

Stolen Firearms in Missouri Are Linked to the Repeal of Its Permit-to-Purchase Law

By Eugenio Weigend Vargas November 29, 2021

According to the latest scorecard released by the Giffords Law Center, Missouri received an F grade for the strength of its gun laws. This places Missouri among the top four states with the weakest gun laws, behind only Mississippi, Wyoming, and Idaho.¹ However, this has not always been the case. The state of Missouri has been incrementally weakening its gun laws in recent years. Perhaps the most notorious change occurred when the state repealed its permit-to-purchase (PTP) law in 2007,² which mandated that all handgun purchasers had to show a valid license—acquired after a background check—before any sale. Following this change in state law, individuals could purchase handguns from sellers not registered as federally licensed firearms dealers without a background check.

Numerous studies have linked the repeal of the PTP law in Missouri to increases in gun homicides, gun suicides, and gun trafficking. A 2014 study concluded that the repeal of the PTP law was associated with a 14 percent increase in overall homicide rates in Missouri and a 25 percent increase in gun homicide rates specifically.³ In 2020, a different study concluded that the law's repeal was by then associated with a 47 percent increase in gun homicide rates and a 23 percent increase in gun suicide rates.⁴ When looking specifically at the impact on young people, analyses have concluded that the rate of gun suicides among adults ages 19 to 24 increased by 22 percent.⁵ Other reports have concluded that the repeal of Missouri's PTP law facilitated the use of guns in criminal activity. As a result, the proportion of firearms that were sold in Missouri and recovered in crime scenes within a year of the sale rose significantly.⁶ Researchers have also found that the implementation of PTP laws in Connecticut significantly decreased both gun suicides and homicides, showing the effectiveness of these laws.⁷

While all these studies have been fundamental in showing the potential benefits of PTP laws, no analysis has looked at the link between these laws and gun theft. This is a major issue: With close to 380,000 firearms stolen in the United States every year, gun theft represents a significant challenge.⁸ These firearms are often recovered at crime scenes or seized from people who are legally ineligible to possess them.

Unfortunately, gun theft in Missouri is a frequent occurrence. A 2019 analysis by the Center for American Progress estimated that at least 51,675 firearms were stolen in Missouri from 2012 to 2017, ranking 10th nationally in number of stolen firearms.⁹ Similarly, an investigation by The Trace found that 850 firearms were stolen in the city of St. Louis during 2015 alone.¹⁰ And in May 2020, more than 30 firearms were taken from a St. Louis gun dealer in an early-morning burglary when the perpetrators broke a window to gain entrance.¹¹

A major problem with stolen firearms is that they are often used to perpetrate crimes. In January 2021, a 30-year-old man was killed in St. Louis with a firearm that had been stolen in Jefferson County.¹² During that same month, a stolen gun was used against police officers in Columbia.¹³ Guns stolen from dealers with a federal firearms license are also recovered in crimes across the state. Annual reports from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives show that from 2012 to 2019, close to 400 guns that were reported as stolen or lost from federally licensed firearms dealers were subsequently recovered after a crime in the state of Missouri.¹⁴

This issue brief examines the association between the removal of PTP laws in Missouri and gun theft—a difficult task because part of the gap in research on stolen firearms can be attributed to limited data. The author found a statistically significant association between the repeal of the PTP law and an increase in gun theft in Missouri, which can be attributed to an increase in overall levels of handgun ownership in the state. Another possibility is an increase in the demand of unlicensed gun sales that no longer required a permit to purchase or a background check, likely fueled by individuals prohibited by law from purchasing a firearm. This generated opportunities to sell stolen firearms at venues such as gun shows or online sales. In one such incident in November 2021, two men were arrested for possession of stolen firearms and on attempts to sell one of those guns to a juvenile via Facebook.¹⁵

This association was not found in neighboring states that had not changed their PTP laws. At the same time, the author found the opposite effect—a decrease in guns stolen—in Connecticut, which implemented PTP laws in the mid-1990s. This analysis lends additional support to efforts to enact gun licensing or PTP laws at the state and federal level, as this policy has not only been proven to reduce gun deaths but is also linked to lower levels of gun theft.

