



9 Things to Know About Gun Violence in Washington State

By Chelsea Parsons and Lauren Speigel October 2014

By many measures, gun violence in Washington state is in the middle range of what is common across the nation. In a 2013 Center for American Progress analysis of gun violence across all 50 states, Washington had slightly below-average rates of overall firearm deaths, overall firearm homicides, firearm homicides of women, gun deaths of children, and aggravated assaults with a firearm.¹ Washington is also middle of the road when it comes to the strength of its gun laws: The Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence and the Brady Campaign awarded Washington a “C” for its gun laws in 2013, finding that the state has some measures in place to prevent dangerous people from accessing firearms but that the laws still have dangerous gaps.²

However, other measures show that gun violence remains unacceptably high in Washington. In 2011—the most recent year for which data are available—624 people were killed with a gun, meaning someone dies from a gunshot wound in Washington every 14 hours.³ This brief highlights 9 measures of gun violence and gun crime in Washington state that stand out as exceptional, unusual, or well above the national average.

Meanwhile, the debate about gun laws is heating up in Washington state. This November, voters will decide whether to accept Initiative 594, which would close the private sale loophole and require a background check for all gun sales in the state.⁴ Under federal law, background checks are only required for sales from licensed gun dealers; private individuals can sell guns without performing a background check to see if the buyer is a felon, domestic abuser, seriously mentally ill, or otherwise prohibited from gun ownership. One analysis suggests that 38 percent fewer women are shot and killed by intimate partners in states that require background checks for all handgun sales.⁵ Another study showed that Missouri experienced a 25 percent increase in firearm homicide rates after it repealed a law requiring background checks on all handgun sales in 2007.⁶ While closing the private sale background check loophole may not solve each of the problems discussed in this brief, it would certainly be a significant step in the right direction and would strengthen the state’s gun laws and prevent thousands of dangerous prohibited individuals from being able to easily buy guns in the state without a background check and with no questions asked. By assessing some measures of gun violence in Washington, this brief provides additional context for what exactly is at stake as voters consider this initiative.

1. Higher rate of law enforcement officers murdered with guns

The danger that criminals with guns pose to law enforcement is acute in Washington state. In the past decade, police officers were murdered with guns at a higher rate than the national average. Federal Bureau of Investigation data show that 13 police officers were murdered with guns in Washington between 2003 and 2012. Controlling for population, 0.019 police officers were killed in Washington per 100,000 residents—27.3 percent higher than the national average of 0.015 police officers killed per 100,000 residents.⁷

The rate of law enforcement officers murdered with guns in Washington state was **27 percent higher** than the national average between 2003 and 2012.

Lax gun laws that allow dangerous people to have easy access to guns without background checks increase the risk officers face on the job. Indeed, in states that have closed the private sale loophole and require background checks for the private sale of handguns, 39 percent fewer law enforcement officers are shot to death with handguns.⁸

2. Law enforcement killers are often prohibited from gun possession

According to an Everytown for Gun Safety analysis of firearm murders of police officers in Washington state between 1980 and 2013, at least 61 percent of the perpetrators of those murders were prohibited from gun possession, primarily because of previous felony convictions.⁹ These individuals should not have been able to acquire a gun, yet they were able to do so at least in part because of weak gun laws that do not require a background check for every gun sale. Such laws place police officers in unnecessary danger as they perform even the most routine duties.

61 percent of perpetrators who killed police officers with guns in Washington between 1980 and 2013 were prohibited from possessing guns.

