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Gun Violence in Iowa

A Cautionary Tale

By Eugenio Weigend and Matt Sinovic April 2018

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Introduction and summary

Iowa has become a cautionary tale in the effort to prevent gun violence in the United States. While the state has among the lowest gun death rates in the nation¹—and has enacted one of the strongest gun laws that requires individuals to obtain a permit from state law enforcement prior to purchasing a handgun²—in recent years, leadership in the state Legislature has undertaken a concerted effort to weaken Iowa’s gun laws.

In 2017, Iowa passed a sweeping new law that weakened many aspects of its gun laws. It also enacted a dangerous self-defense law known as “stand your ground,” which allows individuals to use deadly force even if retreat or other nonlethal methods would be enough to protect their safety.³ The 2017 law also weakened safety training requirements for concealed carry permits; lowered the age for handgun use to 14 with supervision; legalized the carrying of concealed, loaded guns in government buildings; allowed intoxicated individuals to carry firearms on their own property; and loosened restrictions on the possession of short barreled shotguns and rifles.⁴ In addition, the law limited localities from enacting ordinances restricting gun carrying, allowing individuals to sue if prevented from carrying in certain locations.⁵ Also, there have been repeated efforts to repeal the permit-to-purchase requirement, which fortunately have been unsuccessful to date.⁶

Although Iowa has among the lowest gun death rates, gun violence still has a significant effect on the state:

- From 2007 to 2016, 2,253 Iowans were killed with a gun.⁷
- A gun theft occurs every five hours in Iowa.⁸
- Firearms are the most common method used to commit suicide in Iowa.⁹
- From 2007 to 2016, at least 43 percent of Iowa’s domestic violence gun homicides of women were committed with long guns.¹⁰
- African Americans make up 4 percent of the state’s population but account for 31 percent of its gun homicide victims.¹¹

It is crucial for Iowa's elected leaders to take the issue of gun violence seriously and resist efforts to weaken the state's laws in ways that have proven detrimental elsewhere. In addition, there are a number of strong policies that Iowa should enact in order to further reduce the number of lives taken by gun violence each year. This report addresses a number of specific aspects of the gun violence problem in Iowa and offers a menu of policy solutions to confront them.

Gun violence takes a serious toll

According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), from 2007 to 2016, 2,253 Iowans were killed with a gun. This breaks down to 1,846 gun-related suicides, 325 homicides, 38 unintentional shootings, 21 shootings by law enforcement, and 23 gun deaths for which the intent could not be determined.¹² The burden of this violence is not borne equally across all communities in the state. For example, while African Americans make up 4 percent of the state's population, they account for 31 percent of its gun homicide victims.¹³

One subset of gun-related deaths is of particular concern to Iowa women. According to data from the FBI, from 2006 to 2015, 66 women were murdered by an intimate partner and 38 percent of these murders were committed with a gun.¹⁴ In early 2014, there were two domestic violence-related murders in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The first occurred in January when Ingrid Huber Livingston and her mother, Linda Huber, were shot and killed by Livingston's husband. The second followed in February when LuElla Koopman was fatally shot by her husband while the couple's divorce was pending. In both cases, the perpetrators then fatally shot themselves.¹⁵ In June 2017, Mary Dudley was shot and killed by her estranged husband in her Des Moines, Iowa, apartment.¹⁶ These cases have a devastating effect not just on the families but on the entire community. For example, many children who have experienced domestic violence perform poorly in school, and police officers are often shot when addressing domestic violence disputes.¹⁷

One important aspect of domestic violence-related gun homicides in Iowa is the type of gun that is most commonly used. From 2007 to 2016, at least 43 percent of domestic violence gun homicides of women were committed with long guns, meaning rifles or shotguns.¹⁸ Iowa stands out as one of the states with the highest percentages of long guns used to fatally shoot women during domestic violence disputes—it is second only to Vermont.¹⁹ One potential explanation is the state's permit-to-purchase law, which requires an additional application, background check, and waiting period for all handgun sales, regardless of whether the sale is through a licensed gun dealer or an unlicensed private seller. However, this strong gun law does not apply to the sale of long guns, meaning that individuals in Iowa

can buy a rifle or shotgun from a private seller without undergoing a background check and with no questions asked. This disparity in state law makes it much easier for an individual who is prohibited from gun possession to evade the law by purchasing a long gun through a private transaction.

