

Reporting Primer on Guns and Gun Violence

Lisa Dunn
Research Editor, *Guns & America*
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Some Context On The Landscape of Gun Violence

Reporting effectively on guns and gun violence requires an understanding of the context in which that reporting takes place. Important considerations include **a)** what we know about gun ownership in the U.S.; **b)** the basic legal framework in which guns are purchased/owned; and **c)** how U.S. gun deaths break down proportionately in terms of their causes.

a. What we know about gun ownership in the U.S.

The [exact number of U.S. gun owners is unclear](#) because there is no federal registration requirement or regulation that would enable an official count. In fact, federal law [prohibits](#) a central registry of firearms owned by private citizens. About 40% of Americans say they or someone in their household owns a gun, and 22% (about 72 million people) report owning a gun, according to surveys from [Pew](#) and [Harvard and Northeastern](#).

This figure *has* declined, down from 51% of gun-owning households in 1978. Gun purchases, however, have [hit historic highs](#) in recent years and during the COVID-19 [pandemic](#).

More: "[How Many People In The U.S. Own Guns?](#)"

b. The basic framework of gun purchases, ownership

Under federal law, guns purchased at firearm dealers and gun shops require a federal gun background check, which is administered by the FBI using the [National Instant Criminal Background Check \(NICS\) system](#). The law [prohibits](#) the sale and possession of firearms by certain "prohibited persons."

Gun purchases that are made outside of federally licensed dealers (such as online, at gun shows, in-person between private citizens, et.al.), however, have different requirements depending on state law. There is currently no federal law, for example, that requires [Universal Background Checks \(UBC\)](#) for all gun purchases, but more than a dozen states have UBC laws on the books.

More: "[Do Universal Background Checks Prevent Gun Violence?](#)"

c. Proportion of U.S. gun deaths by cause

While the vast majority of media [coverage](#) of guns and gun violence is focused on mass shootings, nearly two-thirds of all gun deaths annually in the U.S. are actually *suicides*. In 2018, the most recent year we have data from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), nearly 40,000 Americans died from firearm injuries. Of these, about 24,000 (61%) were gun suicides. The second largest category was homicides (35%), about 14,000 deaths. The other 3.6% of firearm deaths are unintentional, undetermined, from legal intervention or from public mass shootings (0.2%), according to data from [Mother Jones](#).

A 2019 [survey](#) we did with APM Research in 2019 finds that the public is largely unaware of the true breakdown of gun violence in the U.S. More than half of respondents thought homicides and mass shootings were the leading causes of U.S. gun deaths. Less than one-quarter of those surveyed correctly identified gun suicides as the largest cause of gun deaths.

There are big disparities in terms of race and the victims of each kind of gun violence: More than half of all victims of gun homicides in the U.S. are Black men, while more than 70% of all firearm suicide victims are white men, according to the latest CDC data for 2018.

Community Gun Violence

This describes a particular kind of gun violence that disproportionately affects people of color living in cities. It occurs in public places and is the largest category of gun homicides in the United States. Social and economic inequities related to racism and discrimination (both historical and present-day) are often at the root of this kind of violence.

It's important to avoid inaccurate, damaging terminology.

Try to find and use the names of victims of community gun violence whenever possible and provide context for their lives — no one is “just” a victim. Avoid labeling a juvenile offender or victim (anyone under 18 years of age) as a “man” or “woman.” Avoid using language that implicitly vilifies untried subjects. That could further traumatize victims and survivors or reinforce stereotypes. Some communities that suffer disproportionately from gun violence are understandably reluctant to have themselves defined by that violence, so sensitivity and relationship-building by editorial staff is key.

More: [Reporting Resources, Philadelphia Center For Gun Violence Reporting](#)

Violent crime rates in the U.S. have declined *significantly* since the 1990s.

Violent crime in the U.S. [has declined](#) dramatically over the past 25 years — by more than 50% since 1993 — *including* gun homicides. In recent years, however, there has been an [uptick](#) in gun homicides, especially in some of the largest U.S. cities. Some research has also tied a [surge](#) in gun [sales](#) and [stress](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic to increased gun homicides.

Most U.S. gun homicides are concentrated in a few urban communities.

One [analysis](#) found that half of all gun homicides in 2015 occurred in just 127 cities, which account for just one-quarter of the nation's population. [Several](#) studies show that gun homicides are further concentrated in just a few neighborhoods within those cities and are committed by [a small number of offenders](#), many of whom are known to law enforcement.

Most victims of gun homicides are male and people of color, especially young Black men.

Research has continually shown that Black men are disproportionately the victims of gun homicides and that they have [reduced](#) their life expectancy. A 2018 [study](#) published in the Annals of Internal Medicine found that compared with white men, Black men experienced 27 more firearm homicides per 100,000 people annually nationwide (29.12 for Black men vs. 2.1 for white men). Most victims of gun violence are young — people ages 15-29 account for about half of all gun-related homicide deaths, according to the CDC. And nearly all the victims and perpetrators of gun homicides are men — women account for only about 10-15% of victims annually.

The vast majority of gun homicides involve illegally-obtained firearms (mostly handguns).

Firearms were used in 73% of all homicides in 2019 and a majority (two-thirds) of all gun homicides in the U.S. involve a handgun, according to the [latest FBI data](#). Several studies of underground gun markets and violent crime (like [this one](#) from the University of Pittsburgh and [this one](#) from Duke University) have found that violent offenders typically obtain guns illegally. And [often](#) these weapons originate in neighboring states with laxer gun laws.