The repeal of Missouri’s PTP law is associated with an increase in gun theft

To conduct this analysis, the author looked at the FBI’s datasets on stolen and recovered property in Missouri from 1994, 12 years before the repeal of the PTP law, through 2019, 12 years after the law’s repeal.¹⁶ These datasets compile information from most police agencies in the states and report on the value of different categories of stolen property. One of those categories includes the value of stolen firearms.

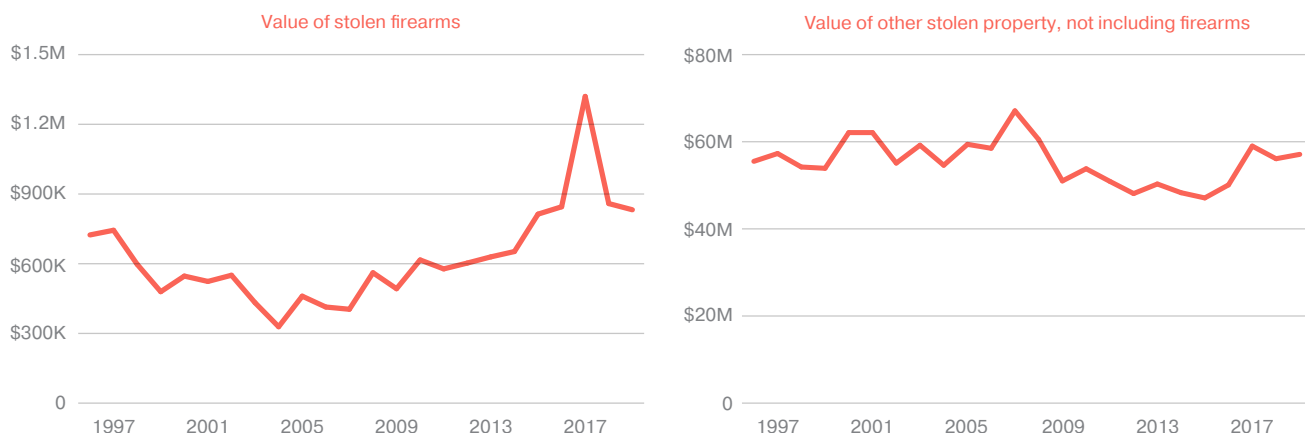
The author used the annual figures of the value of stolen firearms and conducted a series of means test analyses.

First, the author examined the overall annual value of stolen firearms compiled by the FBI from police agencies in Missouri from 1996 through 2019,¹⁷ controlling for inflation across the years and using 2019 as the base year.¹⁸ The real annual average value of stolen firearms from 1996 through 2007 was \$3.1 million. This average rose to \$4.3 million from 2008 through 2019—a 38 percent increase. A means test analysis shows that the average difference was statistically significant. This suggests that the total value of stolen firearms after the removal of the PTP law increased substantially, which in turn suggests that more guns were stolen.

FIGURE 1

Gun theft increased in Missouri after 2007

Value of stolen property reported by 19 local agencies and four sheriff's offices in Missouri, 1996–2019



Note: Values are in 2019 dollars.

Source: Center for American Progress analysis of Jacob Kaplan, "Jacob Kaplan's Concatenated Files: Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program Data: Property Stolen and Recovered (Supplement to Return A) 1960-2019" (Ann Arbor: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2019), available at <https://www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/project/105403/version/V5/view>.

However, an important limitation to the FBI's datasets on stolen property is that police agencies provide partial data or no information at all. To address this concern, the author filtered the data to select information from those police agencies—both local police departments and sheriff's offices—that provided information for all months from 1996 through 2019.¹⁹ Based on data from 19 police departments and four sheriff's offices in Missouri,²⁰ Figure 1 shows that the value of stolen firearms increased drastically after 2007. While the annual average value of stolen firearms reported by these agencies from 1996 through 2007 was close to \$517,000, this average increased to \$733,000 from 2008 through 2019—a 42 percent increase. A means test analysis shows that this difference was statistically significant.