With an estimated 190 deaths per year, the bulk of gun deaths in Iowa are suicides.²⁰ Firearms are the most common method of suicide by Iowans, accounting for 46 percent of all suicides in the state from 2007 to 2016.²¹ Gun-related suicide risk is highest among people between the ages of 41 and 60, who account for 37 percent of these deaths in Iowa.²² Nonetheless, while suicide in the general Iowa population has increased 17 percent since the 1960s, teenage suicides have increased 200 percent, becoming the second-leading cause of death for high school and college students in the state.²³ Reports have determined that the presence of a firearm within a household is a major risk factor and that more than 60 percent of teenage suicides are committed with a firearm.²⁴

Gun theft is a substantial problem

Law enforcement officials have begun to sound the alarm about the increase in gun thefts in communities around the country. These guns pose a significant risk to safety, as they frequently end up being sold in illegal markets and used to commit crimes. Nationwide, from 2012 to 2016, burglaries and robberies of gun stores have increased 48 and 175 percent, respectively.²⁵ During this period, 243 firearms were reported stolen from gun dealers in Iowa. For example, in December 2017, seven fully automatic weapons, two semi-automatic rifles, and nine handguns were stolen from Rangemasters Training Center, a gun store and shooting range located in Clive, Iowa.²⁶

While the number of firearms stolen from gun stores is alarming, the majority of firearms are stolen from private gun owners. Center for American Progress analysis of FBI data found that, from 2012 to 2015, an estimated 6,444 firearms were stolen in Iowa.²⁷ This means that a gun theft occurred on average every five hours. Yet this is an undercount, as many stolen guns are never reported to the authorities.

The numbers are staggering and vary widely from county to county. An analysis of the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) data suggests that, from 2012 to 2015, 20 agencies reported more than 55 percent of the stolen guns in Iowa. As shown in Chart 1, Des Moines alone reported an estimated 528 stolen firearms from 2012 to 2015—around 132 firearms per year. Agencies from Cedar Rapids and Davenport, Iowa, also presented higher numbers, each reporting more than 340 stolen firearms from 2012 to 2015. It is important to highlight that many stolen guns are never recovered: Information from the FBI's UCR reports suggests that, from 2012 to 2015, 90 percent of stolen guns in Iowa were never recovered. These guns can easily end up being used to commit crimes in the state, or they could be illegally trafficked to nearby states.

TABLE 1
Stolen firearms in Iowa, by reporting agency (2012–2015)