Many cities are using strategies aimed at reducing gun violence.

The most common approach is called “violence interruption” or “focused deterrence.” These programs aim to approach violence like a public health epidemic, controlling its spread by targeting the small number of individuals who research shows are responsible for a disproportionate share of a community’s gun violence. The strategy aims to convince these individuals to refrain from violent activity by using trusted community “insiders” to offer them employment opportunities, financial assistance, and access to community mental health resources.

This strategy has been implemented by many groups and is known by many names nationwide, including [Operation Ceasefire](#), [Cure Violence](#), and [Operation Peacemaker](#).

Some cities have experienced more success with these programs than others.

For example, a 2001 Justice Department [study](#) concluded that Operation Ceasefire was successful in reducing gun homicides among Boston’s youth by more than 60%. And a 2008 DOJ-funded [study](#) found the [Cure Violence](#) program implemented in Chicago led to a 41-73% reduction in shootings across seven of that city’s most violent communities.

But long-term benefits are difficult to sustain: A 2011 [study](#) of a focused deterrence program in Pittsburgh found no evidence the program reduced violence there. And a limiting factor of the “success stories” is that they all occurred during a sustained period of [declining violent crime in the U.S.](#) For this reason, some studies have [questioned](#) the ability of researchers to isolate these reductions associated with community violence. [Experts](#) on violence interruption also point out that implementation, long-term funding and having competent leadership are key characteristics of cities that have had success in bringing down gun violence rates.

There is no central federal database for localized homicide data and statistics.

Some police departments track and report homicide statistics on a real-time basis and publish those numbers online. The website for Washington, D.C.’s [Metropolitan Police Department](#) is one example. Other agencies track it but don’t make the information public, so it must be requested. For national data, the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting [website](#) is updated annually, and the CDC’s WONDER [database](#) is updated every 1-2 years.

More: [How To Use The WONDER Database](#) by Luis Melgar & Lisa Dunn

Mass/School Shootings

There is no universal definition for a mass shooting.

This can complicate news coverage. Neither NPR nor the Associated Press, for example, have specific definitions for mass shootings. The FBI has moved away from its previous definition as “four or more victims slain, in one event, in one location” and instead now uses the term “active shooter” defined as “one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area.” Other outlets, like the [Gun Violence Archive](#), use a much broader definition that includes incidents related to gang members, domestic violence and accidental shootings. This results in a much higher count of mass shootings — but also one that includes more that occur in communities of color, which often don’t receive as much media attention.

As journalists, you should define your terms as a team and be prepared to explain it to your audience. Put it in your style guide. Stick to it.

More: [“What Is A Mass Shooting? Why We Struggle To Agree On How Many There Were This Year”](#)

Mass/school shootings are rare, but there is evidence that they have become more common — and more deadly.

According to [the latest CDC data](#), mass public shootings represent less than 2% of all gun deaths annually, compared with suicides (about 60%) and homicides (about 30%). But according to a Harvard [study](#), the rate of these shootings has tripled since 2011. And [a recent FBI study](#) noted that 2017 was the deadliest year for mass public shootings in American history, with more than 100 victims killed in 30 incidents nationwide.

Our own [analysis](#) has found that the average number of days between mass shootings has declined from 365 days in the mid-1980s to just 82 days over the past decade. A few studies have also found that school shootings have increased over time. A [widely cited 2016 study](#) by psychologist Peter Langman found multi-victim school shootings have increased in frequency and number of fatalities in the last 20 years. And a 2019 CDC [report](#) found that multiple-victim homicide rates in schools have been increasing in frequency and lethality since 2009.

The vast majority of mass shooters obtain their guns *legally*.

[A recent study](#) by Guns & America, using data on mass shootings from [Mother Jones](#), found that 74% of shooters *legally* obtained the guns they used in these homicides. The [FBI](#) reached similar conclusions in a study of active shooters from 2000-13, as did the [New York Times](#).

School shooters tend to obtain guns from their homes or family members.

The Wall Street Journal reviewed [all school shootings](#) with at least three victims dead or injured since 1990 and found that at least 17 shooters in 32 total incidents got the weapon from home, with a few also procuring weapons from relatives. Similarly, an October 2000 [study](#) of school shootings by the United States Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center looked at 37 violent incidents in schools. The study found that in nearly two-thirds of the incidents, the attackers obtained the guns from their own home or that of a relative.

Most mass shooters have not been diagnosed with mental illness.

In general, people diagnosed with mental illness are rarely violent. Studies have [shown](#) that only about 3-5% of *all* violence, including gun violence, is attributable to mental illness. And few perpetrators of mass shootings have had verified histories of being in psychiatric treatment for mental illness. Two seminal studies on active/mass shooters ([one published by the American Psychiatric Association](#) in 2016 and [one from the FBI](#) in 2018) found that only about one-quarter of mass shooters they studied suffered from mental illness. Case history research shows that much more commonly, individuals who commit mass shootings [are more often angry, feel aggrieved and have revenge fantasies](#). Here are some other common [misconceptions](#) about mass shooters.