Additionally, the CAP analyzed trends in the value of stolen goods that were not firearms. The author looked at figures from the same agencies that reported full data across the years and analyzed the value of the other categories of stolen goods.

These categories included jewelry, clothes, and furniture, among other things. The annual average value of stolen property (excluding firearms) from 1996 through 2007 was \$58 million and fell to \$53 million from 2008 through 2019—an 8 percent decrease. (see Figure 1) In other words, while gun theft increased substantially after 2007, this was not accompanied by a similar increase in the value of other stolen property in Missouri, suggesting that any changes during 2007 only affected gun theft.

FIGURE 2

Gun theft decreased in Connecticut after 1995

Average value of stolen firearms reported by 19 local agencies in Connecticut, 1980–2011



Note: Values are in 2019 dollars.

Source: Center for American Progress analysis of Jacob Kaplan, "Jacob Kaplan's Concatenated Files: Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program Data: Property Stolen and Recovered (Supplement to Return A) 1960-2019" (Ann Arbor: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2019), available at <https://www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/project/105403/version/V5/view>.

Moreover, CAP conducted a similar analysis from 1996 through 2019 for the neighboring states of Iowa and Nebraska.²¹ For Iowa, CAP analyzed data from the 23 local police departments and five sheriff's offices that reported complete data. For Nebraska, the author looked at data from 11 local police departments and one sheriff's office. While the average annual value of stolen firearms in Iowa was \$210,000 from 1996 through 2007, this average rose to \$253,000 from 2008 through 2019—a 20 percent increase. In Nebraska, the average annual value of stolen firearms was \$65,000 from 1996 through 2007 and rose slightly to \$66,000 from 2008 through 2019—a 1 percent increase. Neither of these increases were statistically significant. While agencies in Missouri saw a significant increase in the value of stolen firearms in this period, this was not reflected across agencies in neighboring states.

Finally, the author analyzed the value of stolen firearms in Connecticut from 1980, 16 years before the implementation of its PTP law in October 1995, through 2011, 16 years after the law's implementation.²² The author looked at data from the 19 local police agencies that reported complete data for those years, controlling for inflation and using 2019 as the base year to keep consistent with the analysis above. While the average annual value of stolen firearms from 1980 through 1995 was \$191,000, this average fell to \$107,000 from 1996 through 2011—a 44 percent decrease. (see Figure 2) A means test analysis showed that this difference was significant. Overall, data from local police agencies suggest that the value of stolen firearms in Connecticut fell after the implementation of PTP laws, a direct contrast to the effect observed in Missouri.

Conclusion

In addition to the rise in gun deaths—both suicides and homicides—as well as gun trafficking in Missouri, data suggest that the removal of the PTP law could have contributed to a rise in gun theft. This could be attributed to an overall increase in handgun ownership or to a rise of unlicensed gun sales in venues where stolen guns can easily be sold undetected. While police agencies in Missouri saw a significant increase in the value of stolen firearms after 2007, this was not followed by a rise in other property theft in the state or in the rise of gun theft reported by police agencies in other states. Additionally, data from Connecticut further support the potential benefits of implementing PTP laws. While police agencies in Missouri saw an increase in gun theft after the removal of its PTP law, police agencies in Connecticut saw a decrease in gun theft after its own PTP law was implemented.

Missouri should consider reinstating its PTP law to reduce gun violence and firearm theft. However, policymakers should implement complementary measures as well. Since carrying firearms in public spaces increases the likelihood of gun theft, the state should require a license to carry open or concealed firearms as well. This requirement should include training on safe-storage practices. Additionally, as illustrated with the example of stolen firearms in St. Louis, firearms can be taken from federally licensed firearms dealers who are easy targets for burglaries. Missouri should require a state-level license to operate an FFL dealership. This license should require security measures such as window protection systems and the locking of firearms after business hours.