Top 20 counties

Agency reporting the value of stolen firearms	2012		2013		2014		2015		2012–2015	
	Value (\$)	Number	Value (\$)	Number						
Des Moines	63,829	142	51,379	114	56,412	125	65,864	146	237,484	528
Cedar Rapids	28,481	63	39,742	88	38,730	86	62,235	138	169,188	376
Davenport	22,942	51	32,432	72	50,791	113	48,791	108	154,956	344
Council Bluffs	36,913	82	20,970	47	47,097	105	12,859	29	117,839	262
Waterloo	29,002	64	12,468	28	20,952	47	25,020	56	87,442	194
Wapello	17,455	39	2,858	6	34,118	76	17,540	39	71,971	160
Sioux City	17,043	38	13,803	31	17,993	40	19,102	42	67,941	151
Fort Dodge	20,638	46	7,874	17	23,830	53	14,335	32	66,677	148
Polk	41,984	93	5,725	13	7,418	16	11,319	25	66,446	148
Dubuque	18,026	40	12,048	27	9,218	20	23,782	53	63,074	140
Pottawattamie	8,805	20	20,005	44	25,311	56	5,670	13	59,791	133
Clinton	23,777	53	5,417	12	13,144	29	16,362	36	58,700	130
West Des Moines	24,539	55	6,301	14	7,555	17	19,187	43	57,582	128
Mills	41,025	91	300	1	3,125	7	11,150	25	55,600	124
Tama	8,580	19	6,740	15	100	1	39,627	88	55,047	123
Linn	4,821	11	17,703	39	11,068	25	19,846	44	53,438	119
Ottumwa	9,625	21	11,462	25	5,630	13	23,338	52	50,055	111
Muscatine	5,463	12	12,171	27	15,272	34	15,480	34	48,386	108
Lee	22,950	51	3,000	7	14,389	32	3,537	8	43,876	98
Burlington	4,150	9	7,950	18	14,364	32	13,945	31	40,409	90
Iowa	726,664	1,615	581,919	1,293	724,571	1,610	866,458	1,925	2,899,612	6,444

Note: Values of stolen firearms reported in this chart are estimated by subtracting the values of recovered firearms reported by the FBI from the values of stolen firearms reported by the FBI. The authors used a standard value of \$450 per firearm to estimate the number of stolen firearms per year. Values below \$450 are considered to be the equivalent of one single firearm. Due to decimal rounding, the total estimated number of stolen firearms may vary by one unit.

Source: Center for American Progress analysis of data from Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Reporting Program Data: Property Stolen and Recovered, 2015 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017), available at <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/36792>; Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Reporting Program Data: Property Stolen and Recovered, 2014 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016), available at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACJD/studies/36392>; Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Reporting Program Data: Property Stolen and Recovered, 2013 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015), available at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACJD/studies/36123>; and Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Reporting Program Data: Property Stolen and Recovered, 2012 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014), available at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACJD/studies/35022>.

Iowa exports crime guns to neighboring states

One dynamic created by the inconsistent patchwork of state gun laws is the movement of guns across state lines, particularly from states with weaker gun laws to those with stronger gun laws.²⁸ Many of these guns end up being used in the commission of violent crime in other states. According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), from 2010 to 2016, 29 percent of guns recovered in crimes nationwide were originally purchased in a state other than where the crime occurred.²⁹

While Iowa is not a top source state for crime guns nationally, it is an important supplier of firearms to neighboring states. From 2010 to 2016, close to 2,700 crime guns used in other states were first purchased in Iowa.³⁰ Fifty-eight percent of these guns were recovered in six states: Illinois, Missouri, Minnesota, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wisconsin—all of which border Iowa. With 730 crime guns recovered and traced between 2010 to 2016, Illinois is the biggest recipient of crime guns purchased in Iowa. Nebraska is also a big recipient, with 468 crime guns recovered during this period originating from Iowa; Iowa is the biggest out-of-state supplier of crime guns to Nebraska.

Iowa is a big supplier of crime guns to Illinois, Nebraska, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin, and South Dakota.

Policy recommendations to reduce gun violence

Iowa has enacted some strong gun laws, such as the permit-to-purchase requirement for handguns and a law requiring domestic abusers to surrender their guns when they are convicted of a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence or issued a domestic violence restraining order.³¹ However, there is much more that can be done to reduce gun violence and save lives in the Hawkeye State.

Close the long gun loophole and require background checks for all long gun sales.

While Iowa has taken a huge step toward closing the private sale loophole to require background checks for all handgun sales with its permit-to-purchase requirement, there remains a substantial gap in the law that allows private sellers to sell rifles and shotguns without requiring a background check. This gap allows individuals who are barred from buying guns for reasons such as convictions for violent crimes or domestic violence to easily evade that law by skipping the gun store and buying guns through private sales.

