States has been in decline for several decades.** Although the industry has enjoyed periods of temporary resurgence, usually primed by “fear marketing”—encouraging people to buy guns by stoking fear of crime, terrorism, violent immigrants, or government control, for example—the long-term trend for the manufacturers of guns for civilians has been one of steady decline.

**Selling militarized firearms to civilians—i.e., weapons in the military inventory or weapons based on military designs—has been at the point of the industry’s civilian design and marketing strategy since the 1980s.** Today, militarized weapons—semiautomatic assault rifles, 50 caliber anti-armor sniper rifles, and armor-piercing handguns—define the U.S. civilian gun market and are far and away the “weapons of choice” of the traffickers supplying violent drug organizations in Mexico.

**The flood of militarized weapons exemplifies the firearms industry’s strategy of marketing enhanced lethality, or killing power, to stimulate sales.** The resulting widespread increase in killing power is reflected in the toll of gun death and injury in the United States—a relentless count that every year takes 10 times the number of lives as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup>

**Militarization has baleful consequences beyond the “routine” toll of murders, suicides, and unintentional deaths.** Military-style weapons are a favored tool of organized criminals such as gangs and drug traffickers, and violent extremists. Semiautomatic assault weapons—especially inexpensive AK-47 type imports—are increasingly used in attacks against law enforcement officers in the United States.

**The pernicious effects of the militarized U.S. civilian gun market extend well beyond the borders of the United States.** Lax regulation and easy access to these relatively inexpensive military-style weapons has resulted in their being smuggled on a large scale from the U.S. to criminals throughout the Western Hemisphere—including Mexico, Canada, Central America, the Caribbean, and parts of South America—as well as to points as far away as Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Africa.

This study surveys the rise of the militarized civilian gun market, examines its impact on public health, safety, and crime in the United States and the world, and refutes the gun lobby’s recent attempt to “rebrand” semiautomatic assault weapons as “modern sporting rifles.”

## “MILITARIZATION” — WHAT IS IT?

The verb “militarize” means “to give a military character to” something.<sup>2</sup> The gun industry has given a “military character” to guns in the U.S. civilian market by—

- **Selling on the civilian market guns that are identical to guns used by the armed forces of the United States and other countries.** These firearms include such sophisticated weapons as the Barrett 50 caliber anti-armor sniper rifle and the FN Herstal Five-seveN 5.7mm pistol.



The Barrett Firearms 50 caliber anti-armor sniper rifle used in combat (above) is sold without meaningful regulation in the U.S. civilian gun market.



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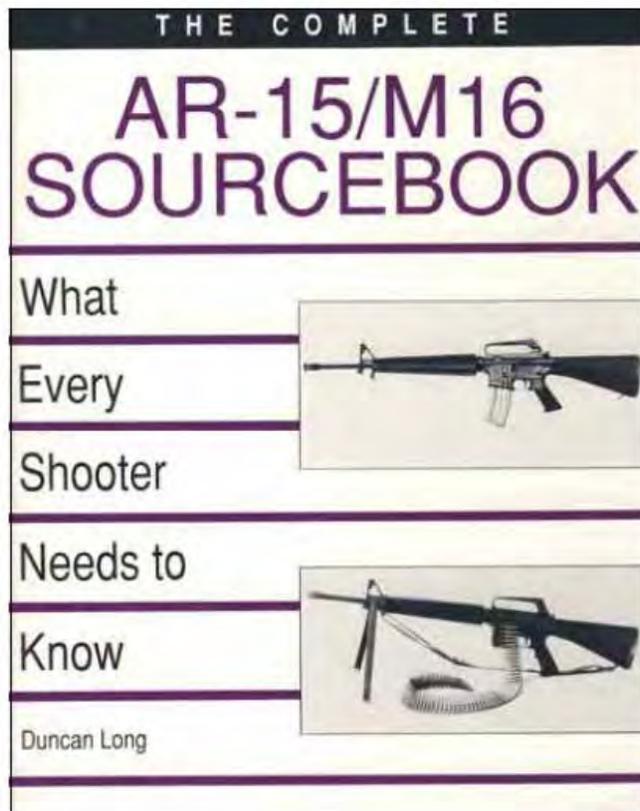
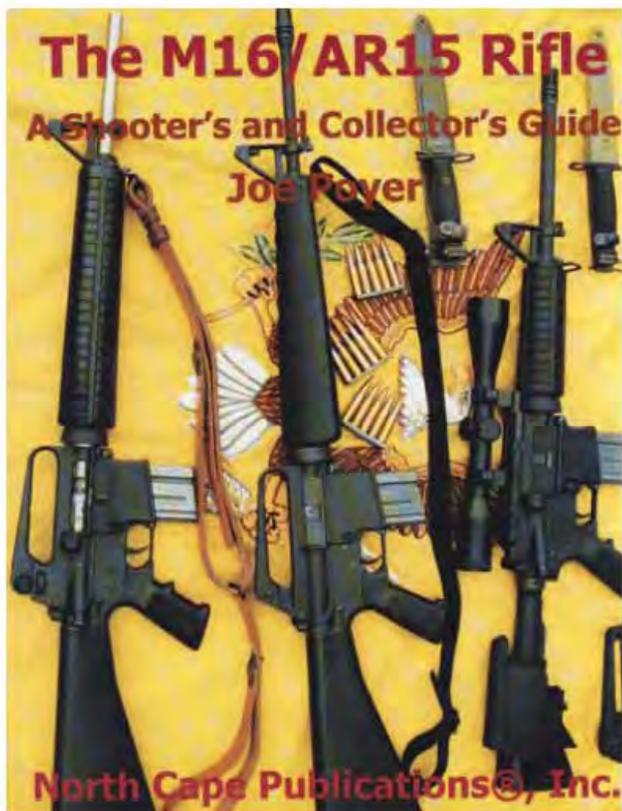
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- Three 20-round polymer magazines and a hard case  
(Low-capacity magazines supplied when required by law)

FNH USA • P.O. BOX 697 • McLEAN, VA 22101 USA • (703) 288-1292 © FNH USA, LLC, a subsidiary of FN Herstal, S.A. 2007.

This ad from *Guns & Ammo* (March 2008) explicitly plays on the military's use of FN's Five-seveN 5.7mm armor-piercing handgun.

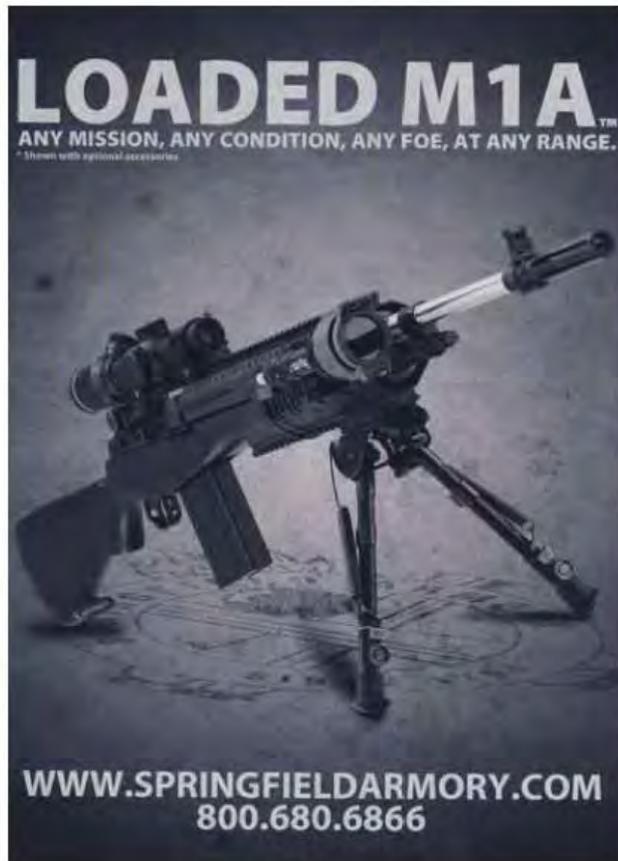
- **Designing and manufacturing, or importing, civilian variants of military firearms that would otherwise be illegal to sell on the civilian market.** These are principally semiautomatic versions of military assault weapons. (Military assault rifles are capable of fully automatic fire. They are thus barred, as “machine guns,” from sale to civilians in the United States.) They include many variants of the AR-15 (the civilian version of the U.S. military M-16 assault rifle) and numerous semiautomatic versions of the Kalashnikov assault rifle, popularly known as the AK-47.



The covers of these books, the left published in 2000, the right in 1992, graphically illustrate the equivalence gun enthusiasts see between the military M-16 and the civilian AR-15.

- **Heavily promoting military-style products through images, slogans, print, video, and other electronic media that link the features, capabilities, and uses of military weapons with firearms available on the civilian market.** In addition to this direct product promotion, the industry relies heavily on suggestive “patriotic” and “heroic” imagery—both historic and contemporary—to identify ownership of military-style weapons with grand themes of “patriotism” and “homeland defense.”

In short, the gun industry designs, manufactures, imports, and sells firearms in the civilian market that are to all intents and purposes the same as military arms. It then bombards its target market with the message that civilian consumers—just like real soldiers—can easily and legally own the firepower of militarized weapons.



These ads from the NRA's *American Rifleman* magazine (May 2010) are typical of how the gun industry implicitly evokes militaristic themes in its marketing.



Colt's Manufacturing's 2010 catalog (cover at top) *American Legends* touches all the bases. Internal pages, clockwise from upper left, glorify: Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders; World War I hero Sgt. Alvin York; Colt's CEO Marine Lt. Gen. William M. Keys; and, U.S. Navy deserter and 1930s bank robber John Dillinger. The brochure's mawkish tone is typical of gun industry advertising and gun lobby propaganda.

## WHY HAS THE GUN INDUSTRY MILITARIZED ITS MARKET?

In spite of the gauzy imagery of its advertising, the gun industry's militarization is simply a business strategy aimed at survival: boosting sales and improving the bottom line. The hard commercial fact is that military-style weapons sell in an increasingly narrowly focused civilian gun market. True sporting guns do not.

