



Pennsylvania Under the Gun

5 Measures of Gun Violence in the Keystone State

By Chelsea Parsons and Eugenio Weigend Vargas May 16, 2016

By some measures, the levels of gun violence and gun-related deaths in Pennsylvania are relatively average or moderate when compared with those of other states. Pennsylvania ranks right in the middle when it comes to the rate of overall gun deaths—coming in 30th among the 50 states¹—and by some metrics, it fares better than others—for example, in rates of gun-related suicides and accidental gun deaths.² By other measures, however, Pennsylvania’s experience with gun violence raises serious concerns, and gun deaths continue to take a terrible toll on the state. Between 2005 and 2014, 13,781 people in Pennsylvania were killed with a gun, more than two-and-a-half times the number of soldiers killed in combat in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined.³

Pennsylvania is also in the middle of the pack when it comes to another aspect of the gun debate: the strength of its gun laws. In 2015, the state received a “C” grade for the strength of its gun laws from the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.⁴ To be sure, Pennsylvania has enacted a number of strong laws that help keep guns out of the hands of those who pose an increased risk to community safety, such as requiring background checks for all handgun sales and requiring gun dealers to obtain a state license in addition to the license required under federal law.⁵ However, there is much more that must be done to strengthen laws in the Keystone State to reduce gun violence and fight gun-related crime, including requiring background checks for all sales of long guns and preventing domestic abusers from having easy access to guns.

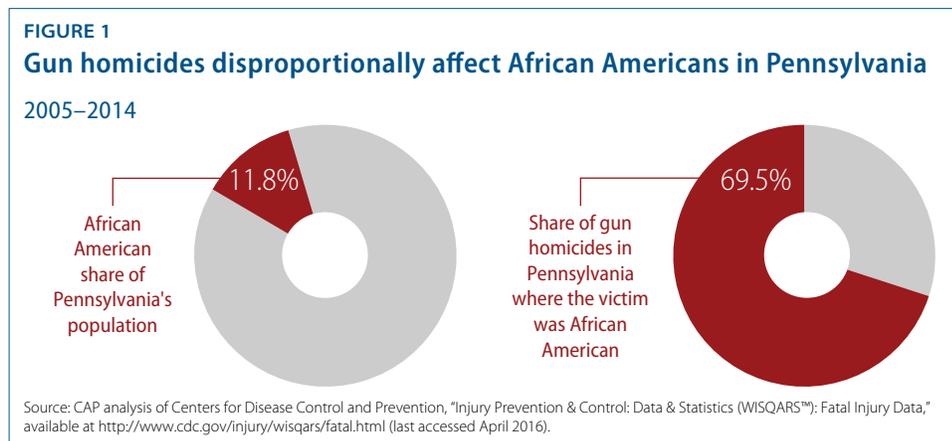
This issue brief explores five aspects of gun violence in Pennsylvania that are especially alarming, unusual, or above the national average:

1. Pennsylvania’s rate of gun homicides is among the highest in the nation, particularly in communities of color.
2. Pennsylvania law enforcement officers are killed with guns at an exceptionally high rate.
3. More Pennsylvanians are killed by gun violence than in car accidents annually.
4. Pennsylvania is a top supplier of crime guns recovered in other states.
5. Pennsylvania women are killed with guns wielded by intimate partners at a high rate.

There are a number of bills currently before the Pennsylvania General Assembly that are designed to close some of the gaps in the state's gun laws.⁶ Many of the policies that these bills advance have broad popular support in the state. According to a 2016 poll, 88 percent of Pennsylvania voters support requiring background checks for all gun buyers.⁷ In addition, there are many opportunities for state and local leaders to take non-legislative action to address gun violence in Pennsylvania communities by strengthening the enforcement of current laws, enhancing oversight of the gun industry, improving data collection, and investing in community-based programs to address the underlying causes of violence.⁸ In light of the devastating effects of gun violence in many communities across the state, it is urgent that Pennsylvania's leaders take action to address this public health crisis.