For example, Trooper Tony Radulescu of the Washington State Patrol was shot and killed by a convicted felon during a traffic stop on February 23, 2012.¹⁰ Similarly, Deputy Sheriff Anne Jackson was shot and killed by an individual with a history of both criminal and mental health issues while she was responding to a domestic disturbance call on September 2, 2008.¹¹ Most notoriously, four Lakewood police officers were shot and killed in an ambush attack while sitting at a coffee shop in Parkland, Washington, on November 29, 2009. The perpetrator, Maurice Clemmons, had an extensive criminal history involving multiple violent felony convictions and had only gotten out of jail on bond one week prior to the shooting.¹²

3. Women are particularly at risk for gun violence

While violent crime in the United States has steadily declined over the past two decades, a significant portion of the violence that remains occurs in the context of domestic or intimate partner violence.¹³ A key driver of this fatal violence is access to firearms by domestic abusers: The mere presence of a firearm in a home experiencing domestic violence increases the risk of homicide of an intimate partner eight fold compared to homes without guns.¹⁴

The risk that domestic abusers with guns pose to women is brought into sharp relief in Washington state: 226 women were murdered with guns in Washington between 2003 and 2012,¹⁵ and more than one-third of all murders of women in the state—37.6 percent—occurred in an intimate partner context.¹⁶ The number of women murdered with guns in the state is 1.5 times the number of soldiers from Washington state killed during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan combined.¹⁷ These cases include that of Sheena Henderson, who was in the process of getting a restraining order against her abusive and mentally unstable husband when he went to her job in Spokane and fatally shot her multiple times before shooting himself on July 8, 2014.¹⁸ In another case, Monique Williams was shot and killed by her ex-boyfriend, Aaron Newport, in Pasco on May 19, 2014—a week after ending their relationship.¹⁹

Since 1998, 6,227 prohibited domestic abusers have tried to buy a gun from a licensed dealer in Washington state but were prevented from doing so because of a background check.²⁰ Yet each of these individuals could have evaded the law simply by going to a gun show or online and purchasing one from an unlicensed seller who is not required to perform a background check. In fact, that is exactly how Aaron Newport purchased the gun he used to murder Monique Williams. Newport was prohibited from possessing guns because of his history of domestic violence and failed a background check when he attempted to buy a gun from a licensed gun dealer. However, he then bought a gun from a private seller online without a background check and with no questions asked.²¹ In states that require background checks for all sales of handguns, 38 percent fewer women are shot and killed by intimate partners.²²

Between 2003 and 2012, 226 women were murdered with guns in Washington—**50 percent more** than the number of soldiers from Washington killed during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan combined.

4. Burden of gun violence falls on young people

The burden of gun violence in the United States falls disproportionately on young people, even though overall violent crime has declined dramatically over the past two decades. More than half of people murdered with guns in Washington state in 2011—51 percent—were under the age of 30.²³

These include cases such as the May 16, 2012, shooting of two teenagers in Shoreline. Tiana Montgomery and Darrold Edwards were returning a cellphone to a friend in the parking lot of an apartment complex when Joseph Cooley opened fire on them, killing

More than half of people murdered with guns in Washington in 2011 were under the age of 30.

17-year-old Montgomery and critically wounding 18-year-old Edwards. There was no apparent motivation for the shooting, for which Cooley was charged with second-degree murder and attempted second-degree murder.²⁴ In a different incident, Kyle Huff was invited to attend a house party in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Seattle on March 24, 2006. After mingling with guests, Huff went outside to his car and retrieved a Winchester pump action 12-gauge shotgun and a .40-caliber handgun, which he then used to shoot six people—ranging in age from 14 to 32—before killing himself outside the house.²⁵

Washington does have some laws in place to prevent access to guns by young people. For example, anyone under age 21 is legally barred from purchasing a handgun, and anyone under age 18 cannot legally possess one.²⁶ However, other aspects of state law—particularly the private sale background check loophole—make it relatively easy for young people to get their hands on guns, with devastating results.