Here, for example, is an informed industry assessment of the importance of assault (often euphemistically called "tactical") weapons to the gun industry from October 2008:

If there is an area of good news, it's still the tactical segment. In the past week, storefront owners and catalog retailers are unequivocally saying that, with the exception of the tactical categories—from AR-style rifles to the polymer pistols increasingly found in the holsters of law enforcement across the country, sales are slow.<sup>3</sup>

Here is another from an article titled, "Industry Hanging Onto [sic] A Single Category"—

The net of all the numbers is that if you're a company with a strong line of high-capacity pistols and AR-style rifles, you're doing land office business. If you're heavily dependent on hunting, you are hurting.<sup>4</sup>

**Gun Industry Problem: Long-Term Decline.** The civilian firearms industry in the United States has been in decline for several decades. Although it has from time to time enjoyed brief peaks in sales, it has been essentially stagnant. For example, demand for firearms apparently increased beginning in 2008 because of fears that "high unemployment would lead to an increase in crime" and the Obama administration would "clamp down" on gun ownership by regulating assault weapons. But demand fell back as these fears waned.<sup>5</sup> A writer for the online industry publication *Shooting Wire* noted in September 2009:

...research tells me what everyone already knows: gun sales are slowing again. It seems the "Barack Boom" has started to go bust. No real reason, other than maybe the fact that everyone already has all the AR-style rifles they can shoot, store or afford, but there is an undeniable slowdown....<sup>6</sup>

In spite of such occasional anomalies, fundamental long-term trends have worked against the gun industry. The nation's largest firearms manufacturer, Freedom Group, Inc., included the following candid disclosure in a document filed recently with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC):

We believe that a number of trends that currently exist may affect the hunting and shooting sports market:

- the development of rural property in many locations has curtailed or eliminated access to private and public lands previously available for hunting;
- environmental issues, such as concern about lead in the environment; and
- decreases in consumer confidence and levels of consumer discretionary spending.

These trends may have a material adverse effect on our business by impairing industry sales of firearms, ammunition and other shooting-related products.<sup>7</sup>

Other trends include aging consumers—the percent of the U.S. population aged 65 and older has grown from 4.1 percent in 1900 to 12.4 percent in 2000.<sup>8</sup> Gun owners are older and young people are less likely to buy firearms. *The Christian Science Monitor* reported in 2002 that some in the gun industry itself explained that the “fact that the average age of gun owners continues to increase is...more than a statistical quirk tied to aging baby boomers. Rather it’s a sign that younger generations see guns differently.”<sup>9</sup> The growing proportion of immigrants in U.S. society also has an impact: “America’s increasing immigrant population has less of a tradition with firearms....”<sup>10</sup>



Electronic entertainment like Nintendo’s Super Mario series of video games threatens the gun industry’s crucial “youth market.”

Recent studies have shown that alternative recreation has drastically affected so-called “nature recreation”—camping, hunting, fishing, and park visitation—by all Americans. According to these studies, “Most reliable long-term per capita visitation measures of nature recreation peaked between 1981 and 1991. They’ve declined about 1.2 percent per year since then, and have declined a total of between 18 percent and 25 percent.”<sup>11</sup> The authors state the cause is “a social change of values characterized by our increasing pursuit of electronic media entertainment.”<sup>12</sup> According to the Entertainment Software Association, U.S. sales of computer and video games grew from \$2.6 billion in 1996 to “well over \$7.0 billion” in 2007.<sup>13</sup>

As a result, the gun industry has failed to keep up with population growth. Between 1980 and 2000 the U.S. population grew from 226,545,805 to 281,421,906—a 24 percent increase.<sup>14</sup> Over the same period, total domestic small arms production fell from 5,645,117 to 3,763,345—a 33 percent decrease.<sup>15</sup> As America has gotten bigger, the gun industry has gotten smaller.

**Gun Industry Solution: Generating Demand with New and More Lethal Designs.** In order to entice new gun owners into its shrinking pool of customers—and to motivate gun owners already in the pool to buy more guns—the gun industry seeks to create innovative products that offer new features and appeal to consumer trends. The industry itself deliberately creates these consumer trends.

An example lies in the phenomena of: (1) the gun lobby’s nationwide campaign, led by the National Rifle Association (NRA), to change state laws to allow the concealed carry of firearms; and, (2) the gun industry’s parallel aggressive marketing of concealable, high-powered handguns. In a 1996 interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, the NRA’s then-chief lobbyist, Tanya Metaksa, claimed credit for generating new gun sales with the concealed carry campaign: “The gun industry should send me a basket of fruit—our efforts have created a new market.”<sup>16</sup>

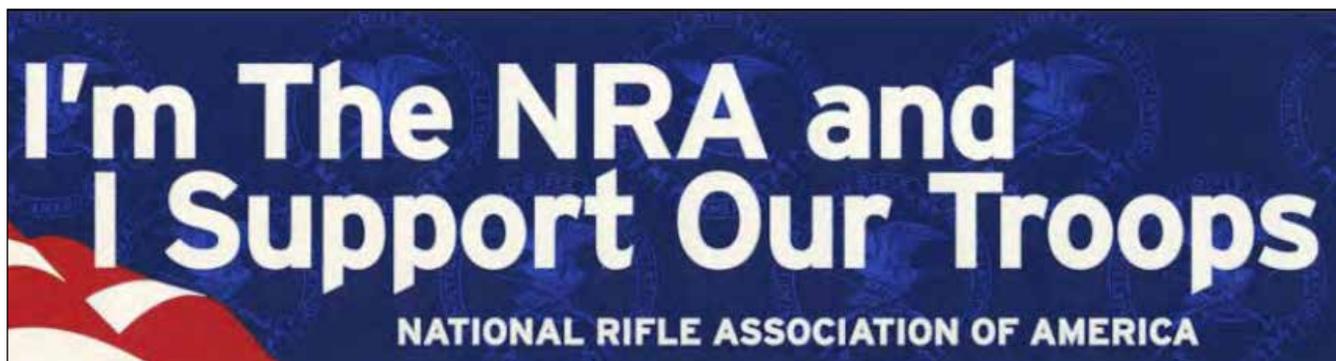


Colt’s Manufacturing evokes the militaristic image of Air Force General Curtis LeMay—“Father of the Strategic Air Command”—to promote its 01970 CY “carry model” semiautomatic pistol.

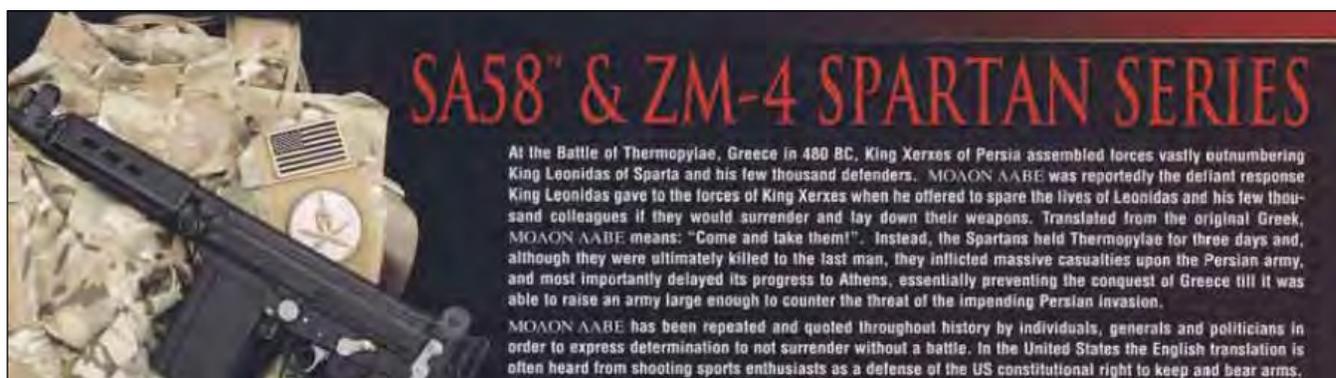
*Colt American Legends* catalog (2010)

A Freedom Group filing with the SEC contains a more recent description of the process: “We have also shifted our business from a manufacturing-based ‘push system’ to a customer-focused ‘pull system,’ *driven by our Chief Sales and Marketing Officers.*” [emphasis added]<sup>17</sup> Translated into plain English from the language of financial filings, this admission means that the conglomerate’s marketing technique is to *generate* demand (“pull”).

The constant generation of “pull” in niche markets is vital to the industry’s survival. If a manufacturer’s new product generates sufficient “pull,” or product demand, imitation by other manufacturers and proliferation of the design follows swiftly.



NRA bumper sticker typical of gun lobby’s pseudo-patriotic propaganda.



DSA, Inc. promoted its “Spartan Series” semiautomatic assault rifles with the Greek phrase “*Molon Labe*” (“Come and take them”) supposedly uttered by Spartan warriors in 480 BC at the Battle of Thermopylae. “In the United States the English translation is often heard from shooting sports enthusiasts as a defense of the U.S. constitutional right to keep and bear arms,” the company’s brochure states.

**Appealing to the Soldier Within.** A marketing technique central to the gun industry’s militarization campaign is appealing to the soldier within potential buyers who are drawn for emotional—or more sinister practical—reasons to military weaponry.



FN Herstal USA’s 2010 catalog touts the SCAR 16S, “the semi-auto only version of the U.S. Special Operations Command’s newest service rifle.”

Here, for example, is an industry newsletter’s description of the appeal of an assault rifle recently introduced by FN Herstal—the FNAR—by reference to a well-known military weapon, the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR):

Even as many in the firearms business worry about the potential for another assault on assault rifles...there’s yet another entry into the black rifle marketplace.

FNH USA has announced the availability of their new FNAR 7.62x51mm semiautomatic rifle. If [sic] looks something like a tuner-version of the venerable BAR, but there’s probably some reason for that resemblance. FNH, after all, owns Browning—and the Browning Automatic Rifle carries a lot of mystique with law enforcement and military folks.<sup>18</sup>



“Descending from the legendary Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR), the FNAR puts autoloading speed and bolt-action accuracy into one powerful package.”

FNUSA description of its FNAR civilian semiautomatic assault rifle, [www.fnhusa.com/le/products/firearms/group.asp?gid=FNG022&cid=FNC01](http://www.fnhusa.com/le/products/firearms/group.asp?gid=FNG022&cid=FNC01)



The BAR was a favorite of U.S. Marines in World War II—and of a notorious 1930s outlaw, serial cop-killer Clyde Barrow.

The gun industry's embrace of militarization can be seen in the chart below. Eleven of the top 15 gunmakers manufacture some type of assault weapon.