1. Pennsylvania's rate of gun homicides is among the nation's highest, particularly in communities of color

With an average of 520 gun homicides per year, a person is murdered with a gun in the Keystone State every 17 hours.⁹ Using data from 2005 to 2014, Pennsylvania ranks 16th among the states for the highest rate of gun homicides per every 100,000 people. The burden of these murders falls disproportionately on Pennsylvania's communities of color. The gun murder rates for African Americans and Hispanics in the state are staggering, with these communities combined representing close to 79 percent of all gun homicides in Pennsylvania.¹⁰ From 2005 to 2014, Pennsylvania ranked fourth in the nation for the rate of gun homicides of African Americans, with a rate that was 55 percent higher than the national average.¹¹ While African Americans make up close to 12 percent of the state population, they account for more than 69 percent of gun homicide victims in the state.¹²



The Hispanic community in Pennsylvania also bears the brunt of the state's gun homicides. From 2005 to 2014, Pennsylvania ranked second in the nation for the highest gun homicide rate of Hispanics, second only to Arizona.¹³ With a rate of 6.1 deaths per every 100,000 Hispanics, the gun murder rate of Hispanics in the state during this period was 63 percent higher than the national average.¹⁴

2. Pennsylvania law enforcement officers are killed with guns at an exceptionally high rate

Police officers across the country face the daily risk of armed confrontation with individuals, especially in states with weak laws that make it easy for people who pose an increased risk to community safety to have access to guns. In recent years, Pennsylvania has experienced a number of high-profile murders of police officers, receiving national attention. In April 2009, three police officers from the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police answering a call regarding a domestic dispute between a mother and son were ambushed. A 22-year-old man wearing a bulletproof vest and armed with a number of guns, including an AK-47 assault rifle, fired on police when they arrived at the scene, killing three officers.¹⁵ In January 2016, a man ambushed a Philadelphia police officer sitting in a patrol car, shooting the officer three times before being apprehended.¹⁶

Data from the FBI reveals that police officers in Pennsylvania face a heightened risk of being shot in the line of duty. According to the FBI, from 2005 to 2014, the state ranked 18th in terms of police officers killed with a firearm, with a rate of 0.182 officers fatally shot per every 1 million people. The state ranked fifth for the rate of police officers assaulted with a firearm.¹⁷ A police officer is fatally shot in Pennsylvania every six months, while an assault with a firearm against a police officer occurs approximately every two days.¹⁸

A recurring theme in these murders and gun assaults on police officers in Pennsylvania is the use of long guns—primarily high-powered assault rifles—in attacks. Forty-three percent of officers fatally shot in Pennsylvania from 2005 to 2014 were killed with long guns.¹⁹ This is notable when compared with national figures: During the same time period, 27 percent of officers fatally shot nationwide were killed with long guns.²⁰ The danger that long guns pose to officers has been demonstrated amply in Pennsylvania. In addition to the murders of the Pittsburgh police officers discussed above, which involved the use of an AK-47, a 31-year-old man used an assault rifle to ambush and fatally shoot a Pennsylvania state trooper and seriously injure another as they exited the Blooming Grove barracks in September 2014.²¹ Additionally, in 2011, Deputy Sheriff Kyle David Pagerly, 22, from the Berks County Sheriff's Office was murdered with an AK-47 rifle while serving a warrant.²² More recently, in November 2015, police officer Lloyd E. Reed Jr., 54, from the St. Clair Township Police Department was fatally shot with a 0.270 caliber rifle while responding to a domestic disturbance call.²³

FIGURE 2**Long guns as a share of total guns used to murder police officers**

2005–2014



Source: CAP analysis of Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Uniform Crime Reports: Law Enforcement Officers Killed & Assaulted," 2005–2014, available at <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/leoka> (last accessed April 2016).

