



Weak Gun Laws Are Driving Increases in Violent Crime

By Nick Wilson August 18, 2022

The rising violent crime rate over the past two years is a pressing issue that requires immediate action. While many have blamed the criminal justice reform movement for the rise in violent crime, these increases can largely be attributed to an alarming escalation in gun violence. If elected officials are serious about stopping violent crime, they need to prioritize and support stronger gun laws at both the state and federal levels.

This fact sheet provides data that show the link between states' actions to weaken their gun laws and rising violent crime rates.

Homicide rates are higher in states with weaker gun laws

- States that received an “F” grade based on the strength of their gun laws—according to the latest scorecard from the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence—saw the highest homicide rates:
 - States with “F” grades saw 25 percent higher homicide rates than states with “C” or “D” grades.²
 - States with “F” grades saw 61 percent higher homicide rates than states with “A” or “B” grades—states with the strongest gun laws.³
- The states with the highest firearm mortality rates are Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Wyoming.⁴ These states all received an “F” grade for their weak gun laws.⁵
- Children and teenagers are most vulnerable in states with weaker gun laws: In 2020, the 10 states with the highest rates of gun deaths among children and teenagers ages 1–19 were Louisiana, Alaska, Mississippi, South Carolina, Arkansas, Kansas, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, and Alabama.⁶ All of these states received an “F” grade for their weak gun laws.
- Reports also suggest that rates of nonfatal gunshot injuries sustained during assaults are higher in states with weaker gun laws: In 2017, the most recent year with available data across all states, states that received an “F” grade had a rate of nonfatal gunshot injuries that was 22 percent higher than states with “C” or “D” grades and 59 percent higher than states with “A” or “B” grades.⁷

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Missouri’s repeal of its handgun law led to an increase in gun homicide rates

- In 2007, Missouri repealed its permit-to-purchase (PTP) law, which required all handgun purchasers to have a valid license that they could obtain only after passing a background check.
- A 2020 study concluded that the law’s repeal was associated with a 47 percent increase in gun homicide rates and a 23 percent increase in gun suicide rates.⁸
- The number of guns sold in Missouri that were later recovered in connection with criminal investigations in the neighboring states of Iowa and Illinois rose by 37 percent following the repeal of the PTP law.⁹
- From 2007 to 2016, Missouri’s overall gun-related child death rate was the sixth-highest in the nation—62 percent higher than the national rate.¹⁰ Specifically, during the same period, the child gun homicide rate in Missouri was the third-highest in the nation.¹¹

Iowa has seen a dramatic increase in gun violence after weakening its state gun laws

- Iowa saw the largest drop in Giffords’ 2021 annual state scorecard rankings, dropping from a “C” in 2020 to an “F” in 2021 after repealing two crucial gun safety measures: requirements for permits to purchase firearms and for permits to carry concealed firearms in public places.¹²
- State Sen. Jason Schultz (R) sponsored the bill eliminating state permit requirements and argued that weakening the gun laws would reduce crime: “More guns equal less crime and ladies and gentlemen when all the good guys are armed the bad guys live a short, dangerous, brutish life,” Schultz said on the Iowa Senate floor.¹³
- In 2018, the Center for American Progress and Progress Iowa warned that efforts by the Iowa Legislature to pass dangerous legislation weakening existing gun laws, including then-existing permitting requirements, would lead to increased violence.¹⁴
- In 2019, Iowa was ranked 43rd in gun violence across the country, with 9.1 firearm related deaths per 100,000 people—25 percent lower than the national average.¹⁵
- Gun homicides increased 23.5 percent in Iowa between 2019 and 2020:
 - Nonfatal shootings increased by 11.7 percent, from 204 in 2019 to 228 in 2020.
 - In 2021, nonfatal shootings increased by another 7.5 percent, to 245.¹⁶
- Gun violence is the most common cause of homicide in Iowa, with firearms responsible for 73 percent of homicides from 2016 to 2020.¹⁷

“More guns equal less crime and ladies and gentlemen when all the good guys are armed the bad guys live a short, dangerous, brutish life.”

– Iowa state Sen. Jason Schultz (R)

Mississippi has the weakest gun laws and the highest firearm death rate in the country

- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mississippi has the highest firearm mortality rate in the country, at 28.6 per 100,000 people.¹⁸
- Giffords claims “Mississippi has the weakest gun laws in the country,”¹⁹ and Everytown for Gun Safety ranks the state at 50th in the country for having the worst gun laws.²⁰
- In 2020, Mississippi had the highest rate of crime gun exports in the country because gun traffickers and individuals legally prohibited from purchasing firearms are traveling from states with stronger gun laws to Mississippi to take advantage of its weak gun laws.²¹

Mass shootings are increasing faster in states with weak gun laws

- A 2019 study found that U.S. state gun laws have become more permissive in recent decades, concluding: “States with more permissive gun laws and greater gun ownership had higher rates of mass shootings, and a growing divide appears to be emerging between restrictive and permissive states.”²²
- State laws requiring permits to purchase a gun are associated with 60 percent lower chance of a mass public shooting occurring.²³
- When a mass shooting occurred, states with a large-capacity magazine ban had 38 percent fewer fatalities and 77 percent fewer nonfatal injuries.²⁴

“States with more permissive gun laws and greater gun ownership had higher rates of mass shootings, and a growing divide appears to be emerging between restrictive and permissive states.”