**ELEVEN OF THE TOP 15 GUN MANUFACTURERS MARKET ASSAULT WEAPONS<sup>19</sup>**

Rank	Manufacturer	Assault Weapons?	Make or Type
1	Sturm, Ruger	Yes	Mini-14 and SR-556 assault rifles
2	Smith & Wesson	Yes	M&P 15 assault rifle
3	Remington	Yes	R-15 assault rifle
4	Maverick/Mossberg	Yes	Tactical .22 assault rifle and assorted assault shotguns
5	Marlin	No	
6	Sig Sauer	Yes	Assorted assault rifles
7	Kel-Tec	Yes	Assorted assault rifles
8	Savage	Yes	110 BA assault rifle
9	H&R 1871	No	
10	Beemiller	Yes	Hi-Point Carbine assault rifle
11	Henry Repeating Arms	No	
12	DPMS	Yes	Assorted assault rifles
13	Beretta, USA	Yes	Storm assault rifles
14	Bushmaster	Yes	Assorted assault weapons
15	Glock	No	

## HOW HAS THE GUN INDUSTRY MILITARIZED ITS MARKET?

The gun industry has militarized the civilian market with three major types of firearms: high-capacity handguns, assault rifles and pistols, and sniper rifles.

### HIGH-CAPACITY HANDGUNS

Handguns are a basic weapon of the U.S. military. Until 1911, the U.S. armed forces historically favored revolvers. In that year the U.S. Army adopted a semiautomatic pistol for the first time, the iconic Colt M1911 in .45ACP (designated the M1911A1 after modifications were made in 1926).<sup>20</sup>



Colt Model 1911A1

The Colt pistol remained the military's standard sidearm until 1989. Although various models of the Colt pistol were offered in the civilian market, American consumers favored revolvers, which continued to dominate the market until 1989.

In that year, Beretta, U.S.A. Corporation—a subsidiary of an Italian gun manufacturer—won final approval of a contract to replace the venerable M1911A1 with its 9mm semiautomatic pistol. In short order, the U.S. civilian handgun market was revolutionized and militarized, in large part because of a deliberate, well-documented marketing strategy by Beretta's management.

**Handgun Militarization—High-Capacity Semiautomatic Pistols.** Beretta’s pistol, designated the M-9, entered service in 1990 as the military’s primary sidearm.<sup>21</sup> But Beretta’s top executive told the *Baltimore Sun* in 1993 that the military contract was simply “part of a carefully planned strategy dating back to 1980”—

The plan was to win the military contract and use it to make Beretta a household name in the United States in hopes of tapping into the larger law-enforcement and commercial markets. That’s why, [Robert] Bonaventure [head of Beretta U.S.A. Corp.] said, the company has been selling pistols to the military for about \$225 each—close to production cost....The biggest market—about twice the size of the police and military business combined—is the commercial market....<sup>22</sup>



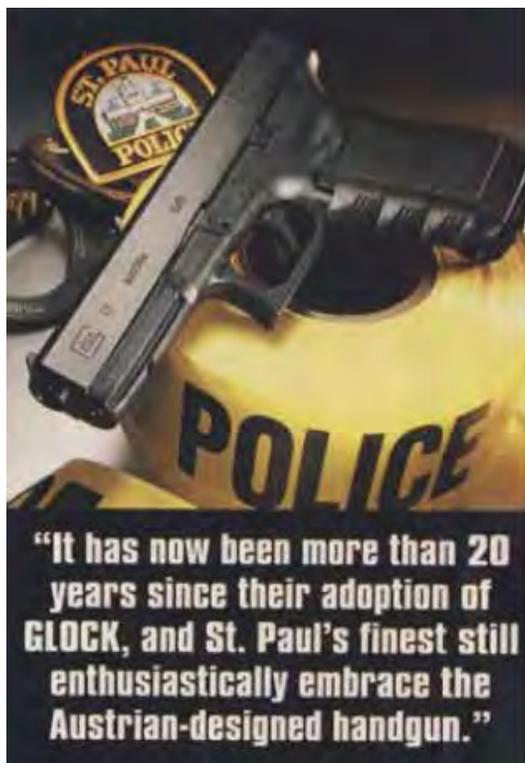
Beretta’s top U.S. executive told the *Baltimore Sun* in 1993 that the company’s strategy was to use the cachet of military sales to reach the larger civilian handgun market. The Beretta M9 also became a favorite of street gangs and drug dealers.

**Beretta 92 F. The Ultimate 9mm Sidearm is now the Official Sidearm of the U.S. Military.**

When the U.S. Government went looking for a new standard issue sidearm, it tested the best pistols in the world. But the Beretta 92 F 9mm Parabellum thoroughly out-classed the competition in every government performance trial. In accuracy. Safety. Reliability. Firepower. In grip, feel, lightness and pointability. The Military was convinced. Now America's fighting men will carry the finest 9mm sidearm in the world. Consistently superior quality and service have also convinced law enforcement agencies like the Connecticut and Wyoming State Police and the Texas Rangers to switch to Beretta. You'll be convinced, too. Look at its outstanding features. Check out the 92 F and the 92 SB Compact along with the complete line of quality Beretta sporting and competition firearms at your gun dealers today. Or send \$2.00 to Beretta USA for a copy of our catalog. Beretta U.S.A. Corp., 17601 Indian Head Highway, Accokeek, Md. 20607 (301) 283-2191

Beretta advertisement from October 1985 issue of *Guns & Ammo* exemplifies the Italian arms maker’s use of military cachet in the civilian gun market.

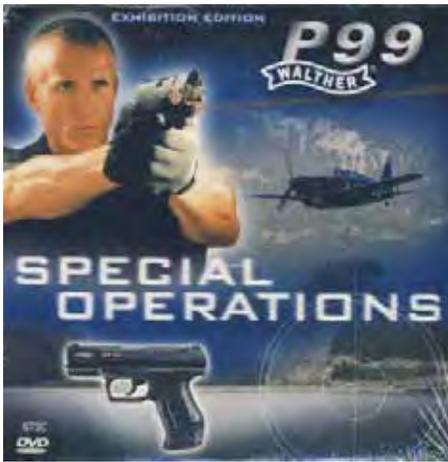
Austrian entrepreneur Gaston Glock had a similar objective when he founded his handgun manufacturing company, won an Austrian army competition in 1982, opened a U.S. subsidiary, and then went after the American law enforcement market. "In marketing terms, we assumed that, by pursuing the law enforcement market, we would then receive the benefits of 'after sales' in the commercial market," Glock told *Advertising Age* in 1995.<sup>23</sup>



Austrian gun manufacturer Glock promotes its firearms by constantly linking them to law enforcement use, a form of domestic militarism.

Boosted by these companies' sophisticated marketing strategies, and an adulatory gun press, high-capacity 9mm semiautomatic pistols reinvigorated the industry in the 1980s. Known as "Wonder Nines," 9mm semiautomatic pistols drove the formerly dominant revolvers out of the handgun market and created a lucrative boom for the industry. The military-style semiautomatic pistols proliferated.

The switch from revolvers to high-capacity pistols dramatically enhanced handgun lethality. As *Jane's Infantry Weapons* observed in the early 1980s, revolvers are "bulky," "generally limited to six rounds," take a "long time to reload," and produce low muzzle velocity. Pistols "can be made flat and unobtrusive," "take up to 13 rounds or more," feature a "simple to replace magazine," and high muzzle velocity.<sup>24</sup>



Gun industry promotional materials, like this DVD distributed at an NRA convention by German gunmaker Walther, frequently emphasize such militaristic terms as “mission,” “special operations,” and “tactical.”



Sniperworld (above) sells military-style firearms through the Internet. Here it assigns customers the “mission” of picking their sniper rifle. The dealer displays its membership in the NRA Business Alliance: “The Business of Freedom.”

**Handgun Militarization—High-Capacity “Anti-Terrorist” Vest-Busting Pistols.** In the scramble for market, the gun industry has introduced a plethora of high-capacity, high-caliber semiautomatic pistol designs since the mid-1980s. But no product better captures the gun industry’s relentless militarization than the Belgian company FN Herstal’s introduction into the civilian market of a pistol and cartridge specifically designed to defeat body armor—the FN Model Five-sevenN.

FN Herstal originally created the 5.7x28mm cartridge as the ammunition for a new submachine gun, the P90. The gun and round combination was developed in response to NATO’s request for design of a weapon that would be effective against body armor—ubiquitous on the modern battlefield. (The P90 is the prime example of a new generation of “high-tech” assault rifles, and a civilian version, the PS90, has become popular in the United States.) In short order, the company also designed a handgun that would chamber the innovative armor-piercing submachine round.

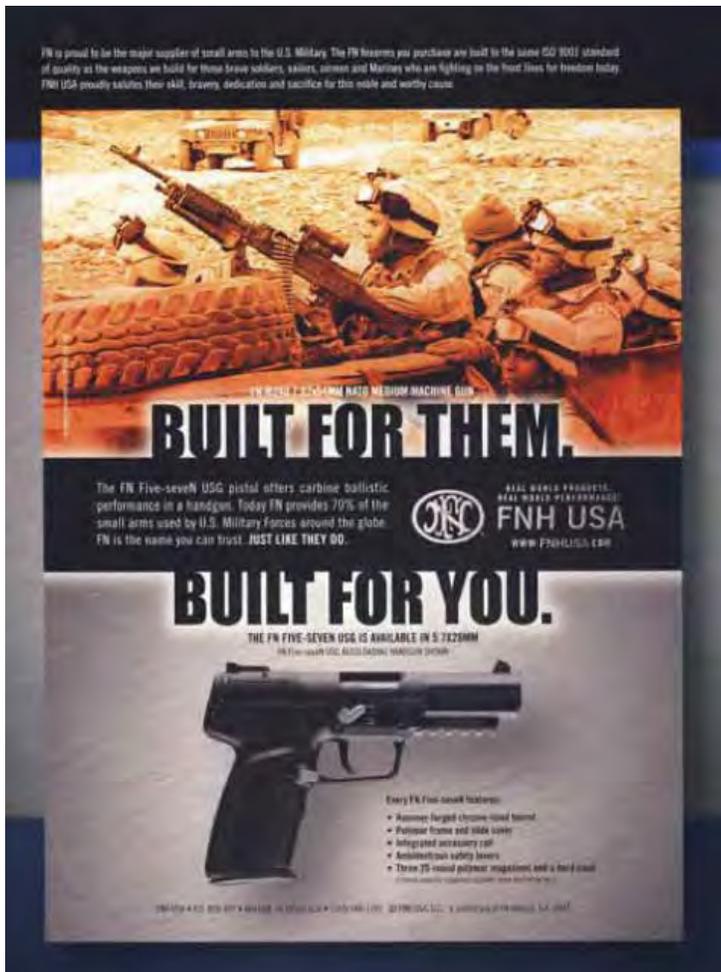


“Just like the Five-seveN handgun, the P90 submachine gun was developed around the 5.7x28mm ammunition to meet the Armies [sic] requirement in terms of efficiency.”