Mass shootings are hardly ever prevented or stopped by a “good guy with a gun”

There have been [some documented incidents](#) of armed citizens stopping a mass shooting, but they are extremely rare. A 2012 study by *Mother Jones* found that [none of the 62 mass shootings](#) from the preceding three decades was stopped by an armed citizen with a gun. In a recent [FBI report](#), the agency studied 50 shootings throughout the U.S. that it labeled "active shooter incidents" — "one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area." Of those, four involved situations where the FBI believes that "citizens possessing valid firearms permits successfully stopped the shooter." Four others involved "unarmed citizens [who] confronted or persuaded the shooter to end the shooting."

Most mass shootings are carried out with handguns — not “assault weapons.”

A 2018 report from the [Rockefeller Institute of Government](#) found that at least one handgun was used in 75% of mass shootings from 1996-2016, compared with 28% in which at least one rifle was used. But when semi-automatic rifles are used, they cause more deaths: A [study](#) of the FBI’s [active shooter database](#) published in 2018 by the Journal of the American Medical Association found that active shooters using semi-automatic rifles killed twice as many people as those who used handguns, shotguns or other types of rifles.

There may be a “copycat effect.”

There’s evidence that many perpetrators model their attacks on previous ones and that a “[contagion effect](#)” exists with reported mass shootings and school shootings. [Researchers at Arizona State University and Northeastern Illinois University](#) found that as many as 20-30% of incidents are set off by other attacks and the effect lasts (on average) about 13 days. For this reason we suggest that, whenever possible, your team not use the shooter’s name.

PAUSE during active shooter events.

When reporting on mass shootings, don’t just jump on and tweet about any story. Whatever law enforcement says publicly, especially in that first chaotic 12-18 hours, is rarely exactly right. Here’s a good [guide](#) from the folks at *On The Media* on covering breaking news that applies here. Continue to ask, “What do we know? What can we verify?”

More tips for reporting on mass shootings can be found in our [Abridged Mass Shooting Toolkit](#). And while there is no accepted definition for “mass shootings,” the term “[neighborhood mass shooting](#)” is increasingly being used to describe (and draw media attention to) community gun violence where there are multiple victims. These events typically don’t receive nearly the same amount of media coverage as indiscriminate mass shootings, but they are far more common.

There are a few reliable sources for determining annual numbers of mass public shootings in the U.S.

Both the [FBI](#) and the [U.S. Secret Service](#) track and analyze mass public shootings in the U.S. and release annual reports. These agencies *generally* report the same numbers of incidents but have differing methodologies. And as mass shootings are

extremely rare, and therefore make up such a small sample size, think carefully before drawing sweeping conclusions.

Police Violence

Pay close attention to the language used to describe the incident, victims and perpetrators.

Avoid using the term “officer-involved shooting,” which isn’t substantive and may lessen responsibility for police wrongdoing. We recommend “police shooting” instead. Avoid labeling a juvenile offender or victim — meaning an individual under the age of 18 — as a “man” or “woman.” The terms “teenager” or “teen” are perfectly acceptable to describe teenagers; you can also use their exact age.

Police kill about 1,000 people every year.

The CDC tracks what it calls “legal intervention” deaths on its [National Violent Death Reporting System \(NVDRS\)](#), which collects detailed data on the victim, precipitating circumstances, type of location, number of wounds, type of weapons, and toxicology screen results. And [as of 2018](#) the FBI began to centralize tracking the number of police killings of civilians.

Journalists and advocacy groups also independently track police killings. Several of these have become the best resources for reporters because they don’t rely on local law enforcement to self-report police violence, and they include data from all 50 states. The most reliable of these are [Mapping Police Violence](#), which was started by activist Samuel Sinyangwe; [Fatal Encounters](#), a catalog by journalist D. Brian Burghart; and the Washington Post’s [“Fatal Force” database](#). In 2019, police killed between 999-1,795 people, according to various tracking systems.

Victims of police shootings are disproportionately people of color.

While a majority of total victims of police violence are [white](#), multiple studies have found that police violence disproportionately affects people of color. A 2020 Harvard [study](#) of nearly 5,400 police-related fatalities in the U.S. from 2013-17 found that Black people were, on average, three times more likely to be killed by police than white people. And a [study](#) published in October 2020 by the University of Pennsylvania also came to similar conclusions. A 2019 [study](#) from Rutgers University published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences supported those findings: Police violence was found to be a leading cause of death of young men in the U.S., with Black men 2.5 times more likely to be killed by law enforcement than white men.

Police shootings happen with about the same frequency in rural and urban settings.

A [study](#) by the Harvard School of Public Health and published in the Journal of Preventive Medicine in May 2020 found fatal police shooting rates were [as high in rural areas](#) as in urban areas. Suburban locations were found to have somewhat lower rates. Some research has found that different neighborhoods present disparate risks of police violence: A 2018 Harvard [study](#) found that the risk of Black people being killed by police was highest in predominantly white neighborhoods.

Police departments have varying policies for how they report on a shooting — and how much information they release to the public.

There is no federal requirement for the release of information following a police shooting. So police departments have varying levels of public disclosure and transparency. Law enforcement often have media strategies that involve only selectively releasing information about a shooting. [Research](#) has shown that it's hard to change first impressions of a news story, so it's important not to publish a story about a police shooting until you have the full picture of the incident, which may include victim family members and/or witnesses.

Let's talk about body-worn cameras.

In recent years there has been widespread adoption of body-worn cameras (or BWCs, body cameras, bodycams in headlines) by U.S. police departments, but empirical evidence is mixed on their effectiveness.