5. Higher rate of school shootings

While school shootings are relatively rare, they are uniquely disturbing when they do occur. According to a recent FBI analysis of active shooter in the United States where four or more people were killed—defined as incidents in which police are called when a shooting is in progress—schools are the second most common place for active shooter incidents to occur and have some of the highest casualty counts of all active shooter situations.²⁷ Washington state has seen at least 20 school shootings since 1993, and 29 people have been killed and wounded in these incidents, including 10 individuals who committed suicide.²⁸ Controlling for population, this equates to a rate of 0.015 school shootings per 100,000 people—2.2 times higher than the national rate over the same period.²⁹

Recent Washington school shootings include an incident in which a child brought a parent’s gun to school and it accidentally discharged.³⁰ In another case, Aaron Ybarra fatally shot one student and wounded two others on the campus of Seattle Pacific University on June 5, 2014.³¹ Additionally, school districts across Washington reported 91 instances in which students were either suspended or expelled for possessing guns while on school property during the 2012–13 school year alone.³²

Over the past two decades, the rate of school shootings in Washington was **2.2 times higher** than the national average.

FIGURE 1
School shootings in Washington state
Comparison of rate of school shootings in Washington state and nationally, 1993–2014



* Rate per 100,000 residents

Source: CAP analysis of [Stoptheshootings.org](http://stoptheshootings.org/), "Home," available at <http://www.stoptheshootings.org/> (last accessed October 2014); Everytown for Gun Safety, "School Shootings in America Since Sandy Hook," available at <http://everytown.org/article/schoolshootings/> (last accessed October 2014).

6. Higher rate of hate crimes

According to the FBI, hate crimes are defined as criminal offenses perpetrated against individuals that are motivated, at least in part, by the perpetrator's bias against a race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity or national origin, or disability.³³ Nationwide, the vast majority of reported hate crimes—90 percent in 2012—involve some type of violence and at least 24 percent of these violent hate crimes involved a weapon.³⁴ That year, 20 percent of victims of violent hate crimes sustained an injury.³⁵

Hate crimes are committed in Washington at a rate **1.8 times higher** than the national average.

Ascertaining the exact number of hate crimes in a given community is difficult, as these crimes are not often reported as such to law enforcement or, in many cases, are not reported at all.³⁶ However, analysis of the available data reveals that Washington state suffers from far more than its share of such offenses. According to the FBI, which collects data submitted by local law enforcement agencies, hate crimes were committed in Washington at a rate 1.8 times higher than the national average between 2008 and 2012.³⁷ During that period, Washington had an average of 2.76 hate crimes per 100,000 residents, compared to the national average of 1.54 hate crimes per 100,000 residents.³⁸ There were 925 hate crimes reported in the state during that period.

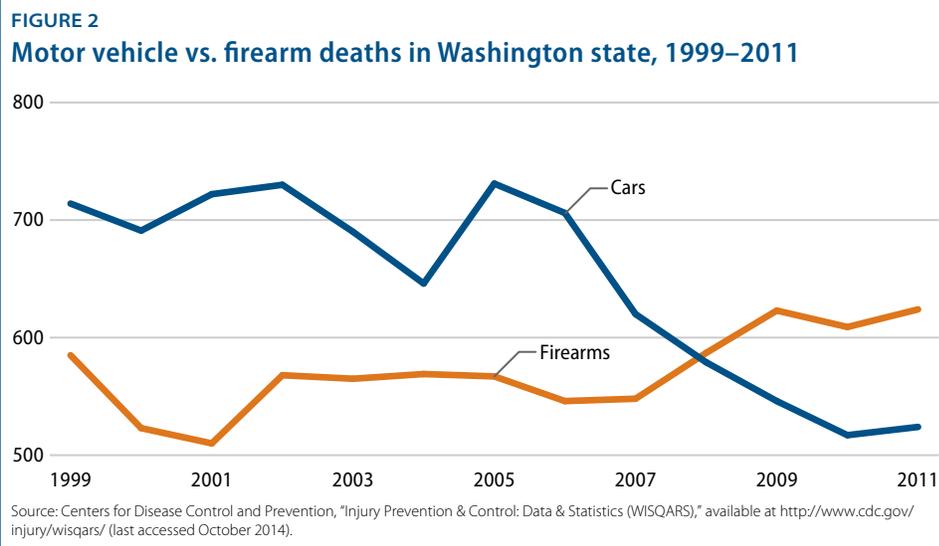
While the majority of hate crimes do not result in fatalities, a number of high-profile bias-motivated murders have been committed with firearms in Washington. For example, a Muslim man who stated that he was angry at Israel entered the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle on July 28, 2006, and opened fire with a semi-automatic handgun, killing one woman and injuring five others.³⁹ Earlier this year, a man used a dating app for gay and bisexual men to lure Dwone Anderson-Young and Ahmed Said to a Seattle nightclub and shot both men in the head at close range, killing them.⁴⁰