FN Herstal website

FN clearly understood that it was releasing a lethal genie. A spokesman for the company told the *Sunday Times* in 1996 that the pistol was “too potent” for normal police duties and was designed for anti-terrorist and hostage rescue operations.<sup>25</sup> The NRA’s *American Rifleman* claimed in 1999 that: “Law enforcement and military markets are the target groups of FN’s new FiveseveN pistol,” and told its readers, “Don’t expect to see this cartridge sold over the counter in the United States. In this incarnation, it is strictly a law enforcement or military round.”<sup>26</sup> In 2000, *American Handgunner* magazine assured the public, “For reasons that will become obvious, neither the gun nor the ammunition will ever be sold to civilians or even to individual officers.”<sup>27</sup>

In fact, this handgun, described as being for anti-terrorist and hostage rescue operations with its law enforcement and military round were, and are, freely sold to civilians. FN was simply hyping its new product with widespread publicity in the gun press about “restricted” sales to military and police, and then—having whetted the gun buying public’s appetite—moved into the much bigger and more profitable civilian market. The Five-seveN is one of the leading firearms smuggled to Mexico from the U.S. civilian gun market.



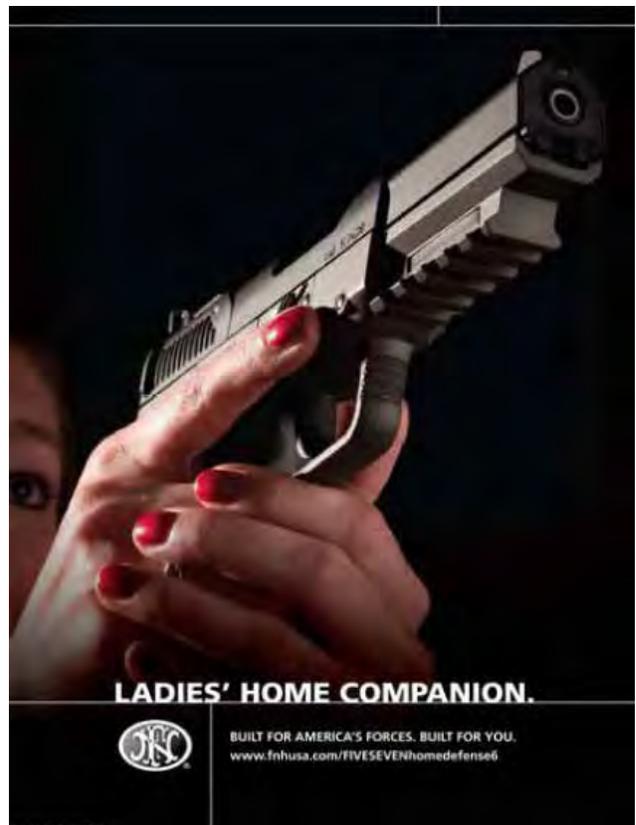
FN has heavily promoted its armor-piercing handgun in the U.S. civilian market. FN emphasizes its military cachet: “Today FN provides 70% of the small arms used by U.S. Military Forces around the globe. FN is the name you can trust. JUST LIKE THEY DO.” [Capitals in original.]

FNH USA 2008 catalog



U.S. Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan, left, used an FN Five-seveN 5.7mm semiautomatic pistol at Ft. Hood, Texas, on November 5, 2009. The major allegedly shot to death 13 people and wounded 32 others. He awaits trial in an Army court martial.

Although aimed at women, this ad's text promotes FN's military connection: "Built for America's Forces. Built for You."



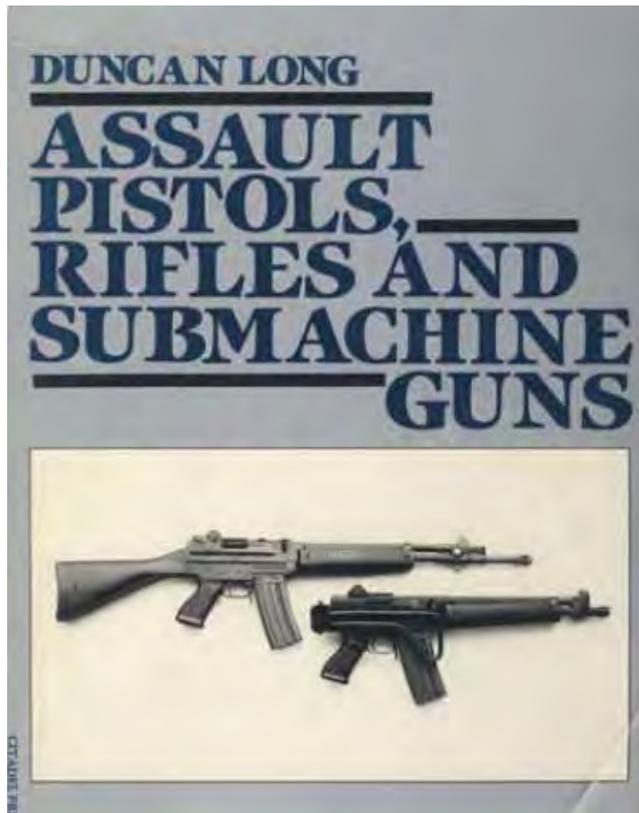
## ASSAULT RIFLES AND ASSAULT PISTOLS

In the mid-1980s, the industry found another niche market—semiautomatic assault weapons.

Semiautomatic assault weapons are civilian versions of automatic military assault rifles (like the AK-47, the M-16, and FN's high-tech P-90) and automatic military assault pistols (like the UZI).<sup>28</sup>

The military weapons “look” the same as the civilian weapons because they are functionally virtually identical. They differ only in one feature: military assault rifles are “machine guns.” A machine gun fires continuously as long as its trigger is held back—until it runs out of ammunition. Civilian assault rifles are *semi*-automatic weapons. The trigger of a semiautomatic weapon must be pulled back separately for each round fired.

Because federal law has banned the sale of new machine guns to civilians since 1986,<sup>29</sup> and heavily regulates sales to civilians of pre-1986 machine guns, there is virtually no civilian market for military assault weapons. The gun industry introduced semiautomatic versions of these deadly military assault weapons in order to create and exploit civilian markets.



The next problem arises if you make a semiauto-only model of one of these selective-fire rifles. According to the purists, an assault rifle has to be selective fire. Yet; if you think about it, it's a little hard to accept the idea that firearms with extended magazines, pistol grip stock, etc., cease to be assault rifles by changing a bit of metal.

In his 1986 book pro-gun author Duncan Long dismissed in the quote above the suggestion that semiautomatic civilian assault rifles were different in any substantial way from their military counterparts. The gun lobby has spent three decades trying to “rebrand” civilian assault rifles as mere sporting guns.

The world's armies developed assault weapons to meet specific combat needs. All assault weapons—military and civilian alike—incorporate specific features that were designed for laying down a high volume of fire over a wide killing zone. This is sometimes known as “hosing down” an area. Civilian assault weapons feature the specific military design features that make spray-firing easy and distinguish assault weapons from traditional sporting firearms.

The most important of these design features are—

- High-capacity detachable ammunition magazines that hold as many as 75 rounds of ammunition.
- A rear pistol grip (handle), including so-called “thumbhole stocks” and magazines that function like pistol grips.
- A forward grip or barrel shroud. Forward grips (located under the barrel or the forward stock) give a shooter greater control over a weapon during firing.

A gun industry observer summed up the design in September 2009:

From the minute you get your first modern, AR-style rifle, the first thing that you notice is the fact that it truly is one of the most ergonomic long guns you'll ever put to your shoulder. Makes sense, it was designed to take young men, many of whom had never fired a gun of any sort before, and quickly make them capable of running the rifle—effectively—in the most extreme duress, armed combat.<sup>30</sup>

130. Firing with the stock pressed to the body is conducted without halting. Press the stock to the right side with the right arm, with the butt of the stock in the armpit or against the front part of the upper arm (Figure 73). If the stock is folded, press the rifle's receiver and pistol grip to the body with the right hand (Figure 56). Hold the rifle with the left hand at the fore end. Point the rifle at the target and, continuing movement, commence firing.

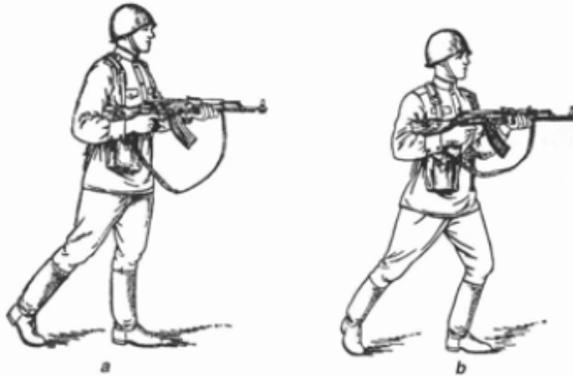


Figure 73. Firing on the move:

a - with stock pressed to side (armpit)

b - with stock resting against upper arm

131. When firing on the move, reload the rifle without stopping movement.



Assault rifles are used for sustained fire action at relatively close range (under 100 meters being the norm). Here Russian troops engage targets with their AK-47/AKM assault rifles.



...loaded at a 100-yard gong. The arm functioned flawlessly, and the iron plate reverberated with pleasing regularity. Recoil was virtually nil and even the report was not prohibitive. Ejection was positive, with the cases being tossed cavalierly to the

continued on page 76

Our test 9mm AR-15 was found to be a natural pointer. Target acquisition was rapid, even in instinctual shooting from waist level.

AK manual, gun magazine, and rifle book illustrate assault rifle “hosing down” technique.

**Imports—AK-47 Variants.** The Soviet Army’s premier assault rifle, the AK-47, went into service in 1947. The AK-47 has been made in many variants since then. It is said to be the most widely-distributed rifle in the world.

China was directly responsible for the AK boom in the United States. The country exported few guns to the United States until 1987, when Chinese rifle imports—mostly semiautomatic versions of the AK-47—surged. The flood of Chinese rifles reached 64 percent of all rifles imported into the United States in 1993.<sup>31</sup>

The executive branch has clear, existing authority under the Gun Control Act of 1968 to completely prohibit the import of any “non-sporting” firearm, such as these military-derived weapons.<sup>32</sup> In 1989, the George H.W. Bush administration blocked the importation of foreign-made semiautomatic assault rifles such as the AK variants. After the gun industry devised ways to skate around this ban with minor design changes, the Clinton administration acted again to cut off the flood of so-called “rule beaters.”

The George W. Bush administration, however, completely and surreptitiously abrogated the first Bush and Clinton import rules. The Obama administration has done nothing to reinstate the earlier tough rules. Accordingly, Eastern European gun manufacturers have taken the place of the Chinese gun makers. They are supplying millions of AK-47-type weapons to the U.S. civilian market through licensed importers.

