



# Weak Gun Laws Are Hurting Police Officers

By Nick Wilson and Eugenio Weigend June 27, 2022

Policing is a perilous profession, and officers often encounter dangerous situations in the course of their duties. These risks are even higher in states with weak gun laws. Yet in many states, the same politicians that claim to support police agencies also push to weaken gun laws—despite law enforcement agencies’ opposition—and further endanger officers’ lives. If elected officials are serious about protecting police officers, they must stop passing dangerous gun laws and increasing police officers’ risk of experiencing gun violence.

This fact sheet both provides data that point to the prominent role of firearms in police officer fatalities and argues for stronger, commonsense gun laws.

## **Firearms are by far the most common method used to kill police officers in the United States**

- From 2012 to 2021, 504 police officers were killed in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Out of those, 456 officers were fatally shot with a gun<sup>2</sup>—meaning that 90 percent of these homicides were perpetrated with a gun.<sup>3</sup>
- From 2020 to 2021, the number of police officers fatally shot rose 35 percent.<sup>4</sup>

## **Police officers in the United States are far more likely to be fatally shot than those in other developed nations**

- From 2012 to 2021, 456 police officers were fatally shot in the United States.<sup>5</sup>
- During that same period:
  - Twelve police officers were fatally shot in Canada.<sup>6</sup>
  - Four police officers were fatally shot in the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup>
  - Three police officers were fatally shot in Australia.<sup>8</sup>

## **Police officers in the United States are more likely to be fatally shot in states with higher levels of gun ownership and weaker gun laws**

- A 2016 study concluded that police officers were three times more likely to be fatally shot in the states with the highest levels of gun ownership than in the states with the lowest levels of gun ownership.<sup>9</sup>
- The Giffords Law Center graded states based on the strength of their gun laws.<sup>10</sup> States that received an “F” saw higher rates of police officers fatally shot from 2017 to 2021.<sup>11</sup>
  - States with “F” grades had a rate of police officers fatally shot that was 75 percent higher than states with “C’s” or “D’s.”
  - States with “F” grades saw a rate of police officers fatally shot that was 152 percent higher than states with “A’s” or “B’s”—those with the strongest gun laws.

## **Police officers are often the target of extreme anti-government and white supremacist groups that have easy access to guns**

- In 2014, a married couple harboring anti-government views and white supremacy ideologies gunned down two police officers in Las Vegas, Nevada.<sup>12</sup>
- The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that from 2005 to 2018, domestic extremists fatally shot 42 police officers.<sup>13</sup>

## **Gun-related assaults against police officers occur at an alarming frequency**

- From 2011 to 2020, at least 999 police officers were assaulted and injured in the line of duty.<sup>14</sup>
  - The vast majority, or 74 percent (735 officers), were assaulted and injured with a firearm.<sup>15</sup>

## **Police officers are also frequently shot while responding to domestic violence disputes**

- In 2017, more police officers were fatally shot while attending to domestic violence calls than during any other firearm-related event.<sup>16</sup>
- A 2021 report shows that, in 2021, seven police officers were fatally shot while responding to calls of domestic violence.<sup>17</sup>

## **Elected officials have passed dangerous gun laws despite opposition from law enforcement groups and individuals**

- In 2021, Texas passed permitless carry, a law that allows anyone to carry a firearm in public without a license, background check, or training. However, police agency groups and individuals opposed this bill.
  - The Texas Police Chiefs Association said the bill posed a threat to all law enforcement agencies and the public in general.<sup>18</sup>

- Similarly, police chiefs, sheriffs, and prosecutors in Tennessee opposed the bill that allows for permitless carry in their state.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, conservative legislators still voted in favor of this law, and it has since taken effect.
- Law enforcement agencies and groups in Alabama, Ohio, and Iowa have also opposed permitless carry measures. Unfortunately, conservative legislators have ignored these concerns.<sup>20</sup>
- In 2022, elected officials in the Ohio state Senate passed a bill to arm teachers despite strong opposition from law enforcement officers and teachers.<sup>21</sup>

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## Conclusion

Police officers in the United States are significantly more likely to be murdered than law enforcement officers in other developed nations, and firearms play a major role. Officers are often shot during routine traffic stops and while attending calls of domestic disputes, and they are also targeted by extremist groups. Although data show that police officers are more likely to be fatally shot in states with weaker gun laws and higher levels of gun ownership, conservative elected officials have pushed for loose restrictions on gun ownership, ignoring opposition from police associations, prosecutors, and sheriffs. Elected officials must be consistent with what they preach: If they really want to support policing in this country, they must stop passing dangerous gun laws and instead pass commonsense preventive measures.

## Endnotes

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- 9 David I. Swedler and others, "Firearm Prevalence and Homicides of Law Enforcement Officers in the United States," *American Journal of Public Health* 105 (10) (2015): 2042–2048, available at <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302749>.
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