Their use doesn't seem to have [stopped](#) the pace of police homicides, either: A 2014 Arizona State University [study](#) found that officers with body cameras were more productive in terms of making arrests, had fewer complaints lodged against them relative to officers without cameras, and had higher numbers of citizen complaints resolved in their favor. But a 2019 [study](#) published in Criminology found that body cameras have not had a significant effect on police officer behavior or on how police are *perceived* by citizens. Similarly, a [study](#) published in 2019 in the South Dakota Law Review acknowledged that some studies find body cameras effective — but questioned whether they are worth the costs.

Police killings rarely result in criminal charges.

Research finds that police officers are [rarely](#) convicted of criminal charges in fatal shootings. But law enforcement agencies sometimes *do* pay large settlements in civil court to victims or their families, which may be worth some follow-up reporting.

According to a recent Wall Street Journal [analysis](#), 20 of the nation's largest police departments have paid more than \$2 billion in victim settlements since 2015. Stories about these settlements, as well as any policy changes that occur as a result of them, can be worth pursuing.

Which resource should you use?

Eventually, both the CDC's [NVDRS](#) and the FBI's Use-Of-Force [database](#) might be good federal sources. But at present, not all states are participating, police department compliance is voluntary, and so far, the FBI, for example, has yet to see more than 40% of departments reporting data. The FBI [says](#) it must reach 80% participation before it will release any data.

When asked to report on the number of police shootings in a specific geographic area, the best resource is the Washington Post's "[Fatal Force](#)" database, which has state-level data that is updated regularly.

Guns & Suicide

The vast majority of U.S. gun deaths are suicides.

Many more people kill themselves with a gun every year in the U.S. than are killed by another individual using a gun. In 2018, the most recent year for which data are available, the CDC reported 39,740 gun deaths in the U.S. Of these, [61%](#) were suicides. More than half of all suicides involve firearms. The overall suicide rate rose by 24% from 1999-2014, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, and firearm suicides increased 28% during that period.

Most Americans are unaware that suicides lead in gun deaths.

A collaborative [study](#) from Guns & America/APM Research Lab/CallToMind found that less than one-quarter (23%) of Americans surveyed correctly identified suicides as the leading cause of gun deaths. More thought the correct response was homicides or mass shootings. This suggests that newsrooms should expand coverage of this topic as a systemic issue.

The typical gun suicide victim is a middle-aged white man. The typical victim of gun homicide is a young, Black male.

More than 85% of gun suicide victims are white [men](#). Young people are not immune, however: Suicide is the second leading cause of death for teens and young adults aged 15-24 and the third leading cause of death for those between the ages of 10-14. A 2019 CDC [study](#) found that suicide rates increased 56% among 10- to 24-year-olds in the U.S. between 2007-17. Research has also shown that household gun ownership is positively associated with the overall youth suicide rate. A 2019 Boston University School of Public Health [study](#) found that for each 10 percentage-point increase in household gun ownership, the youth suicide rate increased by 27%.

Suicide is often an impulsive decision. The means are critical to lethality.

One study found that 25% of people took [less than five minutes](#) between deciding to kill themselves and attempting suicide. Contrary to common arguments about suicidal inevitability, about 90% of people who survive suicide attempts don't go on to kill themselves. Guns are more lethal than any other suicide method, which is where firearm access dovetails with suicide prevention.

Access to firearms is associated with increased suicide risk.

Research has consistently [shown](#) that having a gun in the home significantly increases the risk of suicide, and a major 2020 [study](#) from Stanford University echoes these findings. Research has also found that states with high gun ownership rates have correspondingly high suicide rates. A [sweeping study](#) published in July 2017 in the American Journal of Public Health found that for every 10 percentage-point increase in a state's gun ownership rate, there was an associated increase of 3.3 deaths per 100,000 among firearm-owning men, and a 0.5 increase among women.

“Red flag” or Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) laws can prevent or decrease suicides.

ERPO [laws](#) allow law enforcement (and sometimes family members, schools or doctors) to ask the courts to temporarily remove firearms from people judged to be a danger to themselves or others. A 2018 [study](#) published in Psychiatric Services found that in the years following the passage of ERPO laws in Connecticut and Indiana, there was a reduction in suicide rates in those states of nearly 14% and 7.5%, respectively.

There is very limited evidence, however, that ERPO laws can prevent mass shootings or other homicides. A 2019 [study](#) from the University of California, Davis School of Medicine looked at 21 cases in which ERPOs were used in efforts to prevent mass shootings. They found that as of August 2019, none of the planned mass attacks had occurred and there were no homicides or suicides among the identified cases. ERPOs are sometimes opposed by gun rights advocates, who [argue](#) that they infringe on due process rights.

Reporting on gun suicide can be challenging, and the risk of contagion is real.

Media coverage of suicide has been repeatedly linked to an increase in suicide, especially among young people. [Research](#) suggests that at least 5% of youth suicides are related to contagion. Here are some reporting [guidelines](#) from the Reporting on Suicide collaboration. They include always appending a 24/7 hotline number, describing warning signs and risk factors, and avoiding sensationalizing details. This contagion isn't limited to your audience: Think carefully about the mental support structure of your reporters and editors when assigning such coverage, and make plans to provide resources. But there are best practices to follow that can make it easier. Here is an [example](#) of how to do it thoughtfully and well. And here's [another one](#).

Gun Terminology Dos and Don'ts

Do: Use the correct terms to describe guns and ammunition.

