

GENERAL POLICY # 2

Reduce the Availability and Use of Firearms

Policies and programs that reduce the availability and use of firearms can reduce youth violence, particularly among youth at risk. Legislative action and tactics to reduce supply are the most effective ways in which policy makers can achieve this. Specific legislative actions that can prevent the use of firearms include the following: (i) increasing sentences for crimes committed with a firearm as well as for carrying or selling illegal firearms; (ii) regulating the design of firearms (for example, by banning the importation and private ownership of easily concealed handguns or assault weapons and/or requiring the safe and secure storage of firearms with penalties for owners who do not comply); (iii) regulating firearm transactions (for example, by introducing strict dealer licensing requirements, compulsory licenses for all firearms, and/or mandatory background checks and waiting periods for firearm purchases); and (iv) banning the carrying of firearms altogether. Targeted enforcement interventions that disrupt illegal firearm sales (also known as secondary market transfers) are a second way to reduce the availability and use of firearms by youth at risk. Tactics such as increasing enforcement patrols in high-crime neighborhoods and using undercover police officers to pose as potential gun buyers have been the most successful interventions; gun buy-back programs have not. While the effects of firearm legislation have been mixed, combining laws with supply-side tactics appears to be very promising. A critical starting point for any firearm strategy is establishing a coordinated national, state, and local data collection system for tracking firearm-related injuries and deaths.

How Does Reducing the Availability and Use of Firearms Prevent Risky Youth Behavior?

Reducing the availability and use of firearms can reduce the intensity of youth violence. Increases in youth crime and violence are correlated with rises in lethal crime and violence committed with firearms.¹ The number of firearms in circulation has a direct effect on the ability of those at high risk of violence to obtain guns through theft or voluntary transfers in secondary markets. Therefore, passing restrictive firearms legislation and intervening to limit the supply of firearms reduces the number of deaths and injuries caused by guns. While legislative actions can deter firearm trafficking and general gun use via sentence enhancements, targeted enforcement interventions can actually reduce the quantity of firearms in circulation by regulating the design and transaction of firearms and imposing gun bans.

Research Findings: Providing the Evidence Base

There are three ways to influence the availability of firearms: legislation, tactics to reduce supply, or a combination of both. Here are some examples of the effectiveness of each of the three methods.

Legislative Efforts. International evidence regarding the impact of firearm legislation on youth crime and violence is mixed.² In Canada, for example, the 1977 Criminal Law Amendment Act introduced regulations for the design and transaction of firearms as well as increasing sentences for crimes committed with firearms. A long-term study attributed a 55 percent reduction in homicides and a 25 percent decrease in firearm crimes to these policies.³ Similarly, in 1996 the Australian government passed a law that prohibited military-style weapons, increased import controls on other firearms, and restricted handgun access, and these laws have been credited with a 50 percent decline in firearm-related deaths over the past 10 years. Likewise, a 1977 restrictive licensing law effectively banned the private ownership of handguns in Washington, D.C. With rigorous police enforcement, the policy led to an immediate 25 percent decline in firearm-related deaths.⁵ However, firearms laws have not yielded positive results in all countries. In England, the 1997 Firearms Amendment introduced a handgun ban as well as firearm transaction regulations. Because then, firearm crime rates have continued to increase, and firearm injuries have more than doubled. The 1972 Irish Gun Law,

which prohibited and confiscated all firearms, and Jamaica's banning of firearms and the introduction of mandatory life sentences for possession of firearm crimes, have also failed to reduce violent crime and murder rates.⁶

While different types of firearm legislation have produced mixed results, bans on carrying firearms can be effective, especially in places where homicides are largely perpetrated by and against young people. Colombia is the quintessential example. In the 1990s, policy makers in Cali and Bogotá banned the carrying of guns during periods that were known to have higher homicide rates (such as weekends after paydays, holidays, and election days). Importantly, the legislation was reinforced by awareness campaigns, and the police were trained to administer the new procedures. As a result, homicide rates fell by 14 percent and 13 percent in Cali and Bogotá, respectively, during periods when the ban was in effect.⁷

Supply-side Tactics. Programs that introduce aggressive police patrols in high-crime neighborhoods and attack secondary firearms markets have been successful in reducing the availability of firearms and violence among young people. In the United States, Boston's *Operation Ceasefire* targeted law enforcement resources with the aim of reducing the supply of firearms to gangs and was a major factor in a large subsequent drop in youth homicide rates.⁸ Similarly, New York's *Firearms Investigation Unit* has successfully reduced the flow of guns by identifying gun traffickers by means of undercover gun buys by police officers. Meanwhile, *Operation Gun Stop*, which offers US\$1,000 for anonymous tips that lead to the arrest of a person in possession of an illegal firearm, has removed thousands more guns and criminals from the streets of New York.⁹ *Operation Trident* in England is another example of a successful supply-side program. Targeting young, high-risk Londoners, the program employs 300 police officers who proactively pursue gunmen, drug dealers linked to gun crime, and gun suppliers. The program leads to hundreds of arrests and firearm seizures each year and has reduced youth homicide rates.¹⁰