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### ROMANIAN AK-47's and AK VARIANTS



**Romanian AK-47 WASR10/63M**  
7.62x39mm semi-auto AK-47 with laminated wood, military stock and forend, black synthetic pistol grip, slant cut muzzle brake, sling, bayonet lug, bayonet and high capacity mag. 15-1912 **\$399.95**  
**Two or more each \$389.95 - Five or more each \$379.95**

**Romanian AK-47 WASR10** 7.62x39mm semi-auto with wood stock and forend, synthetic pistol grip, welded muzzle nut, sling and high capacity magazine. 15-1726 **\$389.95**  
**Two or more each \$379.95 - Five or more each \$369.95**



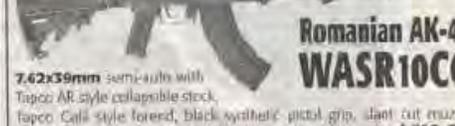
**Romanian AK-47 WASR10/63FPG**  
7.62x39mm semi-auto with original style wood forward pistol grip, wood buttstock, synthetic pistol grip, bayonet lug, slant cut muzzle brake, sling, high capacity mag. 15-1739 **\$389.95**



**Romanian AK-47 WASR10/63SFP**  
7.62x39 semi-auto with Tapco polymer side-folding stock, black synthetic forend and pistol grip, slant cut muzzle brake, sling, bayonet lug, bayonet, high capacity mag. 15-1811 **\$389.95**  
**Two or more each \$379.95**



**Romanian AK-47 WASR10C**  
7.62x39mm semi-auto with Tapco AR style collapsible stock, black synthetic pistol grip, slant cut muzzle brake, bayonet, bayonet lug, high capacity mag. 15-1217 **\$389.95** - **Two or more each \$379.95**



**Romanian AK-47 WASR10CG**  
7.62x39mm semi-auto with Tapco AR style collapsible stock, Tapco Call style forend, black synthetic pistol grip, slant cut muzzle brake, bayonet, bayonet lug and high capacity mag. 15-1744 **\$419.95**  
**Two or more each \$409.95**



**Romanian AK-47 GP75**  
7.62x39mm semi-auto with American made receiver, barrel, polymer pistol grip, forend and stock. Has bayonet lug, slant cut muzzle brake and high capacity mag. 15-1396 **\$429.95**  
**Three or more each \$399.95**

**AK-47 Model GP75** 7.62x39mm 15-1407 **\$429.95**  
**Three or more each \$399.95**



**Romanian AK-47 1975 Bullpup**  
7.62x39mm semi-auto with black polymer stock, new US made receiver and high capacity mag. 15-1442 **\$499.95**



**Yugoslavian AK-47 M70AB21**  
7.62x39 semi-auto, underfolding stock, parkerized finish, black polymer forend, slant cut muzzle brake, high capacity mag. 15-1667 **\$489.95**



**7.62x39mm Semi-Auto VZ2008 Sporter**  
With milled receiver, folding synthetic pistol grip and slant cut muzzle brake and VZ2008 30 Round VZ2008 Bayonet With Bakelight handle.

**SILE DIRECT FROM CHINA AKM-47/S RIFLE**



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84 GUNS & AMMO/DECEMBER 1985

Guns & Ammo ad for AK-type rifles from China in December 1985 (lower right). Since George W. Bush's administration opened the assault rifle floodgates again, AK-type rifles have poured in from Eastern Europe, as evidenced by this May 20, 2010, ad for J&G Sales from Shotgun News, which is typical of fare in the popular publication.

**Domestic Production—AR-15 Variants of the M-16.** After studying over three million casualty reports from World Wars I and II, and data from the Korean War, the U.S. Army concluded, “Marksmanship was not as important as volume.” Accordingly, it decided in the 1960s to replace its M-14 battle rifle with the M-16 assault rifle.<sup>33</sup>

The gun industry quickly churned out civilian versions of the M-16, labeling the semiautomatic model the “AR-15” (the same designation as the prototype military assault rifle). “With the number of companies making those particular black rifles today, it’s tough to keep up them [sic],” a gun industry insider wrote in 2009.<sup>34</sup>



The gun industry created a vast market for AR-15 civilian versions of the U.S. military’s M-16 assault rifle.

Manufacturers have recently introduced assault rifles in 22 caliber, considerably cheaper than the .223 ammunition of the usual AR-15 semiautomatic assault rifle. The lighter weapons also provide an entry model for later transition to higher-caliber rifles. For example, in August 2009 Smith & Wesson began shipments of its M&P15-22 semiautomatic assault rifle. Here is how one gun writer enthused about the new model:

...the M&P15-22 might be the first .22 LR AR platform that actually is appropriate for consumers, law enforcement and military use that can be used to teach AR operations and basic marksmanship skills and know there will be no modifications necessary to transition to the myriad of other AR calibers available.<sup>35</sup>

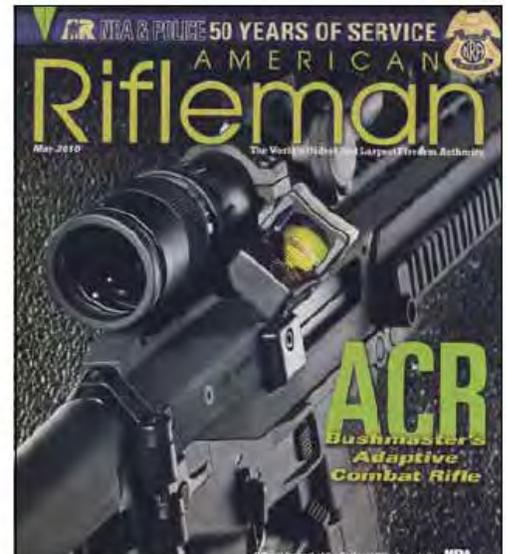


The industry has lately pushed 22 caliber semiautomatic assault rifles.

**The 1994 Assault Weapons “Ban” and the Rise of Bushmaster.** In 1994, Congress passed a ban on the production of certain semiautomatic assault weapons as well as new high-capacity ammunition magazines that held more than 10 rounds. The law banned specific assault weapons by name and also classified as assault weapons semiautomatic firearms that could accept a detachable ammunition magazine and had two additional assault weapon design characteristics.<sup>36</sup>

Because the law listed merely cosmetic features (like bayonet mounts) and did not address the fundamental design of assault weapons, it was ineffective. The gun industry quickly made slight design changes in “post-ban” guns to evade the law, a tactic gunmakers dubbed “sporterization.” One of the most aggressive of the manufacturers of “post-ban” ARs was Bushmaster Firearms. A Bushmaster XM15 M4 A3 assault rifle was used by the Washington, D.C.-area snipers to kill 10 and injure three in October 2002. A poster child for the industry’s success at evading the ban, the snipers’ Bushmaster was marketed as a “Post-Ban Carbine.”

The 1994 law expired (“sunset”) on September 13, 2004.



The Washington, D.C.-area “Beltway Snipers” used the Bushmaster semiautomatic assault rifle being shown at left above. Among Bushmaster’s latest AR-type assault rifles is the “Adaptive Combat Rifle” featured on the cover of the NRA’s May 2010 *American Rifleman*.

**Assault Pistols—UZI, Ingram, Intratec, and More.** A particularly deadly variant in the gun industry’s marketing program has been the sale of civilian assault pistols, which are for the most part simply semiautomatic versions of submachine guns. Firearms expert Duncan Long explained the marketing basis of this trend in his book *The Terrifying Three: Uzi, Ingram, and Intratec Weapons Families*:

As the militaries of the world increasingly rely on assault rifles to fill the submachine gun role, making money on a new submachine gun design becomes harder and harder....Citizens purchasing firearms for everything from plinking to self-defense have provided a lucrative market, especially in the United States. Those weapons produced for the civilian market are generally semiauto versions of the automatic weapons, often modified slightly to conform to U.S. firearms laws.<sup>37</sup>

A more recent development has been the introduction of AK-47 type pistols, which combine all the deadly design characteristics of the military-style assault rifle with the greater concealability of the handgun.

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**Romanian AK Draco Pistol**  
7.62x39 caliber handgun.  
(Backordered)  
[25-1676cc]

Price: \$349.95

quantity	price
2+	\$329.95
5+	\$319.95

Quantity:

Click to enlarge

These are Romanian AK Draco handguns in 7.62x39 caliber, black finish, new receiver. Barrel has integral front sight & gas tube muzzle-nut, wood fore stock, plastic pistol grip, and one magazine. Any standard AK double stack mag or drum. This is a hand gun. Below for shipping details. This firearm was assembled by Intratec International and may contain both new US made parts and used surplus parts. May or may not include cleaning rod.

Gun dealers offer AK-47 type semiautomatic assault pistols, like the Draco above, through the Internet.

## THE ASSAULT WEAPONS HYPE MARKET

**The 1980s Explosion.** Assault weapons quickly became hot items on the civilian market in the 1980s for a variety of reasons. For manufacturers, assault weapons helped counter the mid-1980s decline in handgun sales. Criminals—especially drug traffickers—were drawn to assault weapons’ massive firepower, useful for fighting police and especially competing traffickers. Survivalists—who envisioned themselves fending off a horde of desperate neighbors from within their bomb shelters—loved the combat features of high ammunition capacity and anti-personnel striking power of assault weapons. Right-wing paramilitary extremists, in their ongoing battle against the “Zionist Occupational Government,” made these easily purchased firearms their gun of choice. And for gun enthusiast fans of popular entertainment—*Rambo* and *Miami Vice*—semiautomatic assault weapons offered the look and feel of the “real thing.”

**I**n a survival situation, there's no time to worry about how a weapon will perform. That's why Elite American and European special operations forces rely on firearms made by Heckler & Koch.

The HK M Series Automatic Carbine is a direct offspring of Heckler & Koch's renowned family of M16 Submachine Guns. Designed and built with only one thing in mind: uncompromising performance. It's rugged, reliable. Rifle-like accuracy is 100 meters. The delayed roller-lock bolt system reduces recoil to keep the weapon on target. It exceeds the most stringent NATO accuracy requirements—right out of the box. And HK's revolutionary gas-operated system guarantees that you're still in control every time you mount your scope.

Easy to maintain and take apart, the HK M Series M16 and the HK M16 in full and semi-automatic designed as parts of an integrated gun system. The HK system of interchangeable parts and accessories enables these precision firearms to adapt quickly to changing tactical situations.

Leading military operations and law enforcement agencies around the world rely on firearms that bear the HK name. Your choice is equally clear. You can't carry an ordinary weapon. Or own the most uncompromising firearm in the world.