Members of the media get the mechanics and operation of firearms [wrong](#) quite often, which diminishes our credibility in the minds of gun owners and advocates. This is not only a credibility issue with the gun rights audience, but can also be an issue that has policy implications. What follows is a collection of some commonly-used firearm terminology:

Do: Remember the vast majority of guns made and sold in the U.S. are *handguns*.

In [2018](#), U.S. gun companies manufactured 3.8M semi-automatic handguns, which the ATF calls "pistols," 2.8M rifles and 536K shotguns.

Don't: use the term "assault weapon" or "assault rifle."

"Assault weapons" and "assault rifles" are controversial terms, not technical ones — there is no such thing as an assault weapon. (AR stands for ArmaLite Rifle!) So-called assault rifles describe fully automatic guns used by the military, which can be bought by civilians but require a steep price and a strict [application process](#). They are not widely available.

The term "assault weapon" is a political term with no fixed definition. It has increasingly been used to describe semi-automatic rifles (where the weapon automatically reloads after firing, but you need to pull the trigger for each bullet), but not necessarily every semi-automatic rifle. These weapons are much more prevalent among the American public, but the term is controversial among gun rights supporters. So while "assault weapons" *can* be rifles, they are not technically "assault rifles."

Don't confuse automatic and semi-automatic weapons.

Most AR-15-style firearms are semi-automatic weapons. That is, they fire a bullet for each pull of the trigger. Most gun rights groups refer to AR-15-style guns as sporting rifles and warn against confusing them with military rifles such as the M-16. Automatic weapons, sometimes referred to as "machine guns," are capable of firing multiple rounds with a single pull of the trigger. They are [tightly regulated](#) in the U.S. Don't confuse them.

Appendix 1: Gun Research Organizations

Here are some reliable resources for research, reports and subject matter experts on guns, gun violence and gun policy:

1. [University of California, Davis, School of Medicine, Violence Prevention Research Program](#)
2. [Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Gun Policy and Research](#)
3. [Stanford University](#)
4. [Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Injury Control Research Center](#)
5. [The Violence Project](#)
6. [Boston University School of Public Health](#)
7. [Duke Center for Firearms Law](#)

In reporting on guns and gun violence, there are numerous organizations and advocacy groups involved in policy-related issues at the national level that can be good resources for stories. But it's also important to know who the local gun groups, key players, and hot-button issues are. Have their contact information on hand for when news happens.

Here are some examples of gun rights groups that exert influence in their states:

- [Rocky Mountain Gun Owners \(CO\)](#)
- [Idaho Second Amendment Alliance](#)
- [Missouri Firearms Coalition](#)
- [New York State Rifle & Pistol Association](#)
- [Grass Roots North Carolina](#)
- [Open Carry Texas](#)
- [Virginia Citizens Defense League](#)

Appendix 2: Recommended Reading

1. *Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America* by Adam Winkler (2011)
2. *The Second Amendment: A Biography* by Michael Waldman (2014)
3. *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* by Jennifer Carlson (2015)
4. *More Guns, Less Crime* by John Lott, Jr. (1998)
NOTE: Much of Lott's research has been widely [discredited](#) by scholars of gun violence but it's worth reading to get familiar with his arguments because gun rights advocates often cite his work.
5. *Private Guns, Public Health* by David Hemenway (2017)
6. *Living With Guns: A Liberal's Case for the Second Amendment* by Craig Whitney (2012)
7. *The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs To Know* by Philip Cook & Kristin Goss (2014)
8. *The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture* by Pamela Haag (2016)
9. *Stand Your Ground: A History of America's Love Affair with Lethal Self-Defense* by Caroline Light (2017)
10. *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms* by Nicholas Johnson (2014)

Appendix 3: Glossary of Firearm Terminology

This glossary of gun-related terms was compiled by Lisa Dunn from sources including [Wikipedia](#), [Guns & Ammo](#), [NSSF](#), and [Adam Weinstein](#). Consult applicable style guides for your own usage.

AMMUNITION – The “packaged” components that are needed in order to fire in a case or shell holding a primer, (which produces the spark) a charge of propellant (gunpowder) and a projectile (bullets, slug or pellets.) The units of measure for a quantity of ammunition is rounds. There are hundreds of sizes of ammunition. Examples include .223 Remington, 9mm Luger, 30.06, .308 Winchester, .300 Winchester Magnum, and .50 Browning Machine Gun (BMG). The ammunition used must match the firearm.

AR-15 – a widely-owned semi-automatic rifle. The AR does not stand for “Assault Rifle” as many believe, it was named after the manufacturer that first built it, [Armalite](#). Note that it is almost always semi-automatic, *not* fully automatic.



“ASSAULT” RIFLE — A military-style firearm which fires a reduced-power rifle round, and can shoot in both fully-automatic and semi-automatic modes. Suggest you use this rarely, if ever, and generally to refer to military weaponry.

“ASSAULT” WEAPON – A political term with no fixed definition, defined differently by different jurisdictions. Because the actual definition is so fluid, laws written to regulate assault weapons often define the term by various cosmetic characteristics which do not affect a firearm’s power or function in any fundamental way. Despite public perception, assault weapons are not machine guns. They are semi-automatic firearms, not fully automatic firearms. The term is distinct from the term assault rifle, which is a technical term with a specific meaning widely accepted both in law and within the military and firearms communities.

AUTOMATIC – A firearm designed to feed cartridges, fire them, eject their empty cases and repeat this cycle as long as the trigger is depressed and cartridges

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remain in the feed system. Examples: machine guns, submachine guns, selective-fire rifles, including true assault rifles. A fully automatic firearm is capable of sequentially firing two or more cartridges with a single pull of the trigger. A fully automatic firearm is also called a machine gun. Automatic should not also refer to a semi-automatic firearm.