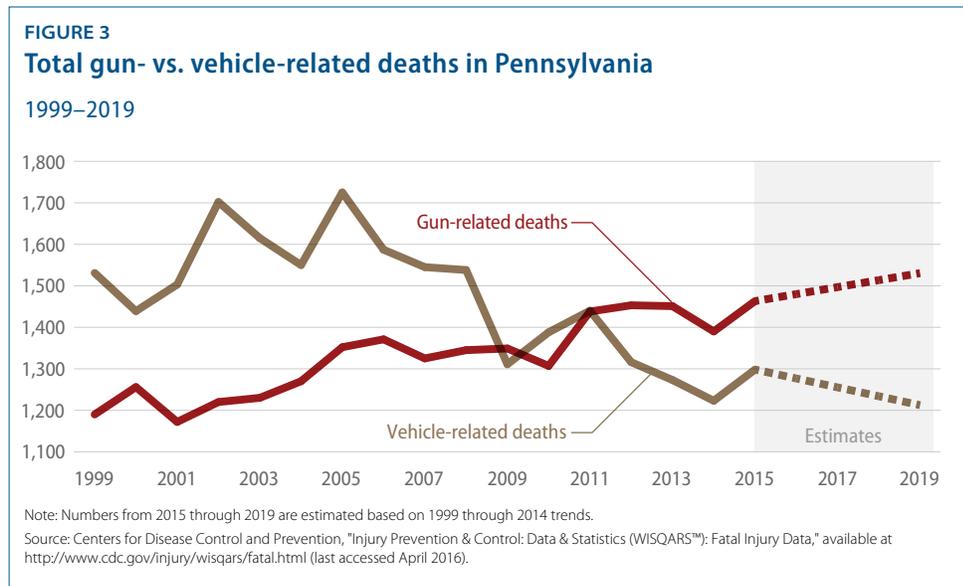
3. More Pennsylvanians are killed by gun violence than in car accidents annually

For decades, Americans have been more likely to be killed in car accidents than by gunfire. Policymakers, elected officials, and the automobile industry responded to the tens of thousands of car accident deaths on the nation's roadways by taking a comprehensive approach to address the issue, which included collecting and analyzing data on car accidents, enhancing safety features in the design of cars, improving technology, and enacting laws to improve driver and road safety.²⁴ This check-all-the-boxes approach worked: In 1999, there were 40,965 car accident deaths nationwide, but by 2014, the number had dropped to 33,736, an 18 percent reduction.²⁵ Car accident deaths in Pennsylvania followed a similar trend: From 1999 to 2014, car accident deaths in the state declined 20 percent.²⁶

This comprehensive approach to reducing car accident deaths stands in stark contrast to the approach taken to address gun violence in this country. The gun lobby has effectively blocked all public health research into gun deaths through restrictive amendments to annual appropriations bills for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health.²⁷ Efforts to enact a comprehensive approach to reduce gun-related deaths have met with staunch resistance from the National Rifle Association and others in the gun lobby and have failed to make much headway at the national or state level in many states.

Consequently, gun-related deaths in the United States rose from 28,874 in 1999 to 33,599 in 2014, a 16 percent increase.²⁸ The disparate approach taken to address these two causes of preventable death has also led to the gap between the two closing: The number of vehicle-related deaths was 42 percent higher than gun-related deaths during 1999; by 2014, the difference had decreased to just 0.4 percent.²⁹ A number of studies have projected that the two lines—vehicle-related deaths and gun-related deaths—crossed in 2015, with gun deaths now outpacing car accident deaths in the United States.³⁰

Pennsylvania is one of the 21 states where gun deaths already have surpassed car accident deaths.³¹ While the number of car accident deaths in Pennsylvania was 29 percent higher than that of gun-related deaths in 1999, by 2014, the number of people killed in car accidents in Pennsylvania was 12 percent lower than the number of people killed by guns.³² While Pennsylvania continues to reduce car deaths, reaching the lowest numbers of such deaths since 1928,³³ the number of gun deaths nonetheless has crept up since 1999. If these trends continue, the number of car accident deaths in the state will be 21 percent lower than that of gun deaths by 2019.³⁴



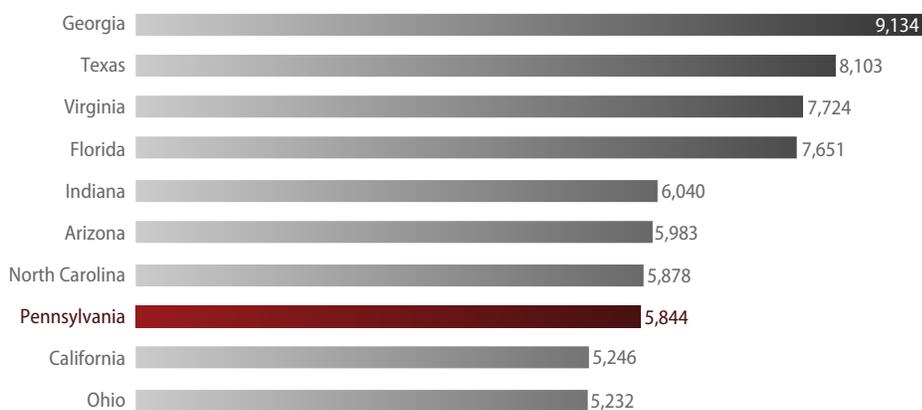
4. Pennsylvania is a top supplier of crime guns recovered in other states