For more information, contact your local distributor or Heckler & Koch, Inc. 1407 Lee Road Channahon, Virginia 22021 Tel. 703-611-3000

**HK**

When you're determined to survive, you leave nothing to chance.

In a world of compromise, some men don't.

**I**n a survival situation, there's no time to worry about how a weapon will perform. That's why Elite American and European special operations forces rely on firearms made by Heckler & Koch.

The HK M Series Automatic Carbine is a direct offspring of Heckler & Koch's renowned family of M16 Submachine Guns. Designed and built with only one thing in mind: uncompromising performance. It's rugged, reliable. Rifle-like accuracy is 100 meters. The delayed roller-lock bolt system reduces recoil to keep the weapon on target. And HK's revolutionary gas-operated system guarantees that you're still in control every time you mount your scope.

Compare the HK M16 to the UZI in any other semi-automatic category on the market. You'll appreciate the difference between carrying an ordinary weapon, and owning the most uncompromising firearm in the world.

For more information, contact your local distributor or Heckler & Koch, Inc. 1407 Lee Road Channahon, Virginia 22021 Tel. 703-611-3000

**HK**

When your life is on the line, you leave nothing to chance.

In a world of compromise, some men don't.

German manufacturer Heckler & Koch pushed the civilian version of its military assault rifle in a series of ads—like these from *Guns & Ammo* magazine—in the mid-1980s stressing “survivalist” themes.

**The Y2K Exploitation.** The gun industry has ever since poured its efforts into new assault weapons designs and into their heavy marketing. One example of the industry's cynicism was its deliberate exploitation of widespread fears of a "breakdown" in public order at the turn of the millennium ("Y2K").<sup>38</sup>

In the January 1999 issue of *Shooting Sports Retailer*, editor Bob Rogers predicted, "Amidst social turmoil and disintegrating economic underpinnings, you will sell more guns in 1999 than you've ever sold in your life."<sup>39</sup> *Shooting Industry's* Russ Thurman asked readers, "Are you cashing in on the new millennium?"<sup>40</sup>

The prime danger, the gun industry luridly suggested, was that of rampaging humans: "...since the Have Nots won't hesitate to break in and take from the Haves, plan on close contact. And plan on being outnumbered. High-capacity rifles, pistols and shotguns are obvious choices."<sup>41</sup> But domestic pets could also become a threat to life in the gun industry's bizarre world: "One might also need to quickly stop a dog or dogs who through starvation revert to wild beasts. Dogs take a lot of killing, so a powerful round and good shot placement will be necessary should this distasteful task arise."<sup>42</sup>

**INDUSTRY watch**

**IT'S TIME TO SELL THE NEW MILLENNIUM!**

BY RUSS THURMAN

**Business Soars**

Industry-wide, companies are reporting excellent sales, even through the normally slow summer months.

Ellet Brothers Inc. reported its second quarter sales of \$38.3 million were up \$6.4 million compared to the same time last year. For the first six months of '99, Ellet Brothers posted total sales of \$77.3 million, compared to \$65.9 million for the first half of '98.

The Sporting Equipment division of Blount International Inc. continues to be a moneymaker for the industry giant. The

**AMMO 2000**

REMINGTON 28-GAUGE COMBO

**HOT SALES ARE EXPECTED TO CONTINUE FOR THE AMMUNITION MARKET**

By Roy Huntington

The past year proved to be another banner one for the ammunition industry. While driven partly by ongoing fears of pending firearms ban and the related reaction by buyers to "stock-up," the impressive sales, were primarily driven by Y2K concerns.

The predictions of massive unrest at the beginning of 2000 prompted gunowners to stock-up on ammunition. Many manufacturers worked around the clock to meet the demand. Virtually all major ammunition makers were back-ordered on .223, .308, 9mm, .45 ACP and .40 "ball" ammunition, especially during the last months of 1999.

Premier gun industry magazine *Shooting Industry* advised dealers in September 1999 (left) that "...taking advantage of the Y2K 'scare' is smart business...." In January 2000 the magazine reported that "...predictions of massive unrest...prompted gunowners to stock-up [sic] on ammunition."

Gun World's Y2K Daisy Chain



Gun World magazine not only published its own article in 1999 about how to “survive Y2K”—it also referred its readers to its sister publication *American Survival Guide*, in which appeared another article of survival advice written by Gun World editor Jan Libourel.



Typical Y2K gun ads from 1999 are shown above.

**Continuing Incitement.** The gun industry, the NRA, and the gun press have exploited every real and imagined public fear since the 1980s—including the terror attacks of September 2001, Hurricane Katrina, “spillover” of border violence, and concerns about violent “illegal” immigrants. The industry’s propaganda added fuel to the militia movement in the 1990s. Lethal confrontations occurred between federal law enforcement and civilians heavily armed with military-style weapons at Waco, Texas, and Ruby Ridge, Idaho. Barack Obama’s election, and fears that he would push an anti-gun agenda, ignited growth in the “militia” movement and a disturbing trend of open display of assault weapons near Presidential speaking engagements.<sup>43</sup>



The ad for a Benelli shotgun on the left, from the NRA’s 2010 annual meeting brochure, ostensibly speaks to a “revolution” in shotgun design. The ad for the “tactical” shotgun on the right, from the September 2010 *Guns & Ammo* magazine, links “homeland security” to “Iraq, Afghanistan, Your Livingroom.”



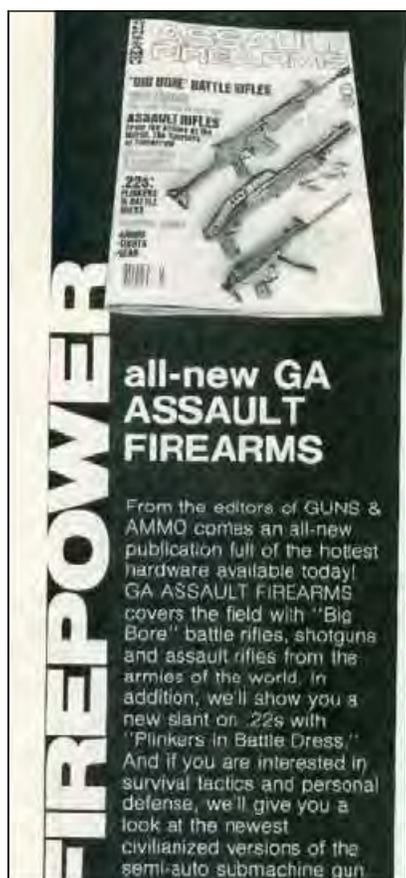
The NRA pamphlet *Freedom in Peril* warns, "Second Amendment freedom today stands naked...." Laced with ugly stereotypes of the gun lobby's political enemies—a classic technique for dehumanizing "the other"—it suggests "towering waves" of danger from ethnic and racial gangs. "Sometimes," the brochure suggestively states, "any hope of prevailing rests in the hearts and hands of a very urgent few...."



**The National Shooting Sports Foundation’s Rebranding Campaign.** In November 2009, the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) announced that—“due to gun owners’ concerns over President-elect Obama and possible legislation regulating the Second Amendment rights of Americans”—it had placed on its website a “media resource...to help clear up much of the confusion and misinformation about so-called ‘assault weapons.’”<sup>44</sup>

This was the opening salvo in the industry’s meretricious campaign to “rebrand” semiautomatic assault weapons as “modern sporting rifles.”<sup>45</sup> The point of the campaign—inspired by the pummeling the industry gets for selling killing machines—is apparently that semiautomatic assault rifles are really just another sporting gun, no different from an older generation of bolt-action and low-capacity rifles.

Unfortunately for the NSSF and the industry, the widely-reported affection for semiautomatic assault rifles by extremists, drug lords, and common criminals gives the lie to this insidious “rebranding” campaign. Even worse, some within the gun industry’s own ranks apparently never got the NSSF rebranding memo. They continue to call semiautomatic assault rifles what they are—*assault rifles*—and even write lurid prose promoting the worst features of these guns.



Manufacturers and fan magazines alike called semiautomatic assault weapons “assault weapons” before their deadly killing power became a matter of public debate.

For recent example, the August 2010 edition of *Gun World* magazine headlines “Ruger’s Mini-14 Tactical Rifle” as “‘Combat Customized’ From the Factory.”<sup>46</sup> Among other outbursts of naked candor in the enthusiastic article are the following—

- Ruger’s Mini-14 Tactical Rifle is a version of the well-established Mini-14 incorporating many of the assault rifle features that end users have been [sic] applying themselves for decades, this time straight from the factory.
- **Being seen over the years as a sort of “poor man’s assault rifle” the Mini-14 has spawned a huge array of after-market parts that may be applied to make it more “assault rifle-y.”** Recently Sturm, Ruger & Co. finally decided to get into the act themselves by producing their Mini-14 Tactical Rifles. [Bold added]

This spasm of candor is typical of the “wink and nod” game that the gun industry plays when it talks to itself and to its hard-core consumers: call them what you will—“black rifles,” “tactical rifles,” or “modern sporting rifles”—semiautomatic assault weapons are plain and simply military-style assault weapons.



## 50 CALIBER ANTI-ARMOR SNIPER RIFLES

The 50 caliber anti-armor sniper rifle is a case of militarization in which precisely the same weapon is sold on the civilian market as that sold to the world's armed services.

This lucrative weapon was invented in the early 1980s by a Tennessee commercial photographer, Ronnie G. Barrett, who derived the sniper rifle from the Browning 50 caliber machine gun.<sup>47</sup>

Barrett's 1987 patent called his new invention an "anti-armor gun." He described the rifle in his patent claim as a "shoulder-fireable, armor-penetrating gun." Barrett related the novelty of his anti-armor gun as follows:

The recoil and weight of the Browning M-2 heavy-barrel machine gun (50 cal.), belt-fed, make it unsuitable for firing from the shoulder. The bolt-fed sniper rifle of smaller weight and caliber will not penetrate armored targets. The bolts of guns of a caliber that will penetrate armored targets are often broken by recoil because of excessive strain on the lock lugs. Thus, there is a need for a light-weight, shoulder-fireable, armor-penetrating gun that can stand up to heavy duty use. After extended investigation I have come up with just such a gun.

Barrett Firearms Manufacturing, Inc. is today the leading supplier of 50 caliber anti-armor sniper rifles to U.S. military forces and many other armies of the world.

FROM THE DESK OF RONNIE BARRETT



My Fellow Gun Enthusiasts,

Great things are happening now at Barrett! Recent additions to our facility ensure consistent deliveries, and our new R&D shop is world-class. Barrett Optics launched the revolutionary BORE! Our online store is growing every day, and the Barrett internet forum is a hub for exchanging great ideas. Our training department is staffing up with experienced professionals.