Enact a gun violence restraining order

Under current state law, there are few options for family members concerned about an individual who has access to a gun and is experiencing a temporary period of crisis that could lead to suicidal or violent behavior. A gun violence restraining order allows concerned family members to petition a court for the temporary removal of firearms from a person in crisis upon a demonstration of risk to self or others.³² An extreme risk protection order (ERPO) is a narrowly tailored remedy that balances the rights of an individual to legally possess guns with the broader public interest of protecting against lethal violence against oneself or others. States that have enacted these laws have seen positive results. An analysis

of Connecticut's ERPO-style law found that it was highly effective at identifying individuals who were at the highest risk for suicide and had access to guns; for every 10 to 20 orders issued, one life was saved.³³

Require gun owners to report lost or stolen guns

Under current state law, gun owners are not required to report to local law enforcement if a gun in their possession is stolen or lost. The lack of reporting contributes to insufficient data on the full scope of Iowa's gun theft problem while also enabling gun trafficking by removing gun owners' accountability when their guns are used in connection with a crime.³⁴ To date, 11 states have enacted laws to require reporting stolen guns.³⁵

Restore law enforcement discretion in the issuance of concealed carry permits

In 2011, Iowa Legislature weakened the state's concealed carry permitting law by reducing sheriffs' discretion to decline to issue concealed carry permits if they had reason to believe that the firearms would be used unlawfully.³⁶ Since that change in the law, the number of permits has increased significantly. In the first year following the change alone, the state saw an overall 150 percent increase in permits issued.³⁷ This has raised concerns among sheriffs across the state about who is receiving carry permits. Linn County Sheriff Brian Gardner explained, "There are people out there that I know I am issuing permits to, that the law forces me to, that shouldn't have a weapon."³⁸ Dubuque County Sheriff Joseph Kennedy reported, "Every once in a while we get a permit request from a known gang member, but their level of criminality has not reached the point to where they cannot get a permit."³⁹ A recent study found that states that provide law enforcement officers with the discretion to decide who can receive a concealed carry permit experience significantly lower rates of gun deaths than states that provide law enforcement with little or no discretion to decide who can receive a concealed carry permit.⁴⁰

Repeal the dangerous "stand your ground" law

In 2012, expansive "stand your ground" laws gained notoriety after the murder of Trayvon Martin in Florida. These laws have had a negative effect on the states that have implemented them. For example, Florida's enactment of this law in 2005

is significantly associated with a 24 percent increase in overall homicides in the state and a 32 percent increase in gun-related homicides.⁴¹ There is also growing evidence that these laws have a racially disparate impact on communities of color. The *Tampa Bay Times* conducted a study of 200 cases and found that 73 percent of defendants who killed black victims used this law to avoid conviction, compared with 59 percent of defendants who killed white victims.⁴²

In addition, there is no evidence that such laws have a positive effect on public safety. A 2012 study found no significant association between strengthening self-defense laws and deterring burglaries, robberies, or aggravated assaults.⁴³ In contrast, this study found that the states that implemented these measures saw homicides increase by 8 percent.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Gun violence in Iowa does not occur at as alarmingly high a rate as it does in many of Iowa's neighboring states. However, it continues to have a significant impact on Iowans. Every 39 hours, a person is killed with a gun in Iowa.⁴⁵ There is much more that state leaders can do to protect community safety and reduce the number of gun deaths in the state.

About the authors

Eugenio Weigend is the associate director for Gun Violence Prevention at the Center for American Progress. His work has focused on public security and he has conducted research on arms trafficking, organized crime and violence, firearm regulations in the United States, and the illegal flow of weapons into Mexico. Weigend has a Ph.D from Tecnologico de Monterrey and a master's degree in public affairs from Brown University.

Matt Sinovic is the executive director of Progress Iowa, a multi-issue progressive advocacy organization that has grown from a few dozen members to an online network of nearly 70,000. Year-round, Progress Iowa advocates in creative and compelling ways for a stronger middle class, first-class public education, and fairness for every citizen under the law, while working to build and enhance networks between progressive activists and organizations.

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