BALLISTIC FINGERPRINT – A fired case has marks upon it that it picked up from the extractor, ejector, and breechface of the gun when the shot goes off. A bullet fired through a rifled barrel also has rifling marks unique to the barrel that launched it. A record of these marks, when stored in a central database, is called a ballistic fingerprint. Some states require this record to be made by law, so that individual guns can be located and identified from bullets or casings found at the scene of a crime.

BARREL – The metal tube through which the bullet or shot travels. The barrel serves the purpose of providing direction and velocity to the bullet.

BOLT ACTION – A type of firearm, almost always a rifle, in which an empty shell casing is removed from the firing chamber by the turning and retraction of a metal cylinder-shaped mechanism called a bolt. A new, unfired, cartridge is inserted and secured into the chamber by reversing the action of the bolt.

BULLET – The single metal projectile expelled from a gun. It is not the same as a cartridge. The cartridge — also called a round — is a complete package, which includes the case, primer, powder, and bullet. Bullets can be of many materials, shapes, weights and constructions, such as solid lead, lead with a jacket of harder metal, round-nosed, flat-nosed, hollow-pointed, etc.

CALIBER – The diameter of the bore of a firearm measured as a fraction of an inch. Although such a measurement may be frequently stated in millimeters. It is correctly expressed as “.40 caliber” (note the decimal point) or as “10 millimeter” (without “caliber” or the leading decimal point). Caliber numbers when used to identify the size of the bullet a gun will fire are usually followed by words or letters to create the complete name of the cartridge. These letters often represent a brand name or an abbreviation for the name of the company that first introduced the round.



CARBINE – A rifle with a relatively short barrel. Any rifle or carbine with a barrel less than 16” long must be registered with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. Shotguns with barrels less than 18” long fall into the same category. Carbine is commonly used today to indicate any rifle of short overall length.



CARTRIDGE – A single, complete round of ammunition which includes the case, primer, powder, and bullet.



CASE, CASING – The envelope (container) of a cartridge. For rifles and handguns it is usually of brass or other metal; for shotguns it is usually of paper or plastic with a metal head and is more often called a “shell.”

CHAMBER – The rear part of the barrel that is formed to accept the cartridge to be fired. A revolver employs a multi-chambered rotating cylinder separated from the stationary barrel.

CLIP – The controversial name sometimes used to describe a magazine which is an ammunition storage and feeding device. Magazines may be integral to the firearm (fixed) or removable (detachable). The magazine functions by moving the cartridges stored in the magazine into a position where they may be loaded into the chamber by the action of the firearm. Avoid using this term.



COLLAPSIBLE STOCK – A stock on a long gun that can be shoved into itself to shorten it, either for storage or to make the gun fit shooters of different sizes.

CROSSHAIRS – The cross-shaped object seen in the center of a firearm scope. Its more-proper name is reticle.

CYLINDER – A rotating cartridge holder in a revolver. The cartridges are held in the chambers and the cylinder turns, either to the left or to the right, depending on the gun- maker's design, as the hammer is cocked.

DOUBLE ACTION (DA) — A type of firearm that may be discharged either by manually cocking the weapon and then pulling the trigger or by using trigger action to both cock and fire the weapon. Originally used only for revolvers but now common in semi-autos as well, now it commonly means a revolver or pistol on which a long trigger pull can both cock and release the hammer to fire the weapon. In a revolver this action also rotates the cylinder to the next chambered round.



DOUBLE BARREL – A shotgun with two barrels, either side-by-side or one over the other.



FIREARM — A rifle, shotgun or handgun using gunpowder as a propellant. By federal definition, under the 1968 Gun Control Act Air, guns are not, by definition, firearms.

GAUGE – The bore size of a shotgun determined by the number of round lead balls of bore diameter that equals a pound. It is used like “Caliber” for the shotgun.



HAIR TRIGGER – A trigger that breaks from an extremely light touch.

HANDGUN – Synonym for pistol. Designed to be fired while held in one or both hands, rather than while braced against the shoulder.

HIGH-CAPACITY MAGAZINE – An inexact, non-technical term indicating a magazine holding more rounds than might be considered “average.”

HOLSTER – A gun holder that may be strapped to a human body, or affixed to the inside of a pack or bag, or dropped into a pocket. A holster serves to protect the gun’s mechanisms and finish, to provide security by covering the trigger so it cannot be pulled inadvertently, and to present the grip of the gun at a constant

angle for easy access. Some holsters also serve to obscure the outline of the gun so it may be more easily concealed. Typically made from leather or plastic.

HUNTING RIFLE — A firearm used primarily for hunting game and having a number of common characteristics including, but not limited to the following:

- A long, rifled barrel – typically longer than 16”
- Is fired from the shoulder
- Contains an internal magazine (Some do have detachable magazines, but this is not common)
- Most are bolt action although some are semi-automatic
- A telescopic site can be mounted to the top to improve accuracy over distance



JACKET – The envelope enclosing the core of a bullet.

LASER – A laser is an alternative sighting device which enables the shooter to quickly and accurately see where the firearm is aimed even when lighting or other conditions prevent using the gun’s normal sights. Lasers may be located within the grips, hung from accessory rails at the front end of the gun, or placed within the firearm.



