



# America Under Fire

An Analysis of Gun Violence in the United States  
and the Link to Weak Gun Laws

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# Introduction and summary

One of the key questions in the gun debate is whether strong gun laws—such as requiring background checks for all gun sales; limiting who may carry guns and where they may carry them; and providing increased oversight of the gun industry—are effective at reducing gun violence. This is not an easy question to answer, as there are myriad factors that may contribute to the rate of gun violence in any community. In addition to easy access to guns facilitated and enabled by weak gun laws, there are an interconnected web of social and economic issues that can have an impact on rates of violence in a community, such as persistent poverty, lack of employment and educational opportunities, and a breakdown in the police-community relationship that imperils community safety. Much of the burden of day-to-day gun violence in this country falls disproportionately on communities of color, which are often at the epicenter of these related challenges. Another factor that may affect rates of gun deaths in a state is the level of gun ownership in that state, which is difficult to assess because of the lack of any comprehensive accounting of private gun ownership in this country.<sup>1</sup> And roughly two-thirds of gun deaths in the United States are the result of suicide, which raises another set of questions regarding the role of access to guns in contributing to high rates of suicide.

Despite the many factors that may contribute to rates of gun violence in a particular community, there is a robust and growing body of research that demonstrates an undeniable correlation between certain strong gun laws and lower rates of gun violence. A 2013 study by a group of public health researchers examined the relationship between the overall strength of a state's gun laws and rates of gun deaths in the state and found that states with stronger gun laws had lower rates of gun deaths than states with weaker gun laws.<sup>2</sup> A 2011 study that analyzed state-level data drew similar conclusions: Firearm-related deaths were significantly lower in states that had enacted laws to ban assault weapons, require trigger locks, and mandate safe storage of guns.<sup>3</sup> Two studies led by Daniel Webster at the Johns

Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health demonstrated the impact of state laws requiring a permit—and background check—before an individual can purchase a handgun. When Connecticut implemented this requirement, gun-related homicides in the state fell 40 percent; when Missouri eliminated this requirement, gun homicides increased 26 percent.<sup>4</sup> And research conducted by Everytown for Gun Safety, a nonprofit gun violence prevention advocacy group, found that states that require universal background checks for all handgun sales have significantly lower rates of intimate partner gun homicides of women, law enforcement officers killed by handguns, and gun-related suicides.<sup>5</sup>

In 2013, the Center for American Progress conducted a study to assess the correlation between the relative strength or weakness of a state's gun laws, as measured by the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, and rates of gun violence in the state across 10 categories of gun violence or gun-related crimes. Consistent with the research cited above, the CAP study found a strong correlation between strong gun laws and lower rates of gun violence.<sup>6</sup>

In the 3.5 years since that study, a number of things have changed that warrant revisiting that research. Many states have acted to strengthen their gun laws: Since the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, eight states have enacted laws to require universal background checks—bringing the total number of states that have enacted such laws to 18—and 20 states have strengthened their laws to help keep guns out of the hands of domestic abusers.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, other states have taken the opposite approach, loosening laws regarding where guns may be carried and weakening or eliminating concealed carry permit requirements.<sup>8</sup> In addition, improvements made in the collection of data relating to gun violence now allow more precise tracking of events such as mass shootings and fatal shootings by law enforcement officers.

In this report, the authors revisit CAP's 2013 analysis with a revised methodology, some new categories of gun violence, and updated state grades from the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. The report provides a state ranking across 10 key indicators of gun violence, then uses these rankings to calculate an overall Gun Violence Index score for each state. Using this score, the authors assessed the correlation between the rate of overall gun violence in the state and the relative strength or weakness of each state's gun laws.

Once again, CAP finds a strong and significant link between weak gun laws and high rates of gun violence. The 10 states with the weakest gun laws collectively have an aggregate level of gun violence that is 3.2 times higher than the 10 states with the strongest gun laws. And while this correlation does not prove a causal relationship between stronger gun laws and fewer gun deaths, the link between stronger gun laws and lower rates of gun violence cannot be ignored. As the gun debate continues to churn, policymakers at all levels of government must take action to close dangerous loopholes and enact strong gun laws to protect all of the nation's communities from this national disgrace.

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