I am also pleased to report that each Barrett model of large-caliber rifle is in service with a government somewhere around the globe. This is a great accomplishment for us, but it is equally important to you, the buyer. Adoption by a government indicates a proven design, stable support, and continuous upgrades over many years. Consider this when you are comparing our rifles to any other competitor.

Advertising note "From the Desk of Ronnie Barrett," inventor of the 50 caliber anti-armor sniper rifle, boasts that "...each Barrett model of large-caliber rifle is in service with a government somewhere around the globe." In his pitch to "Fellow Fun Enthusiasts," Barrett urges them to "[c]onsider this when you are comparing our rifles to any other

Barrett has also aggressively marketed its anti-armor rifles to civilian buyers in the United States. After Barrett effectively created a new civilian market for his anti-armor rifles, lower-priced competition sprang up from dozens of new manufacturers cashing in on the booming niche. These rifles have become one of the hottest items sold in the civilian market.

In spite of their battlefield pedigree, 50 caliber anti-armor rifles are no more regulated under federal law than a 22 caliber target rifle, and are less regulated than handguns. Under federal law, anyone at least 18 years of age who is not in a category as to whom transfers or possession of firearms is prohibited—such as convicted felons—can legally buy any .50BMG anti-armor sniper rifle sold in America. But it is against the law for a federally licensed dealer to sell a handgun to anyone less than 21 years of age. Unlike other weapons of war—such as 50 caliber fully automatic machine guns—50 caliber anti-armor rifles are exempt from the stringent provisions of the federal National Firearms Act, which requires a photo, fingerprints, local law enforcement approval, record of the transfer, and registration of the weapon with a \$200 fee.



The gun industry has saturated the American civilian “gun culture” with 50 caliber anti-armor sniper rifles, like this AR-50.

## TAXPAYERS SUBSIDIZE THE GUN INDUSTRY

In spite of “anti-government” and insurrectionist rhetoric from the National Rifle Association and its ilk, the gun industry and the gun lobby aggressively milk the federal government for taxpayer subsidies. For example, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service regularly subsidizes gun industry marketing research in the guise of “conservation” grants, as described in this 2009 industry article:

The Task Force 20/20 group, industry leaders from the hunting and shooting sports, is continuing to work toward its goal of increasing participation in hunting and the shooting sports by 20 percent over the next five years....Task Force 20/20 began in 2008 during the NSSF Summit whose primary focus was discussing research from a three-year study titled *The Future of Hunting and the Shooting Sports—Research-based Recruitment and Retention Strategies*. The report condenses the findings of one of the largest and most comprehensive studies ever conducted on factors related to the hunting and shooting sports industry. Funding for the research came from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in the form of a multi-state conservation grant.<sup>48</sup>

### The Future of Hunting and the Shooting Sports

Research-based Recruitment and Retention Strategies

- Home
- Task Force Members
- 2008 Summit Videos
- The Future of Hunting and the Shooting Sports* Chapter Summaries
  - Introduction
  - Participation in Hunting and Shooting Sports
  - U.S. Demographic Trends and Characteristics
  - Hunting and Shooting Initiation, recruitment, Retention, and Desertion
  - Motivations for and Satisfaction with Hunting and the Shooting Sports
  - Target Markets
  - Hunting and Shooting

**Background:**  
In June the National Shooting Sports Foundation hosted the 2008 Shooting Sports Summit in Colorado Springs. The summit gathered leaders from throughout the shooting, hunting and outdoor industry as well as key leaders from fish and wildlife agencies and conservation organizations to address key challenges that face the future of the shooting sports.

At the core of the Summit was a three-year research project titled, "*The Future of Hunting and the Shooting Sports - Research-based Recruitment and Retention Strategies*." **The report condenses the findings of one of the largest and most comprehensive studies ever conducted on the factors related to our industry.** Funding for the research came from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in the form of a multi-state conservation grant. NSSF commissioned the firm of Responsive Management to conduct the research for the report.

The Summit closed out with attendees committed to taking action on key efforts to reach new hunters and shooters to ensure that our shooting traditions will be a lasting heritage passed on to future generations. To guide the successful implementation of this research the NSSF has developed *Task Force 20/20*<sup>SM</sup>.

**Member Organizations:**

The U.S. armed forces also subsidize industry activity, largely through the ploy of “marksmanship” programs, as this article from an industry newsletter attests:

Every summer, prior to the National Rifle and Pistol Trophy Matches at Camp Perry, Ohio, Soldiers from the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit take time out of their own training and preparation to pass their knowledge and superb shooting skills on to the next generation of American shooters at the Small Arms Firing School....

“It’s such a great thing,” said Jim Davis, Hamilton, Ind. “This is the best place in the country, maybe the world, to learn about shooting and everything that goes with it.”

Davis took his son and three other children from the Dekalb County 4-H club to the rifle class, stressing to them how valuable the instruction that they are receiving is to them now and down the road.

“I still remember when I came to this school as a teenager,” he said. “I tell my kid that this is something that you’ll always remember.”<sup>49</sup>

The Army Marksmanship Unit also hosts an annual event for “civilians playing army in combat situations.”<sup>50</sup>

The shooting sport of 3-gun competition, with pistol, rifle, and tactical shotgun is rooted somewhere in the idea of adults playing army. It is simulated combat. And Three Gun can get even more interesting when the Army issues an invitation to bring your guns and join up for three days of competition, with the Army Marksmanship Unit hosting their 3-gun challenge.<sup>51</sup>

The bottom line—ultimately the only thing that matters to the gun industry—is that taxpayers are paying for the means by which a dying industry hangs on by funding market research in the guise of “conservation grants” and introducing new generations of children to the “sport” of shooting military-style weapons in the drag of military marksmanship programs.

## THE RESULT: MILITARIZED FIREARMS DEFINE THE U.S. CIVILIAN FIREARMS MARKET

Military-style weapons today define the U.S. civilian gun market. As noted earlier, *Shooting Wire* summarized the gun industry's situation in December 2008 as follows:

The net of all the numbers is that if you're a company with a strong line of high-capacity pistols and AR-style rifles, you're doing land office business. If you're heavily dependent on hunting, you are hurting.<sup>52</sup>



Military-style "combat rifles" and lethal firepower dominate U.S. civilian firearms market production and marketing.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF MILITARIZATION

The widespread availability of militarized firearms—including especially high-capacity semiautomatic pistols and assault weapons—has substantially raised the level of lethality of armed encounters in the United States. Criminal street gangs, drug traffickers, and militant extremists are all drawn to the military-style firepower of these weapons.

Two trends are remarkable.

**Increasing Attacks on Law Enforcement with Assault Weapons.** A recent Violence Policy Center study of reported incidents showed that more than one out of four assault weapons incidents involve police. Moreover, the number of assault weapons incidents involving police grew significantly between the two periods studied (March 1, 2005 to February 28, 2006 and March 1, 2006 to February 28, 2007).<sup>53</sup>

A typical more recent incident is that of Richard Poplawski, who is accused of shooting to death Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, police officers Paul J. Sciallo II, Stephen J. Mayhle, and Eric G. Kelly on April 4, 2009. Among the guns Poplawski fired at police was an AK-47 semiautomatic assault rifle.<sup>54</sup>



Richard Poplawski and the three police officers who died on April 4, 2009.

**Trafficking of Military-Style Weapons from the United States.** According to both United States and Mexican officials, large numbers of military-style firearms from the U.S. civilian gun market fuel criminal violence in Mexico. Congressional hearings and public policy reports have made clear that the U.S. gun industry is instrumental in making readily available to illegal gun traffickers the types and numbers of weapons that facilitate drug lords' confrontations with the Mexican government and its people. U.S. and Mexican officials report that, based on firearms tracing data from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the cartels obtain up to 90 percent of their firearms from the United States.<sup>55</sup>



Military-style firearms smuggled from the United States fuel violence among Mexican drug cartels and criminal confrontations with the Mexican government. Weapons of choice include 50 caliber anti-armor sniper rifles, assault rifles, and cop-killing FN Five-seveN anti-armor handguns.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

More than anything else, the news media, public interest groups, and especially policymakers must come to grips with a deadly reality. That reality is that the gun industry is not today—if it ever was—a “sporting” industry. It is a highly militarized and increasingly cynical industry that has cast all restraint aside to generate profit from military-style firearms.

Like an injured predator, the industry is particularly dangerous as it sinks further into its inevitable decline. The gun industry’s desperate “marketing” campaigns underwrite mass shootings in the United States, increasingly lethal confrontations with law enforcement, and armed violence abroad.

Most insidiously, the gun lobby’s exploitation of fear—racial, ethnic, and political—encourages resort to armed violence among the most impressionable and ill-equipped to function in a complex society.

This is truly an era in which to do nothing is to invite unthinkable violence.

## ENDNOTES

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# Owning a Gun in America Is a Luxury

How much does it really cost to own a gun?

By [Jay Willis](#)

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Two weeks after Parkland became the latest American city to watch its name become synonymous with the horrors of gun violence, the cottage industry of [Second Amendment commentary](#) that springs up after each one of these tragic episodes was in full swing. Among its more strident defenders, as usual, was Fox News personality Andrew Napolitano, who penned an [op-ed](#) outlining his preferred justification for the continued existence of this country's two-hundred-plus-year-old right to bear arms: It preserves the "natural right" of self-defense.

Natural rights, explains Napolitano, are not granted by government—they are "claims and privileges that are attached to humanity as God's gifts." Or, as he [put it](#) in the *Washington Times* after the Pulse nightclub shooting: "We know from reason, human nature and history that the right to defend yourself is a natural instinct that is an extension of the right to self-preservation, which is itself derived from the right to live."

This is not just a Fox News company line. It was [a pillar](#) of Justice Scalia's reasoning in [District of Columbia v. Heller](#), a Supreme Court case holding that the right to keep a handgun in one's home is not dependent on service in a "well regulated militia." (Napolitano says that when he asked the late justice why he sometimes used the term "pre-political" instead of "natural," he replied. "You and I know they mean the same thing, but 'natural' sounds too Catholic, and I am interpreting the Constitution, not Aquinas.") To these men, the Second Amendment is kind of a formality, enshrining in the law a common-sense truism as a matter of linguistic convenience.

An important implication of this argument, says Napolitano, is that more Americans would be safer if only more Americans were self-reliant gun owners. "We all need to face a painful fact of life: The police make mistakes like the rest of us and simply cannot be everywhere when we need them," he wrote after Parkland. "When government fails to recognize this and it disarms us in selected zones, we become helpless before our enemies." But if the underlying purpose of the Second Amendment is to enable people to take responsibility for their own safety, one complication is that it does nothing to finance the exercise of that right. And owning a gun is expensive.