LONG GUN – A firearm with an extended barrel, designed to be fired while in contact with the shoulder of the shooter. Include rifles and shotguns.

MACHINE GUN – A fully automatic firearm that rapidly fires multiple rifle-caliber shots with a single pull of the trigger. Do not use this term to refer to semi-automatic rifles, like most AR-15-style rifles. In the U.S., these guns are tightly regulated under the 1934 National Firearms Act (NFA). According to the

ATF, as of 2017, there were 630,000 machine guns in the U.S. That, however, is a fraction of the roughly 400 million guns in America.



MAGAZINE – A container, either fixed to a pistol’s frame or detachable, which holds cartridges under spring pressure to be fed into the gun’s chamber. Detachable magazines for the same gun may be offered by the gun’s manufacturer or other manufacturers with various capacities. A gun with a five-shot detachable magazine, for instance, may be fitted with a magazine holding 10, 20, or 50 or more rounds. Box magazines are most commonly located under the receiver with the cartridges stacked vertically. Tube or tubular magazines run through the stock or under the barrel with the cartridges lying horizontally. Drum magazines hold their cartridges in a circular mode. A magazine can also mean a secure storage place for ammunition or explosives.



MAGNUM CARTRIDGE/GUN – A term indicating a relatively heavily loaded metallic cartridge or shotshell and a gun safely constructed to fire it. It generally indicates a round which cannot be interchanged with other loadings of the same caliber (for example, a .22 Magnum shell does not fit within a firearm designed to fire .22 Long Rifle ammunition).



MISFIRE – The condition of a cartridge not firing when an attempt to fire it is made. It can be caused by either a defective cartridge or a defective firearm. The term is frequently misused to indicate a Negligent Discharge of a firearm.

MULTI-BARRELED – A gun with more than one barrel, the most common being the double-barreled shotgun.

MUZZLE – The open end of the barrel of a gun from which the projectile exits.

NIGHT SIGHTS – A type of iron sights that glow or shine in the dark, intended for use in low light conditions. Some night sights consist of tiny tubes of tritium, while others use a phosphorus paint.

PELLET GUN – A rifle or pistol using compressed air or CO2 to propel a skirted pellet as opposed to a spherical BB. Not a firearm.

PISTOL – Synonymous with “handgun.” A gun that is generally held in one hand. It may be of the single-shot, multi-barrel, repeating or semi-automatic variety and includes revolvers.



PISTOL GRIP – An extra handle behind the trigger for the firing hand to wrap around. A “semi-pistol grip” is one less pronounced than normal; a “vertical pistol grip” is more pronounced than normal.

POINT-BLANK RANGE – The farthest distance that a target of a given size can be hit without adjusting the sights. The exact range is determined by the performance of the cartridge used, the ZERO range, and the accepted size of the target area.

POWDER – The chemical propellant burned to produce the hot gases which send the bullet flying downrange.

PULL – 1) The entire process of making the trigger complete its journey past the trigger break. 2) What a shotgun shooter yells when she wants a target (typically a clay pigeon) to be thrown into the air to shoot.

PUMP or PUMP ACTION – A type of mechanism for removing a spent shell casing from the chamber of a firearm and inserting a fresh cartridge into the chamber. This type of mechanism is most commonly used in shotguns.

RECOIL – Sometimes called kick, recoil is the sudden rearward push made against the shooter when a firearm is fired. This push is due to Newton's Third Law of Motion (for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction). The heavier the bullet and the faster it leaves the muzzle of the barrel, the greater the recoil. A shooter is said to be recoil-sensitive if she does not enjoy the sensation caused by this rearward force.

REPEATING FIREARM – A firearm that may be discharged repeatedly without recharging by means of deliberate, successive mechanical actions of the user.

REVOLVER – A gun, usually a handgun, with a multi-chambered cylinder that rotates to successively align each chamber with a single barrel and firing pin.



RIFLE – A firearm designed to be fired from the shoulder and fire only a single projectile at a time, as opposed to a shotgun which can throw many small projectiles (shot) at the same time.



ROUND – Synonym for a cartridge. A unit of measure for ammunition which is one complete unit of ammunition, includes a bullet (or other projectile), powder, and a primer, and is contained in an outer shell or case. Typical quantities are 20 rounds and 50 rounds in a single box.

SAFETY (MECHANICAL) – A mechanical device used to block the firing pin or trigger such that the firearm cannot be fired.



SATURDAY NIGHT SPECIAL – A catchy phrase having no legal or technical meaning. It's a colloquial term used in the United States and Canada for any inexpensive [handgun](#), especially a [mousegun/pocket pistol](#). Saturday night specials have been defined as compact, inexpensive, small-caliber handguns with perceived low quality;^[1] however, there is no official definition of "Saturday night special" under US or Canadian federal law.



SAWED-OFF SHOTGUN (RIFLE) – Common term for federally restricted “short-barreled shotgun (rifle),” as with a conventional shotgun with barrel less than 18” (rifle less than 16”) or overall length less than 26.”



SCATTERGUN – A casual term for a shotgun.

SCOPE – A magnifying tube through which the shooter may see the target and aim the firearm. Scopes contain a reticle, commonly in the shape of a cross, which must be properly centered upon the target for accurate aim.



SECOND AMENDMENT (THE) – The second article in the United States Constitution’s Bill of Rights which states, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” The National Constitution Center [has a good summary](#) of the Amendment’s history and debate over its meaning.