7. More people killed by guns than by cars

For decades, car accidents have accounted for far more deaths than guns nationally. However, after decades of enhancing car design, improving road safety, and reducing drunk driving, the number of car accident deaths has steadily declined. While car accidents killed 17,386 more people nationwide than guns in 1981, the gap between the two causes of death closed to only 3,192 individuals in 2011.⁴¹ Many studies predict that gun deaths will outpace car accident deaths nationwide by 2015 or 2016.⁴²

Washington is **1 of just 14 states** where more people die by gunfire than in motor vehicle accidents.

However, Washington state is one of just 14 states where gun deaths already outnumber motor vehicle deaths. In 2009, guns accounted for more deaths than car accidents in Washington for the first time—by a margin of 77 deaths.⁴³ This trend has continued through 2011—the most recent year for which data are available—when 100 more people were killed by gunfire than motor vehicle accidents.⁴⁴



While efforts to reduce motor vehicle fatalities have been robust and resulted in a great number of lives saved, efforts to reduce gun deaths—such as laws to reduce access to guns by dangerous people—have been more limited.

8. Prohibited buyers acquire guns online in high numbers

There are thousands of websites that allow people to buy and sell guns, and the absence of a requirement that private sellers conduct background checks before completing these sales has created a huge venue for dangerous individuals who are prohibited from gun possession to easily evade the law and buy guns. A recent investigation by Everytown for Gun Safety found that criminals are using the Internet to buy guns in Washington and discovered that 1 in 10 individuals seeking to buy guns online in the state were prohibited from owning guns under either federal or state law.⁴⁵ Everytown estimated that more than 4,000 guns will be transferred to prohibited purchasers this year in Washington through just five popular websites that facilitate no-background-check sales.⁴⁶

Approximately **1-in-10** gun buyers seeking to purchase guns online in Washington are prohibited from buying or possessing guns.

The potential for tragedy from such no-background-check sales is obvious. As explained earlier, Aaron Newport was prohibited from gun possession but bought the gun he used to murder Monique Williams via a private online sale.⁴⁷

9. More gun dealers than post offices or Starbucks

Initiative 594 would require a background check for all private sales of firearms, with some limited exceptions, and require that a federally licensed firearms dealer conduct such transactions.⁴⁸ While some have argued that this is an overly burdensome requirement, there are currently 1,416 licensed dealers in the state, more than three times the number of post offices and twice the number of Starbucks locations.⁴⁹ Finding a licensed dealer to facilitate the private sale of a firearm in the state would pose little challenge to the vast majority of Washington state residents.

There are 1,416 licensed gun dealers in Washington, **272 more** than there are post offices and Starbucks locations in the state combined.

Conclusion

Here's one more number: Between September 2003 and September 2013, 1,552 individuals were prosecuted for violations of federal gun and explosives laws in Washington state, including those that violated the federal background check requirements.⁵⁰ Hundreds more were prosecuted in state court. These numbers make clear that gun laws can be used to find and prosecute criminals before they pull the trigger and take a life.

However, no-background-check gun sales make it harder to catch gun criminals. Research suggests that implementing background checks is a key step toward preventing gun deaths and reducing access to guns by dangerous individuals who are prohibited from gun possession due to felony convictions, domestic abuse, or serious mental illness. With a measure to close the private sale loophole on the ballot in November, voters in Washington state have the opportunity to strengthen laws to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people.

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