

ARMING AMERICA

Purchasing guns for criminals is easy, illegal and ‘extremely difficult’ to stop

BY GABRIELLE LAMARR LEMEE AND CONNOR SHEETS  
REPORTING FROM AMERICAN FORK, UTAH

Vainaku Magic Na’a walked into a Scheels sporting goods store south of Salt Lake City on a September afternoon in 2021. He strode past racks of camping supplies and the indoor Ferris wheel and headed upstairs to the expansive gun section. He picked out a Glock 43 pistol from one of several locked display cases set amid a taxidermied menagerie, according to a federal criminal complaint. He showed the clerk his Utah driver’s license and concealed-carry permit and checked “yes” on the required federal form that asked whether he was purchasing the gun for himself. Then Na’a drove to the nearby home of his uncle Siosifa Lavulavu and handed him the Glock in exchange for the cost of the gun, \$529.99, plus his \$100 fee for making the buy, the complaint said.

Federal prosecutors accused Na’a of buying at least 97 firearms from dealers in the Salt Lake City area between September 2019 and February 2022, each time attesting the guns were for himself. He and his uncle allegedly passed many of these guns along to an Oakland father-and-sons operation that sold them in California. Often, the weapons ended up in criminals’ hands.

When Na’a bought the guns, he broke the law by providing false information on a federal form, according to the federal indictment against him. In 2022, a new federal law made the act of illicitly buying guns for someone else a crime called a straw purchase. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives has identified straw purchases as among the most common firearms trafficking pathways. They’re also one of the hardest problems in gun regulation to solve.

American civilians own an estimated 352 million firearms and demand for guns reached record levels in 2020, as measured by background check data. In exploring gun access in the U.S., The Times interviewed more than 100 people, obtained volumes of public records, reviewed thousands of pages of court filings and law enforcement records, and analyzed millions of rows of federal, state and local data.

The Times analysis found that there’s a firearms dealer within a 10-minute drive of 88% of the U.S. population, and layers of regulations have not stemmed the flow of guns to criminals. [See Guns, A14]



CLIFTON GRANT JR. stands outside Hollywood Le Bon Hotel, where Inside Safe moved him in August after five years on the streets. “I’ve got something to wake up for now, with not just misery being upon me,” he said.

Bass sees gains on homelessness



SHERIDAN MAKI, shown in November, lives in a homeless encampment on the sidewalk along the 6000 block of Franklin Avenue in Hollywood.

The answer to this crisis will start with perception

ERIKA D. SMITH

For as long as people have watched tents take over sidewalks and RVs deteriorate under free-ways, politicians have been making promises about solving homelessness in Los Angeles.

And for just as long, those same politicians have been breaking them.

This is undoubtedly why, back in March, as Mayor Karen Bass was ap-



proaching her first 100 days in office, only 17% of Angelenos believed her administration would make “a lot of progress” getting people off the streets, according to a Suffolk University/Los Angeles Times poll. Far more — 45% — predicted just “a little progress” would be made.

I was thinking about this deep well of public skepticism while listening to Bass, all smiles in a bright green suit on Wednesday morning, enthusiastically explain why the progress she has actually made is a reason for renewed optimism.

[See Smith, A6]

First year of Inside Safe gets 1,951 people off streets, but it still faces a steep climb.

BY DAVID ZAHNISER, RUBEN VIVES AND DOUG SMITH

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass had been in office for little more than week when she announced the launch of Inside Safe, her signature program to move homeless Angelenos out of the city’s biggest encampments and under a roof.

The first place she went was a noisy stretch of Calhuenaga Boulevard under the 101 Freeway in Hollywood. Working closely with Councilmember Nithya Raman, city and county agencies found beds for about 30 unhoused residents living at or near the overpass.

Last week, the mayor celebrated her first year in office, touting the work her administration has done to address the crisis. By then, 10 more people had set up tents, tarps and at least one cardboard structure on the streets around the overpass that had been targeted by Inside Safe in December 2022.

The return of those encampments offers just one example of the challenges the mayor will face in the second year of her fight against homelessness.

Since taking office, In- [See Inside Safe, A6]

Is Ohtani contract a Dodgers bargain?

Deferrals in phenom’s 10-year, \$700-million deal let team upgrade roster with additions.

BY JACK HARRIS

There’s almost no such thing as a \$700-million bargain in baseball.

Then again ... By agreeing to a record-breaking 10-year, \$700-million contract with Shohei Ohtani on Saturday, the Dodgers both added a two-time MVP to their star-stud-



SHOHEI OHTANI’S contract caused shock waves over its unprecedented amount of deferred money.

ded roster and structured the contract — thanks largely to Ohtani’s decision to take an unprecedented amount of deferred money — in a way that should allow them to pursue more impact additions this offseason and beyond.

“The deferrals were primarily about allowing the team to be successful on the field,” said one person with knowledge of the contract who was not authorized to speak publicly about the agreement. “Because above all else, he wants to win.”

Ohtani’s deal isn’t official [See Ohtani, A9]

Wildlife rehabilitators in a fight for survival

Critter caretakers feel threatened as the state steps up inspections of their facilities.

BY LOUIS SAHAGÚN

The unceremonious end of Robert Everett’s decades-long career as a pioneering wildlife rehabilitator came without warning recently as state investigators appeared suddenly at his San Dimas home.

After answering a sharp rap on the door early one morning in late October, the 80-year-old said, he stood on his porch as California Department of Fish and Wildlife officers “came in, narcostyle,” and began evaluating his injured, diseased and orphaned avian patients to determine which ones should be released, transferred

elsewhere or euthanized.

Everett, who had just been discharged from the hospital and was learning to self-administer antibiotics intravenously in both arms, said he looked on with “shock and awe” as a peregrine falcon, red-tailed hawk, great horned owl, barn owl and saw-whet owl that he used as “educational animals” in school presentations and to attract donors were taken away. “They shut me down,” he said.

The enforcement action at Wild Wings of California — which Everett and his supporters described as a raid — has sent shock waves through Southern California’s close-knit community of wildlife rehabilitators. For decades, Everett and other rehab operators have stretched shoestring budgets and rallied ragtag [See Wildlife, A7]

Fighting rages in Gaza Strip

Israel presses ahead with its offensive against Hamas after the U.S. agrees to send more munitions. WORLD, A3

Digital billboards to light up L.A.

City Council approves 71 of the bright signs despite fears that they will be a deadly driving distraction. CALIFORNIA, B1

In L.A., Biden avoids Gaza issue

At a fundraiser that drew a pro-Palestinian rally nearby, he focuses on Donald Trump instead. CALIFORNIA, B1

Weather  
Periods of sun.  
L.A. Basin: 73/51. B6



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