## The Price of Being a Responsible Gun Owner

A gun is a gun, no matter who holds it. NRA spokesperson Dana Loesch is fond of making this point, [arguing](#) that firearms act as the "great equalizer," even among historically marginalized groups. But these statements are aspirational, not descriptive. Gun ownership is [less common](#) among African-Americans and Hispanics than whites, and [more common](#) among wealthier Americans than poorer ones. The financial and bureaucratic barriers to gun ownership, explained one California police officer, tend to disadvantage the same people who would supposedly be most empowered by the availability of tools of self-defense. "People don't live in dangerous neighborhoods by choice—they often can't afford to live anywhere else," he said, noting that the task of obtaining a concealed carry permit, which most states require their proverbial Self-Reliant Good Guys with Guns to have, can be a cost-prohibitive one. "Citizens who want to do everything right can't afford to legally protect themselves." The cultural proliferation of guns has transformed the "right" of self-defense into a luxury available only to those who can afford it.

The process of buying a gun is like buying a car from a really good salesperson: After you make up your mind to buy a gun, you will do your research, consider your needs, pore through reviews, ask friends for

advice, and go for some test drives. Eventually, you will walk into a showroom intending to purchase a specific bundle of goods for what you hope is a fixed price. You will leave with a gun, but also with lots of other stuff—some of it mandatory, some of it optional, and none of it included in the amount you thought you would spend in the first place.

Courtesy of gun owners, law enforcement personnel, and gun shop proprietors who generously agreed to help with this project, below are some rough estimates of what it might cost for a firearms novice to become a responsible, well-trained, law-abiding handgun owner. It is not exactly a task that everyone can afford to undertake.

A gun (\$500 to \$650)

While personal taste in handguns varies, most people with whom I spoke recommended that a first-time buyer opt for a 9-millimeter handgun, which tend to be lighter and easier to fire than their larger-caliber counterparts. One gun shop salesperson showed me four different entry-level models, each of which offered different magazine capacities, grip backstraps, and finishes. The most expensive was \$650; the least expensive was \$500, excluding tax.

As is the case when buying a car, you can save money by opting for a used model, or one from a down-market manufacturer. A gun shop owner in Texas told me that his wares start at just \$219.99. But most of what he sells, he says, costs a shade under \$500.

Ammunition (\$150 to \$200 to start)

You need two kinds: practice rounds for the range, and hollow-points—which expand in diameter upon contact—for self-defense. Popular online retailers will sell you 100 hollow-point rounds for around \$40, and 100 rounds of practice ammunition for around \$25. Again, opinions vary on how much ammunition is enough ammunition, but let's say your first buy as a newly-christened pistol owner runs around \$100.

Most handguns come with one or two magazines—the detachable contraption that stores ammunition and is inserted into the grip. (No, it's not a clip. Don't call it a clip.) At \$30 or \$40 apiece, one gun owner recommends grabbing extras to cut down on reloading time at the range. Spend \$15 and \$30 on a speed loader, too, to save yourself the achy-fingered tedium of manually loading rounds into empty magazines.

Accessories (\$200 to \$250)

Basic cleaning supplies run around \$20. A holster costs between \$20 and \$40, unless you're fond of leather. Keep the handgun in an entry-level, portable gun safe, which your favorite sporting goods outfitter sells for around \$40. Heavier-duty, in-home stationary safes—especially those that can store multiple firearms—can be much more expensive.

That's all before you get into attachable accessories. In a nighttime home intruder scenario, a high-lumen light mounted on a handgun's rail system will help you identify who you're pointing the gun at and temporarily blind them, buying additional precious seconds to decide what to do. Several gun owners listed this as a must-have accessory, and it is not cheap. A good one costs around \$150.

Lessons and range fees (\$300 to \$500, excluding ammunition)

Members of gun-owning families are in luck here, since they benefit from the wisdom of experienced relatives from whom they can learn for free. If you don't come from one of those, though, you'll need to learn yourself. A range near me offers an introductory class for about \$90, which covers topics like vocabulary, storage, safety, marksmanship, and operation. Basic eye and ear protection comes bundled together for \$30.

An annual range membership, including daily usage fees, can run between \$275 and \$350, depending on the market and the frequency with which you visit. One gun owner recommended shooting at least once a month to ensure that your skills don't atrophy. Remember, that's a box or two of practice rounds every time.

Administrative fees (varies by state, but can be hundreds of dollars)

A gun is most useful for self-defense—the type that can stop mass shootings, at least—if you have the option of bringing it outside. Most states require gun owners to pay for this privilege, at the very least. To get a concealed pistol license in [Washington](#), I had to pay \$48 at the sheriff's office, which took my fingerprints and ran a background check. (In [New York City](#), the fee is \$340, which does not include fingerprinting costs.) There were no tests of my skills or questions about my motives for applying. A month later, I received a laminated, wallet-size card affirming my right to bring a handgun into the drugstore.

Other states impose more stringent prerequisites. Residents of [Florida](#) who want a concealed carry permit have to complete an approved firearms education course first. In [Illinois](#) and [Maryland](#), first-time applicants must undergo 16 hours of classroom training—that's two full workdays of instruction—and demonstrate proficiency in a range test, hitting the designated target at least 70 percent of the time.

In places that allow law enforcement to exercise discretion, getting a permit may be functionally impossible, even for those who can meet all the legal requirements. Between [state](#) and [local](#) fees, a California “carry concealed weapon” permit, or CCW, costs around \$300. But in 2014, the *San Francisco Chronicle* [reported](#) that in Alameda County—home to Oakland, Berkeley, and some 1.6 million Californians at the time—law enforcement officials had issued a total of 170 permits. San Francisco, a city of more than 850,000 people, famously evaluates CCW applications on a [strict “necessity” standard](#). As of 2014, there were fewer than 10 of them.

Grand total

One gun shop owner estimated that a prospective gun owner, at an absolute minimum, could buy a cheap pistol and a single box of defensive rounds for around \$250. But these are half-measures. Becoming a safe, responsible, well-trained gun owner—the kind of person who is ready to exercise their natural right to self-defense to the fullest, whether from an intruder in the home or a mass shooter at the mall—costs well over \$1,000. In more expensive markets, if you factor in the time and expense associated with necessary training, that figure could almost double.

Conversations about gun policy rarely consider how the sticker price of hardware might affect ownership patterns. But the nonpartisan Pew Research Center has found that NRA membership rates are [highest](#) among gun owners who report household incomes of greater than \$100,000. A 2014 [analysis](#) published by NORC, a nonpartisan research organization affiliated with the University of Chicago, found that 44 percent of respondents with incomes above \$90,000 had a gun in the home. For those making between \$25,000 and \$49,999, the rate fell to 32.1 percent. Below \$25,000, it was only 18.2 percent.

When the data is broken down into even smaller intervals, says Tom Smith, one of the NORC study's co-authors, the gradient starts to look “pretty steep.” The most recent three years of biannual data from the [General Social Survey](#), which is administered by NORC, show that the likelihood of finding a gun in the house correlates pretty strongly with whether the people who live in it manage to clear six figures.

Survey data cannot explain any individual's decision about gun ownership. (Plenty of people who can afford a gun choose not to do so.) But guns and gun accessories are expensive, notes the Giffords Law Center's Kelly Drane, which means that purchasing a firearm is likely easier for wealthy people. As Smith puts it, “Well-to-do families are more likely to have any particular commodity, from guns to cars to 60-inch

TVs. Having more disposable income means you can make less restrictive choices.” And for lower-income Americans who do not have comfortable reserves of disposable income, forgoing their Second Amendment right isn’t really a choice. Even the barebones starter kit, noted one gun owner, is a lot of money for someone who doesn’t have a lot of money. “That doesn’t solve the problem,” he said. “You can certainly buy your way into a more legitimate way to defend yourself if you’ve got the money.”

It’s easy to say that no price is too high for safety and security. Bumper sticker slogans are free, though, and guns are not. It is a basic problem of scarce resource allocation and perception of risk: If something terrible happens to you, failing to have a gun on you only *might* make you more safe. (The Las Vegas shooting happened in a city full of well-trained, gun-carrying professionals. It didn’t matter.)

As a practical matter, maybe Napolitano would concede that fewer than 100 percent of people need to be armed in order to prevent mass shootings, especially in urban areas. But every admission like this one undermines the principle of self-reliance, and doubles as a tacit acknowledgement that having more guns in a confined space is an inherently dangerous thing. Besides, choosing the winners—deciding how many good gun owners counts as “enough,” and who doesn’t need to be able to protect *themselves* in order to be considered “safe”—is an inherently political process, and one that is unlikely to be more charitable to marginalized groups than the status quo.

Astute legal scholars will remind you that the Second Amendment is a negative right—that it protects the *right* to own guns, but that nothing obligates the government to make sure everyone exercises it equally. The Bill of Rights is full of [promises like this one](#), which sound noble and egalitarian in theory but are kinder to wealthier people in practice. Celebrating the virtues of equality while ignoring the consequences of inequity has always been the American way.

This is coherent as a legal argument, but it fails as a moral one. The Second Amendment is the only one that implicates possession of a tangible object, and the unstated reason people require *guns* to defend themselves is that other people—bad people—are assumed to have guns, too. The right to bear arms is a “necessity” borne of some 250 years of treating guns as part of the fabric of American society, not as the affirmative policy choice that it is. Today, the Second Amendment bestows its unique brand of freedom only on those who can afford a gun, paying a de facto tax to feel a little less vulnerable to the omnipresent threat of harm. If we justify the right to bear arms on self-defense grounds—if it is convenient shorthand for a natural right to protect ourselves—we also accept that for anyone who can’t pay this tax, the right is a hollow one.

This rationale’s most insidious implication is that it casts doubt on the idea that a greater social obligation exists to protect members from harm. “I’m not going to be a Gabby Giffords,” explained GOP congressman Ralph Norman after [displaying his pistol](#) during a recent public appearance. In 2011, the Arizona legislator was shot in the head by a man who used his legally-obtained handgun to kill six people that morning. Norman’s message is clear: If she had brought a pistol to that grocery store, perhaps things would have turned out differently. The availability of guns in the marketplace enables people to feel less responsible for doing the hard work of addressing gun violence, because it permits them to think of self-defense as a choice—even for those who may not actually have one.

I can’t fault anyone who wants to do all that they can to protect themselves and their loved ones. I respect the decisions of responsible, thoughtful people who use their resources to learn how to use a gun for that purpose. But I am troubled by the fact that doing so is a privilege—another way in which America’s culture of guns is most dangerous for the most vulnerable people who live in it.