Combined Approaches. Legislative action combined with supply-side tactics appears to be the most promising approach. In Brazil, the 2003 *Disarmament Statute* increased sentences for illegally owning a firearm, strengthened firearm transaction regulations, and imposed bans on carrying firearms. The legislation was followed by increased policing to attack firearms markets and enforce the ban. Within one year, the national firearm homicide rate declined by 8.2 percent, the first drop in 13 years.¹¹ *The Kansas City Gun Experiment* in the United States is another example of the combined approach. After a firearm ban was passed, intensive police patrols targeted an 80-block hotspot area where the homicide rate was 20 times the national average. Patrol officers found and seized guns by making routine vehicle stops and frisking individuals. The 29-week experiment produced a 49 percent decline in gun crime and a 67 percent reduction in homicide in the area.¹²

Moving Forward: Factors for Success

- ***The creation of a National Firearm Injury Surveillance System*** is an important starting point for any strategy to reduce firearms. This system is vital for monitoring the impact of firearms legislation and supply-side interventions (in other words, the frequency of youth crime and violence committed with firearms in targeted zones), as well as to make any necessary policy changes during the implementation of the intervention.
- ***Combining legislative action and supply-side interventions*** is the most promising approach for reducing firearm-related violence.
- To be successful, ***firearm bans must include awareness campaigns*** to explain, promote, and garner public support for the ban. Another essential element is to ***provide training for the police in implementing the new procedures***, if necessary.
- ***Effective firearm regulation requires cooperation among all levels of government***, law enforcement agencies, business, the media, and citizens to prevent crime, promote public health, and ensure the safety of individuals.

- ***Bans on carrying firearms can be useful in preventing homicide*** in violent regions of the world, but the effectiveness of the approach is unclear in less violent cities.
- ***The success of supply-side interventions greatly depends on the ability of the police to develop a close partnership with community members*** as well as robust intelligence-based policing, proactive crime prevention, and better detection. Offering rewards for information leading to the arrest of individuals who carry or possess illegal firearms is another sound strategy.
- ***Supply-side and legislative firearm interventions are only as strong as the ability of the police to enforce them.*** Police awareness of the legislative framework and methodology training in enforcement strategies are therefore imperative.

Endnotes

1. Cook, Philip, and Jens Ludwig. 2006. "Aiming for Evidence-Based Gun Policy." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 25(3): 691–735.
2. The evaluations of the different firearm laws discussed in this section do not consider their specific impact on young people. However, because the majority of firearm crime and violence occurs among and against youth at risk, the general trends are also indicative of the effects on young people.
3. Canada Firearms Centre. 1996. "A Statistical Analysis of the Impacts of the 1977 Firearms Control Legislation." Evaluation Document, Program Evaluation Section. Canada Firearms Centre, Ottawa, ON, Canada.
4. Chapman, S., P. Alpers, K. Agho, and M. Jones, 2006. "Australia's 1996 Gun Law Reforms: Faster Falls in Firearm Deaths, Firearm Suicides, and a Decade Without Mass Shootings." School of Public Health, University of Sydney.
5. Loftin, C. D. McDowall, B. Wiersema, and T. Cottey. 1991. "Effects of Restrictive Licensing of Handguns on Homicide and Suicide in the District of Columbia." *New England Journal of Medicine* 325: 1625–1630.
6. For England, Ireland, and Jamaica, see Mauser, Gary. 2004. "An International Survey of Gun Laws and Violent Crime." Presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology, Nashville, Tennessee.
7. Villaveces, Andres. 2000. "Effect of a Ban on Carrying Firearms on Homicide Rates in Two Colombian Cities." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 283: 1205–1209.
8. Cook and Ludwig 2006.
9. Almo, Cari, and Megan Golden. 2004. "Reducing Gun Violence: An Overview of New York City's Strategies." Vera Institute of Justice, New York, NY.
10. See the Metropolitan Police Website for Operation Trident, <http://www.stoptheguns.org/>.
11. Instituto Sou da Paz. 2006. "Brazil: Changing a History of Violence." Instituto Sou da Paz, São Paulo, Brazil.
12. U.S. Department of Justice. 1999. *Promising Strategies to Reduce Gun Violence*. Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.

Key Implementation Considerations	
Anticipated Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the prevalence and lethality of youth violence
Secondary Effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance standards of living in communities subjected to high rates of firearm violence • Change social norms about firearm use • Reduce suicide rates • Lower health care and emergency costs
Responsible Agency/Sector	Ministry of National Security, Attorney General, local police, and governing agencies
Targeted Risk Group	Types I, II, and III
Targeted Age Group	12–24
Cost Elements	
Necessary Initial Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of gun violence problem • Development of a National Firearm Injury Surveillance System • Trust in police • Identification of sources of illegal weapons • Control of secondary firearms markets
Specific Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australia, Canada, and Washington, D.C.: General firearms legislation • Gun carrying bans: Cali and Bogotá, Colombia • Supply-side tactics: <i>Operation Ceasefire</i>, <i>New York Firearms Investigation Unit</i>, <i>Operation Gun Stop</i>, <i>Operation Trident</i> • Combined approach: Brazil and Kansas City Gun Experiment
Level of Effectiveness (Strong Evidence or Emerging Evidence)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legislative efforts – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sentence increases and transaction regulations—emerging evidence - Firearm carrying bans—Strong evidence in certain environments • Supply-side tactics—Strong evidence • Combined approaches—Strong evidence
Issues to Consider for Replication and Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program design must consider the specific circumstances governing firearms at the country, regional, and community level, including legal guidelines and public perceptions. • Social marketing campaigns and an increase in legitimate police presence in communities can reduce public support for gun carrying and use. • Youth at risk tend to see guns as a badge of honor linked to their masculinity, which means that interventions are required to help young men to find other ways to develop and assert their gender identity.