When police officers recover a gun in connection with a crime, an early question often asked by investigators is: Where did it come from and how did the perpetrator obtain it? To begin to answer these questions, local law enforcement can request that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, or ATF, trace the gun to learn where it was first sold at retail. Information on a gun's origins often provides a valuable lead to local law enforcement in its crime investigation. However, a series of restrictive policy riders attached to ATF's annual budget drastically limit how much of this trace data about crime guns the agency can release to the public.³⁵ The agency does, however, publish an annual report that gives a general overview of where guns recovered in crimes were originally purchased at retail, broken out by state. This information demonstrates that guns do not respect state borders and frequently move across state lines before being used in the commission of a crime. According to ATF data, from 2012 to 2014, 29 percent of guns recovered in crimes and traced were originally purchased in another state.³⁶

Moreover, the ATF data show that states are not equal exporters of crime guns. A study by Mayors Against Illegal Guns analyzing ATF trace data found that in 2009, 10 states supplied almost half of the crime guns that had crossed state lines.³⁷ Pennsylvania—in part due to its proximity to Interstate 95, a popular corridor for gun trafficking, and to its relatively weak gun laws compared with other states in the region—is one of the top source states for guns that cross state lines and are used in the commission of a crime. From 2012 to 2014, Pennsylvania ranked eighth for highest number of guns exported to other states and recovered in crimes, with a total of 5,844 such guns.³⁸ The majority of these guns ended up being used in crimes in neighboring states that have substantially stronger gun laws than Pennsylvania—specifically, New York and New Jersey.³⁹ This year, the Brooklyn District Attorney’s Office brought charges against a number of individuals for illegally trafficking guns to New York City that were purchased from Pennsylvania and Georgia gun dealers.⁴⁰

FIGURE 4
Top ten source states for guns recovered from crimes in other states

Number of crime guns exported to other states, 2012–2014



Source: Authors’ analysis of Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, “Firearms Trace Data - 2013,” available at <https://www.atf.gov/about/firearms-trace-data-2013> (last accessed March 2016); Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, “Firearms Trace Data - 2012,” available at <https://www.atf.gov/about/firearms-trace-data-2012> (last accessed March 2016); Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, “Firearms Trace Data - 2014,” available at <https://www.atf.gov/about/firearms-trace-data-2014> (last accessed March 2016).

5. Pennsylvania women are killed with guns wielded by intimate partners at a high rate

There is a strong and growing body of research demonstrating that access to guns in homes with a history of domestic violence drastically increases risks to women. Nationally, women are 500 percent more likely to be killed by an intimate partner in households with a history of domestic violence when a gun is present in the home.⁴¹ From 2005 to 2014, 34 percent of women murdered in the United States were killed by an intimate partner; 55 percent of those murders were committed with a firearm.⁴²

Women in such circumstances are at acute risk in Pennsylvania. From 2005 to 2014, 463 women in the state were murdered by their intimate partners. The gun murder rate of women by intimate partners during this period in Pennsylvania was a full 8 percent higher than the national average, and 56 percent of these murders were committed with a gun.⁴³ More recent data illustrate that there were 113 domestic-violence-related murders in 2015; in 53 percent of these murders, the victims—the vast majority of them women—were fatally shot.⁴⁴



The tragic and often deadly result of the combination of domestic violence and guns in the home has brought into sharp relief a number of murders in Pennsylvania. In May 2015, a 25-year-old Perry County man shot and critically wounded his estranged wife and fatally shot her friend before committing suicide.⁴⁵ In December 2014, a 35-year-old former Marine went on a killing spree in the small southeastern Pennsylvania town of Pennsburg following a custody dispute with his ex-wife, Nicole Hill Stone. In addition to the fatal shooting of his ex-wife, three others also were shot and killed, including a 14-year-old girl. The shooter later committed suicide.⁴⁶

Conclusion

In Pennsylvania, a person is killed with a gun every six hours.

Gun violence in Pennsylvania is an urgent public health issue that demands attention from the state's leadership. There is so much more that elected leaders in Pennsylvania can do to enact strong laws and policies that help save lives and keep guns out of the hands of people who pose an increased risk to community safety.

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Endnotes

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