– Paul M. Reeping and others, “State gun laws, gun ownership, and mass shootings in the US: cross sectional time series.”

Police officers are more likely to be fatally shot in states with weaker gun laws

- States that received an “F” grade from the Giffords Law Center²⁵ based on the strength of their gun laws saw higher rates of police officers fatally shot from 2017 to 2021.²⁶
- States with “F” grades had a rate of police officers fatally shot that was 75 percent higher than states with “Cs” or “Ds” and 152 percent higher than states with “As” or “Bs”—those with the strongest gun laws.²⁷

States that strengthen gun laws see reductions in violent crime

- Connecticut’s 1995 handgun purchaser licensing law, also known as PTP, was associated with an estimated 27.8 percent decrease in its firearm homicide rate from 1995 to 2017.²⁸

- Indiana and Connecticut were the first states to implement an extreme risk protection order.²⁹ For approximately every 10 risk-based firearm removal actions, one life was saved.³⁰
- Hawaii is the only state that has a complete registry of all firearms and had the lowest gun death rate in 2020, the most recent year for which data are available.³¹
- A 2022 Johns Hopkins University report found that the five states with the lowest gun death rates in 2020 had both an extreme risk protection order law and a firearm purchaser licensing law or a waiting period.³²

Conclusion

Voters are increasingly recognizing that gun violence is a serious problem in U.S. society and that weak gun laws are driving the rise in violent crime.³³ When state legislatures repeal effective gun laws, such as those requiring a permit to purchase a firearm or to carry guns in public places, violent crime increases and communities become less safe. Elected officials who claim to support law enforcement continue to weaken state gun laws that make officers' jobs more dangerous, despite law enforcement opposition.³⁴ If elected officials are serious about reducing violent crime, strengthening gun violence prevention laws at both the state and federal levels must be on the top of their agendas.

Endnotes

- 1 The following states received an "F" grade on the latest scorecard from the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming. See Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, "Annual Gun Law Scorecard," available at <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/resources/scorecard/> (last accessed August 2022).
- 2 The following states received a "C" or "D" grade: Florida, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Vermont, and Wisconsin. See *Ibid.*
- 3 The following states received an "A" or "B" grade: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Washington. See *Ibid.*
- 4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Firearm Mortality by State," available at https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/firearm_mortality/firearm.htm (last accessed August 2022).
- 5 Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, "Annual Gun Law Scorecard."
- 6 Center for American Progress analysis of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Injury Prevention and Control: Data and Statistics (WISQARS): Fatal Injury and Violence Data," available at <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html> (last accessed August 2022).
- 7 Center for American Progress analysis of Everytown for Gun Safety, "EveryStat: How does gun violence impact the communities you care about?," available at <https://everystat.org/> (last accessed May 2022).
- 8 Alexander D. McCourt and others, "Purchaser Licensing, Point-of-Sale Background Check Laws, and Firearm Homicide and Suicide in 4 US States, 1985-2017," *American Journal of Public Health* 110 (10) (2020): 1546-1552, available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32816544/>.
- 9 Daniel Webster, Cassandra Kercher Crifasi, and Jon S. Vernick, "Effects of the Repeal of Missouri's Handgun Purchaser Licensing Law on Homicides," *Journal of Urban Health* 91 (2) (2014): 293-302, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3978146/>.
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- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, "Annual Gun Law Scorecard."
- 13 David Pitt, "Reynolds considers gun bill, days after Boulder shooting," *The Associated Press*, March 28, 2021, available at <https://apnews.com/article/boulder-shootings-iowa-colorado-kim-reynolds-98732d54b9bc3fdcb5a63092511fcd5>.
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- 15 Everytown for Gun Safety, "Gun Violence in Iowa" (New York: 2020), available at <https://maps.everytownresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Every-State-Fact-Sheet-2.0-042720-Iowa.pdf>.
- 16 CAP analysis of Gun Violence Archive data. See Gun Violence Archive, "Home," available at www.gunviolencearchive.org/ (last accessed July 2022).
- 17 Iowa Department of Public Health, "Iowa Violent Death Reporting System (IAVDRS)," available at <https://idph.iowa.gov/disability-injury-violence-prevention/iavdrs> (last accessed August 2022).
- 18 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Firearm Mortality by State."
- 19 Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, "Mississippi Gun Laws," available at <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/states/mississippi/> (last accessed August 2022).
- 20 Everytown for Gun Safety, "Gun Laws in Mississippi," available at <https://everytownresearch.org/rankings/state/mississippi/> (last accessed August 2022).
- 21 Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, "Mississippi Gun Laws."
- 22 Paul M. Reeping and others, "State gun laws, gun ownership, and mass shootings in the US: cross sectional time series," *BMJ* 364 (2019): 1542, available at <https://www.bmj.com/content/364/bmj.1542>.
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- 32 Ari Davis and others, "A Year in Review: 2020 Gun Deaths in the U.S." (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2022), available at <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-05/2020-gun-deaths-in-the-us-4-28-2022-b.pdf>
- 33 Chris Jackson and others, "As gun violence remains a major concern, Americans favor stricter regulations" (Washington: Ipsos, 2022), available at <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/FiveThirtyEight-2022-midterm-election>.
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