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Preventing Firearm Violence: What Does the Research Show?
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Many of California's innovative efforts to prevent firearm violence have been evaluated, and the results are positive.

Requirement that all firearm transfers include a background check and permanent record.

Nationwide, approximately 40% of firearm acquisitions are made from private parties.^{1,2} This increases to at least 80% for acquisitions made with criminal intent.³⁻⁵ Under federal law and in most states, such purchases are anonymous and undocumented; no background check is conducted and no record is kept.

California's requirement that essentially all transfers of firearms be routed through a licensed retailer makes such acquisitions illegal and therefore difficult to accomplish. The policy has been shown to have beneficial effects on firearm trafficking.^{6,7} It has enhanced law enforcement's ability to solve crimes and map firearm trafficking networks, by allowing the ownership of recovered crime guns to be traced not to the first retail purchaser, but to the most recent purchaser.^{7,8} At gun shows in California, direct private party transfers are rare. In neighboring states, they are very common.^{9,10}

Anonymous private-party transactions are particularly important as a source of firearms for felons and other prohibited persons, who would be detected by background checks. More than 95% of prohibited persons who are incarcerated for firearm-related crimes acquired those firearms from private parties.⁵ Denying purchases by felons who fail the background check reduces their rate of subsequent arrest for firearm-related or violent crimes.¹¹

An important fraction of persons who purchase firearms legally in California become prohibited persons within a few years.¹² Requiring a background check for each purchase results in the denial of subsequent purchases by these newly-prohibited persons.

Prohibition on the purchase and possession of firearms by violent misdemeanants.

Among persons who purchased handguns legally in California some years ago, and as compared to those with no prior criminal record, purchasers with one prior conviction for a violent misdemeanor were approximately 9 times as likely to be arrested subsequently, including for the violent Crime Index offenses: murder, rape, robbery, or aggravated assault.¹³ Those with two or more prior convictions were 15.1 times as likely to be charged with these most serious crimes. California broadened its denial criteria to include violent misdemeanants in 1991. As compared to violent misdemeanants who purchased handguns in 1989 or 1990, those who attempted to make such purchases in 1991, and whose purchases were denied under the terms of the new policy, experienced an approximately 25% reduction in risk of arrest for future crimes involving firearms or violence.¹⁴

Screening of ammunition purchasers to detect prohibited persons.

Since 1998, the city of Los Angeles has required proof of identification and a thumb print for ammunition sales. Researchers reviewed data for 2,031 persons who purchased ammunition in April and May, 2004, and found that 2.6% of purchasers were prohibited persons who purchased more than 10,000 rounds of ammunition.¹⁵ This is more than double the rate seen for firearm transfers; in 2004, the denial rate for firearm transfers in California was 1.1%.¹⁶

The city of Sacramento has developed an enforcement program based on this model. From January 2008 through August 2009, 229 prohibited persons purchased ammunition. The District Attorney filed charges against 197 of these; others were indicted in federal court. The vast majority of cases were resolved with convictions. Search warrants were executed, and firearms and/or ammunition were recovered 65% of the time. Seizures included 160 firearms, thousands of rounds of ammunition, explosives devices, and controlled substances.¹⁷

Gun show regulation.

California maintains a law enforcement presence at gun shows and has established regulations governing these events and the organizations promoting them. Observational research has compared gun shows in California to those in four states with lax regulations that are also important sources of firearms used in California crimes.⁹ Products and transactions that were illegal in California were rare. Surrogate or straw purchases, which are illegal nationwide, were 6.6 times as frequent in the comparison states as in California.

Prohibition on commerce in selected firearms.

California has prohibited commerce in certain semi-automatic firearms commonly referred to as assault weapons. Prior to this action, among young adults who purchased handguns legally, those with a prior criminal history were twice as likely as others to purchase assault-type handguns. Among all young adults who purchased handguns and had a criminal history, those who purchased assault-type handguns were 70% more likely to be arrested subsequently for crimes

involving firearms or violence.¹⁸ Observational evidence at gun shows suggests a continued demand for

these weapons from out-of-state sources.¹⁰ Law enforcement data show that the ban has diminished in California's importance as a source of firearms trafficked into Mexico.

California has also prohibited commerce in firearms that failed to meet basic safety tests. The principal impact of that policy has been largely to eliminate production in the United States of the inexpensive handguns commonly known as Saturday night specials. According to ATF tracing data, these firearms were 3.4 times as likely to be used in crime as were other handguns.¹⁹ A sharp decrease in production of these firearms coincided with a sharp decrease in rates of firearm violence in the United States; no causal association has been established.

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