Furthermore, the author acknowledges that there are limitations to this analysis. Given limited data, this issue brief only focused on information reported by some agencies. In this regard, the author urges support for better FBI data compilation around stolen firearms. That the author analyzed the value of stolen property and not the absolute figures presents another limitation. While it is possible that the price of firearms increased or that more expensive weapons were being stolen in the state, the fact that the average value did not increase in neighboring states limits this explanation. Regardless, in addition to the value of stolen firearms, reports in Missouri should include the absolute number of stolen firearms. Ideally, the data could be further broken down by types of firearms, such as handguns and rifles.

Evidence has already showed that by removing its PTP law, Missouri endangered its population. The evidence in this brief further supports that argument by revealing a strong link between the repeal of the state's PTP laws and gun theft. Missouri can and should do more to protect its citizens. Finally, evidence from Missouri and Connecticut highlight the importance of implementing permit-to-purchase licenses. Other states should follow Connecticut's example and pass similar measures.

Eugenio Weigend Vargas is the director for Gun Violence Prevention at the Center for American Progress.

The author wishes to thank Chelsea Parsons, Philip Wolgin, and Nicole Ndumele for their comments and feedback. The author would also like to thank Cassandra Crifasi and Daniel Webster for their insights.

Methodology

CAP conducted a series of additional analyses to test the robustness of the results presented in this issue brief. For example, Missouri further weakened its gun laws in 2016 by passing a law that allowed for permitless carry. This is perhaps why 2017 presented the highest value of stolen firearms. To remove the potential effect of this law on the analysis, the author compared the average annual value of stolen firearms from 1996 through 2007 with the average annual value of stolen firearms from 2008 through 2016—a period that followed the removal of the PTP law but preceded the implementation of permitless carry. The average value of stolen firearms from 2008 through 2016 was \$643,000—24 percent higher than the average annual value of stolen firearms from 1996 through 2007. This difference was also statistically significant based on a means test analysis. This suggests that even before the implementation of permitless carry, the removal of PTP had an effect on the volume of stolen firearms in Missouri.

CAP ran an analysis on the value of stolen firearms reported by the 19 police departments and four sheriff's offices in Missouri from 1996 through 2019 without controlling for inflation. Results resembled those reported above. Finally, CAP conducted an analysis with data from all agencies in Connecticut, regardless of whether they reported complete data. Again, results resemble the analysis from the 19 local police agencies.