SELECTIVE-FIRE – A firearm’s ability to be fired fully automatically, semi-automatically or, in some cases, in burst-fire mode at the option of the shooter.

SEMI-AUTOMATIC – A firearm designed to fire a single cartridge, eject the empty case and reload the chamber each time the trigger is pulled. It uses the energy from the fired shot to eject the empty case and feed the next round into the chamber

How it works:

<https://youtu.be/RWpE7Zltlx8>

SHELL – An empty ammunition case.

SHELL CASING – A hollow piece of metal that is closed on one end except for a small hole which holds a primer. The open end holds the bullet. The hollow portion holds the powder. Together the assembled unit is called a cartridge.

SHOOTING SPORTS – There are a lot of different competitions and other games which involve firearms. These are all referred to collectively as the shooting sports.

SHOT – In shotgunning, multiple pellets contained in the shell and sent downrange when the shotgun is fired.

SHOTGUN – A smooth bore long gun that shoots a group of pellets called shot instead of bullets. Depending on the bore size and the size of the pellets there may be from less than 10 to two hundred or more pellets in a single shotgun cartridge. Shotguns are designed for shooting moving targets (such as flying birds or running rabbits) at close range.



SIDE-BY-SIDE – A shotgun with two barrels which are situated next to each other.



SIGHTS – The device that aids the eye in aiming the barrel of a firearm in the proper direction to hit a target. It can be a mechanical, optical, or electronic device. Iron sights or sometimes known as open sights, consist of specially-shaped pieces of metal placed at each end of the barrel. The sight

closest to the muzzle end of the gun is called the front sight, while the one farthest from the muzzle (and nearest to the shooter) is called the rear sight.

SILENCER – Properly called a suppressor this highly regulated device is used to reduce the sound of a firearm’s discharge. It does not actually silence most firearms but rather lowers the intensity of the muzzle blast and changes the sound characteristics. The possession, use, and transportation of silencers have been tightly controlled under federal law since 1934. Any device which reduces the sound of discharge by more than 2 dB is considered by the ATF to be a “silencer.”

SINGLE – ACTION (SA) – A pistol or revolver, in which the trigger is only used for firing the weapon, and cannot be used to cock the firing mechanism. On single-action revolvers, the hammer must be manually drawn back to full cock for each shot. On pistols, the recoil action will automatically re-cock the hammer for the second and subsequent shots. A single-action semi-automatic firearm has a hammer that is not actuated by the trigger. The hammer may be cocked by hand, or by racking the slide, or by the rearward movement of the slide after each shot is fired. The most widely known single-action semi-auto handgun is the 1911-style pistol designed by John Moses Browning.

SINGLE-SHOT – A gun mechanism lacking a magazine, requiring that separately carried ammunition must be manually placed in the gun’s chamber for each firing.

SKEET – A shotgun shooting sport in which the competitors attempt to break aerial targets directed toward them or crossing in front of them from different angles and elevations. It is an Olympic shooting sport.

SLIDE – The upper portion of a semi-automatic pistol that houses the barrel and contains the breechblock and portions of the firing mechanism. Ejecting the spent case as it moves to the rear and loading a fresh cartridge into the chamber as it moves forward again. As its name states, it slides along tracks in the top of the frame during the recoil process, providing the linkage between the breechblock and barrel. To rack the slide means to pull the slide back to its rearmost position, and then let it go forward under its own spring tension. To ride the slide means to rack the slide incorrectly, allowing your hand to rest upon the slide as it moves forward during the loading sequence. Riding the slide is a common cause of malfunctions.

SLIDE-ACTION – A gun mechanism activated by manual operation of a horizontally sliding handle almost always located under the barrel. “Pump-action” and “trombone” are synonyms for “slide-action.”

SLUG – More correctly a “rifled slug” or “shotgun slug.” An individual cylindrical projectile designed to be discharged from a shotgun. The term is often incorrectly used to mean a bullet.

SMALL ARMS – Firearms designed to be carried and used by an individual or individuals.

STOCK – 1) The back part of a rifle or shotgun, excluding the receiver. It is commonly made of wood, wood laminate, metal, or plastics. 2) An unaltered firearm as it comes from the factory. 3) Some people and companies refer to handgun grip panels as stocks.

SUBMACHINE GUN – A fully automatic firearm commonly firing pistol ammunition intended for close-range combat.



SUPPRESSOR, SOUND – Improperly called a “silencer” this highly regulated device is used to reduce the sound of a firearm’s discharge. Silencers do not actually silence most firearms but rather lower the intensity of the muzzle blast and change the sound characteristics. The possession, use, and transportation of silencers have been tightly controlled under federal law since 1934. Any device which reduces the sound of discharge by more than 2 dB is considered by the ATF to be a “silencer.”

TELESCOPIC SIGHT – A sight which has an integral telescope.

TRACER (AMMUNITION) – A type of ammunition that utilizes a projectile or projectiles that contain a compound in its/their base that burns during its flight to provide a visual reference of the projectile’s trajectory.

TRAJECTORY – The arc described by a projectile traveling from the muzzle to the point of impact.

TRIGGER – The release device that initiates the cartridge discharge. Usually a curved, grooved or serrated piece that is pulled rearward by the shooter's finger, which then activates the hammer or striker, causing the gun to fire.

TRIGGER LOCK – A locking device put on a firearm to render it unable to be fired. This can be useful in a home which does not have a gun safe to prevent small children from accidentally discharging the firearm.