

# The Sandy Hook Project

Getting to the truth about gun-related violence in the US

## Why the Brady Act Failed

I wrote a [post](#) earlier this year regarding the decline in homicides that started in the early 1990's. This trend roughly coincides with the passing of the Brady Act in 1993, which raised the question: did the Brady Act have the desired effect on handgun violence?

Before attempting to do my own analysis, I searched for existing works. I found a very thorough [analysis](#) of the Brady Act performed by Phillip J. Cook, PhD. Dr. Cook is the senior associate dean of faculty and research at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, and is considered one of the leading experts on gun control.

Dr. Cook's measured the impact on a set of states that were required to enact new legislation as a result of the Brady Act against a group of states that had sufficient gun legislation in place. His conclusions were that while the law appeared to affect suicides amongst persons 55 years and older, the Brady Act had no measurable impact on homicide rates. In his assessment Dr. Cook states, "The best available evidence suggests that treatment-state gun dealers are important sources of guns that have been used in crimes in both the treatment and control states. Interstate gun running is often the source of guns being used in crimes in the control states, with many of these guns coming from states with more lenient gun laws such as the treatment states."

While Dr. Cook goes on to point out that a majority of guns used in crimes were purchased in the same state, I was still very interested in understanding more about the movement of guns between states. Their mobility not only reduces the effectiveness of the Brady Act, it also impacts any efforts to implement gun legislation in a specific location, such as the handgun bans in Chicago and Washington DC. I wanted to see how significant this problem was and if there were indications that a correlation between lenient gun laws and the number of illegal guns originating from a particular state.

To explore this relationship I extracted data from the ATF's Gun Tracing Program. The Gun Tracing Program traces guns retrieved from criminal investigations to their state of origin. The ATF provides this service to thousands of law enforcement agencies, both in the US and abroad. Each year, the ATF produces a report for each state describing the number and type of guns recovered during the course of criminal investigations, the circumstances in which they were recovered and the state from which the gun

originated. By aggregating this data, I was able to determine which states are the leading sources of guns. However, as Dr. Cook pointed out most of the illegal guns traced in a state originated in that state, so to measure interstate movement of guns I removed those guns that were recovered in their state of origin.

In 2011, 148,566 guns were traced by the ATF. Of those 139,752 were traced back to a specific state of origin. Of those, 34,529 guns, 25% of those traced, were recovered outside their state of origin. The following are list of the top 20 states, in terms of the number of guns that originated in that state and the number of guns originating in that state but recovered in another state:

Total Guns Traced to State			Guns Recovered in Other States		
State	Guns	% of Total	State	Guns	% of Total
California	14,103	9.49%	Georgia	2,703	7.83%
Florida	12,966	8.73%	Florida	2,363	6.84%
Texas	10,894	7.33%	Texas	2,352	6.81%
Georgia	9,093	6.12%	Virginia	2,195	6.36%
North Carolina	7,082	4.77%	Ohio	1,727	5.00%
Ohio	6,952	4.68%	Indiana	1,693	4.90%
Pennsylvania	6,684	4.50%	California	1,622	4.70%
Arizona	6,086	4.10%	North Carolina	1,612	4.67%
Virginia	5,716	3.85%	Pennsylvania	1,597	4.63%
Indiana	5,146	3.46%	Arizona	1,515	4.39%

Louisiana	4,640	3.12%	South Carolina	1,491	4.32%
Illinois	4,410	2.97%	Alabama	1,418	4.11%
Alabama	3,312	2.23%	Kentucky	1,152	3.34%
South Carolina	3,162	2.13%	Tennessee	992	2.87%
Maryland	3,150	2.12%	Mississippi	965	2.79%
Tennessee	2,725	1.83%	West Virginia	722	2.09%
Michigan	2,564	1.73%	Louisiana	648	1.88%
Missouri	2,508	1.69%	Nevada	645	1.87%
Kentucky	2,488	1.67%	Washington	570	1.65%
Washington	2,187	1.47%	Oregon	511	1.48%
	<b>115,868</b>	<b>77.99%</b>		<b>28,493</b>	<b>82.52%</b>

In both lists the top five (10%) states account for over 30% of the guns traced in 2011 in their respective categories. But these are also some of the most heavily-populated states in the U.S. To eliminate bias against larger populations, I generated this table using guns per 100,000 residents to normalize the data.

Total Guns Traced to State			Guns Recovered in Other States	
State	Population	Guns per State 100K	Population	Guns per 100K

Louisiana	4,492,076	103.29	West Virginia	1,819,777	39.68
Arizona	6,392,017	95.21	Mississippi	2,951,996	32.69
Georgia	9,687,653	93.86	South Carolina	4,561,242	32.69
Delaware	601,723	88.08	Alabama	4,779,736	29.67
Indiana	6,423,113	80.12	Georgia	9,687,653	27.90
North Carolina	9,380,884	75.49	Virginia	7,882,590	27.85
Virginia	7,882,590	72.51	Kentucky	4,314,113	26.70
South Carolina	4,561,242	69.32	Indiana	6,423,113	26.36
Alabama	4,779,736	69.29	Nevada	2,643,085	24.40
Florida	18,801,310	68.96	Delaware	601,723	23.77
Mississippi	2,951,996	68.67	Arizona	6,392,017	23.70
West Virginia	1,819,777	64.35	North Carolina	9,380,884	17.18
Nevada	2,643,085	62.28	Idaho	1,545,801	15.91
Ohio	11,542,645	60.23	Tennessee	6,296,254	15.76
Kentucky	4,314,113	57.67	Ohio	11,542,645	14.96
Alaska	710,231	56.46	Arkansas	2,915,918	14.88

Maryland	5,699,478	55.27	New Hampshire	1,324,575	14.57
Pennsylvania	12,604,767	53.03	Louisiana	4,492,076	14.43
Oregon	3,825,657	52.93	Wyoming	544,270	13.96
Oklahoma	3,687,050	43.99	Oklahoma	3,687,050	13.70

As a result of my initial discovery efforts I have come to the following conclusions:

**The number of guns moving between states is significant.** Of the over 139,752 guns traced in 2011, 34,529 were recovered outside their state of origin. While on that represents only 25% of the guns traced in total, the state-by-state impact varies greatly. In the District of Columbia nearly 98% of the guns traced originated in other states. Any local efforts to manage the purchase of guns in DC would have little impact on the number of illegal guns in that state. This strongly supports Dr. Cook's conclusions.

**Gun movement varies greatly between states.** The number of guns traced in California was greater than the number of guns traced in South Dakota by a factor of 188, though the population of California was only 46 times greater the population of South Dakota. Louisiana and Arizona traced over 100 guns per 100,000 residents, while Massachusetts traced less than 16 guns per 100,000 residents. Many of the states that appear at the tops of these lists are known for their strong pro-gun legislation, such as Arizona and Florida.

In subsequent posts I will explore the relationship between state gun legislation and the guns recovered from crime scenes. I have started by creating a [map](#) that demonstrates where guns that originated in each state were recovered. But based on this initial analysis, I now recognize that attempts to introduce federal gun control measures like the Brady Act are thwarted by legislation and enforcement at the local level.

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