Endnotes

- 1 Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, "Annual Gun Law Scorecard," available at <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/resources/scorecard/> (last accessed August 2021).
- 2 Kaitlin Washburn, Hurubie Meko, and Humera Lodhi, "When Missouri repealed a key gun law, few protested. The result: more deaths than ever," *Missouri Independent*, October 31, 2021, available at <https://missouriindependent.com/2021/10/31/when-missouri-repealed-a-key-gun-law-few-protested-the-result-more-deaths-than-ever/>.
- 3 Daniel Webster, Cassandra Kercher Crifasi, and Jon S. Vernick, "Erratum to: Effects of the Repeal of Missouri's Handgun Purchaser Licensing Law on Homicides," *Journal of Urban Health* 91 (2014): 598–601, available at https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11524-014-9882-7?sa_campaign=email/event/articleAuthor/onlineFirst.
- 4 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/>.
- 5 Apurva Bhatt and others, "Association of Changes in Missouri Firearm Laws With Adolescent and Young Adult Suicides by Firearms," *JAMA Network* 3 (11) (2020), available at <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2772526>.
- 6 Cassandra K. Crifasi, Alexander D. McCourt, and Daniel W. Webster, "The Impact of Handgun Purchaser Licensing on Gun Violence" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Prevention and Policy), available at https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-gun-violence-prevention-and-policy/_docs/Impact_of_Handgun.pdf.
- 7 Kara E. Rudolph and others, "Association Between Connecticut's Permit-to-Purchase Handgun Law and Homicides," *American Journal of Public Health* 105 (8) (2015): 49–54, available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26066959/>.
- 8 David Hemenway, Deborah Azrael, and Matthew Miller, "Whose guns are Stolen? The Epidemiology of gun theft victims," *Injury Epidemiology* 4 (11) (2017), available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/labs/pmc/articles/PMC5385318/>.
- 9 Chelsea Parsons and Eugenio Weigend Vargas, "Gun Theft in the United States: A State-by-State Analysis," Center for American Progress, March 4, 2020, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/guns-crime/news/2020/03/04/481029/gun-theft-united-states-state-state-analysis/>.
- 10 Brian Freskos, "Thieves are Stealing More and More Guns in St. Louis. One Official Wants to Force Owners to Better Secure their Weapons.", *The Trace*, December 1, 2016, available at <https://www.thetrace.org/2016/12/gun-theft-missouri-permitless-carry-safe-storage/>.
- 11 Kevin S. Held, "34 firearms stolen from south St. Louis County gun store; heist took just minutes," *Fox 2 Now*, June 1, 2020, available at <https://fox2now.com/news/missouri/34-firearms-stolen-from-south-st-louis-county-gun-store/>.
- 12 KMOV.com staff, "Guns stolen from Jefferson County being used in crimes in St. Louis, authorities say," *KMOV4*, March 19, 2021, available at https://www.kmov.com/news/guns-stolen-from-jefferson-county-being-used-in-crimes-in-st-louis-authorities-say/article_cf6a066e-88fe-11eb-bb9f-db56b7af3286.html.
- 13 Matthew Sanders, "Police suspect stolen gun used to shoot at Columbia officers," *ABC 17*, January 22, 2021, available at <https://abc17news.com/news/crime/2021/01/22/police-suspect-stolen-gun-used-to-shoot-at-columbia-officers/>.
- 14 CAP analysis of U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, "Data and Statistics: Firearms Trace Data," available at <https://www.atf.gov/resource-center/data-statistics> (last accessed September 2021).
- 15 Bill Lukitsch, "KC men sold guns on Facebook, including a Glock offered to a juvenile, according to feds," *The Kansas City Star*, November 6, 2021, available at <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/crime/article255589641.html>.
- 16 The authors used FBI datasets that were concatenated by experts. For more information, see Jacob Kaplan, "Jacob Kaplan's Concatenated Files: Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program Data: Property Stolen and Recovered (Supplement to Return A) 1960-2019" (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2019), available at https://www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/project/105403/version/V7/view;jsessionid=3A2F8BCA0A9187919FB93092B20B2C1D?path=/openicpsr/105403/fcr:versions/V7/ucr_property_stolen_recovered_yearly_1960_2019_rda.zip&type=file.
- 17 The state of Missouri also reports data on the value of stolen property. However, they do not include data before 2001.
- 18 For the consumer price index, the author used data from U.S. Inflation Calculator, "Consumer Price Index data from 1913 to 2021," available at <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/inflation/consumer-price-index-and-annual-percent-changes-from-1913-to-2008/> (last accessed August 2021).
- 19 The author selected those agencies that reported 12 months of data for each year in the analyzed period.
- 20 The local police departments are those of Branson, Cameron, Columbia, Creve Coeur, Frontenac, Gladstone, Independence, Jackson, Jefferson City, Ladue, Lebanon, Mexico, Moberly, Neosho, North Kansas City, Pacific, Richmond, Sedalia, and Springfield. Sheriff's offices included those of Christian, Cole, Jefferson, and Shelby counties.
- 21 Only one agency reported data in Illinois. There were no data for Arkansas for the years 2008 and 2003. Fewer than three agencies reported complete data in Kentucky and Kansas across the analyzed period.
- 22 Data before 1980 were limited. Therefore, the author chose to analyze 16 years before and 16 years after the implementation of the law.